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Thursday, Feb. 27

Senior Menu: Potato soup, chicken salad sandwich, mixed vegetables, fruit, whole wheat bread.

Girls and boys state wrestling at Rapid City
Region 1A Girls Basketball tournament: Groton Area vs. Sisseton, 7 p.m., Groton Area Arena.

Good Morning

It's Thankful Thursday

May this Thankful Thursday bring you peace, joy, and a heart full of gratitude. Take a moment to count your blessings and embrace the beauty of today.

Lord, we are so grateful for everything!

Amen



God's Spoken Word Ministries

Friday, Feb. 28

Senior Menu: Spanish rice with hamburger, green beans, vanilla pudding with oranges, whole wheat bread.

Groton FFA CDE
Girls and boys state wrestling at Rapid City
Boys Basketball vs. Aberdeen Christian at the Aberdeen Civic Arena: 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow.

Saturday, March 1

Girls and boys state wrestling at Rapid City
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

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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.

Ukraine Minerals Deal

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to visit the White House as early as tomorrow to finalize and sign an economic deal that grants the US access to revenues from Ukraine's natural resources while helping Ukraine rebuild its war-torn economy.

Ukraine is home to roughly 5% of the world's critical raw materials—which include about 17 elements essential to a wide range of products, including medical equipment, military applications, and consumer technology such as cellphones and electric vehicles. However, an estimated 40% of Ukraine's mineral resources are inaccessible because of Russian-occupied regions. Analysts say the US seeks to reduce its dependence on China, the world's largest producer of rare earth minerals, which controls roughly 75% of the global supply.

The preliminary agreement between the US and Ukraine currently does not include explicit security guarantees for Ukraine, which Kyiv has sought in negotiations. The deal follows earlier drafts that were rejected due to insufficient security guarantees and a US demand for \$500B in mineral profits.

Religion in America

A new study released yesterday by the Pew Research Center shows the decline of Christianity in the US has slowed and may have stabilized. The survey of 36,908 Americans, conducted in 2023 and 2024, found that almost 85% of US adults believe in God or a universal spirit, with 62% identifying as Christian—40% as Protestant and 19% as Catholic.

The news comes after years of steady decline, with previous studies showing 78% of US adults identified as Christian in 2007 and 71% in 2014. The study also found that 29% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, including atheists, agnostics, and those identifying as "nothing in particular."

Significant age gaps persist, with only 46% of adults younger than 25 identifying as Christian, compared to 80% of those older than 74. Non-Christian religious groups make up 7.1% of the population, up from 4.7% in 2007.

Ceasefire Phase Nears End

Tens of thousands of Israelis lined the funeral route yesterday for 32-year-old Shiri Bibas and her two young sons, whose bodies were recently returned as part of the ceasefire. The trio were abducted Oct. 7, 2023, amid Hamas' coordinated cross-border attack and were later killed in captivity. Husband and father Yarden was released alive earlier this month.

The funeral came as the sides agreed to an exchange of roughly 600 Palestinians and four Israelis last night. The ceasefire's first, 42-day phase is set to expire Saturday, which has seen 33 Israelis and nearly 2,000 Palestinians released, as well as the return of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to their destroyed homes in Gaza. Humanitarian agencies estimate roughly 60% of structures in Gaza are destroyed, including 92% of residences and more than half of all hospitals. Three Palestinian infants reportedly died this week amid a regional cold snap.

Separately, President Donald Trump shared an AI-generated video on social media late Tuesday depicting the Gaza Strip redeveloped by the president, a controversial plan he has touted in recent weeks.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Michelle Trachtenberg, actress known for roles on "Gossip Girl" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," found dead at her New York City apartment at age 39.

Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Topsy)" tops Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart for the 35th week, a record for a single act since the chart began in 1958.

NFL scouting combine kicks off today from Indianapolis; see schedule and preview.

Basketball legend Diana Taurasi retires after 20 WNBA seasons, six Olympic gold medals, and three WNBA titles.

Science & Technology

Researchers find evidence of humans living in tropical rainforests as early as 150,000 years ago, roughly 80,000 years earlier than previously believed.

Engineers integrate networked fiber-based computer into garments, allowing the wearer to track activity and monitor health conditions.

Study makes first estimate of the quantitative effect of animals in shaping the Earth's surface; researchers estimate animals contribute 76,000 gigajoules of energy into reshaping the planet's features each year.

Business & Markets

US stock markets end mixed (S&P 500 +0.0%, Dow -0.4%, Nasdaq +0.3%) as S&P snaps a four-day losing streak.

Nvidia reports fourth quarter revenue of more than \$39B, up 12% from last quarter and 78% year-over-year.

Eli Lilly plans to invest at least \$27B to build four new manufacturing sites in the US as demand for its weight-loss and diabetes drug Zepbound rises.

GM raises quarterly dividend by 25% and announces \$6B stock buyback.

Senate confirms Jamieson Greer to be the US trade representative by a vote of 56 to 43; Greer served as chief of staff to the US trade representative during the first Trump administration.

Politics & World Affairs

Unvaccinated child dies from measles in West Texas, the first such death in outbreak that has infected at least 124 people; the measles-related death is also the first in the US since 2015.

White House directs federal agencies to prepare for large-scale firings, calls for the removal of underperforming employees or those engaged in misconduct.

Federal employment board pauses firings of six probationary staffers amid probe on whether the firings were illegal.

President Donald Trump proposes \$5M "gold card" to expedite path to US citizenship.

US Supreme Court hears arguments over Ohio woman's claim that she suffered reverse discrimination from her employer because she is straight.

Washington Post owner Jeff Bezos says the paper's op-ed section will focus on viewpoints supporting personal liberties and the free market.

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
502 North 2nd Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-8453

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
810 North 1st Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-2344

Groton Area School Board

Grant Rix, President
Nick Strom, VP
Debra Gengerke
Martin Weismantel
Tigh Flihs
Travis Harder
Dr. Heather Lerseth-Flihs,
DVM

Superintendent

Joseph J. Schwan
(605) 397-2351 ext. 1003
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High School Principal

Shelby Edwards
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1004
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Elementary Principal

Brett Schwan
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Business Manager

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Athletic Director

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Opportunity Coordinator

Jodi Schwan
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K-12 School Counselor

Emily Neely
(605) 397-2317
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Technology Coordinator

Aaron Helvig
(605) 397-8381 ext. 1025
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Region 1A Girls Basketball @ Groton Area

Thursday, February 27th, 2025

Game Times/Locations: Main Court in Arena

- 7:00PM → #2 Groton Area (white) vs. #3 Sisseton (dark)

*Prior to the first game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$6.00 Students: \$4.00.

- No passes will be accepted for regional play.
- AD's- please send me a pass list to leave at the ticket booth for spouses and admin.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM:

- Sisseton – last locker room down the JH hallway

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Sisseton: North Bench

Fan Sections:

- East Side – Groton
- West Side – Sisseton

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: www.GDlive.com or [Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl](#)

Varsity Officials: Justin Deutsch, Dave Planteen, Luke Anderson

Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

Official Book: Alexa Schuring

Shot Clock Operator: Joe Schwan

Announcer: Mike Imrie

Ticket Takers: Jodi Schwan &

National Anthem: Groton Area 8th Grader, Aspen Beto on Clarinet

Thank you,
Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director

After Rounds' Push, USPS Announces Huron Mail Processing Facility Will Remain Open

Announcement Comes After Rounds' Legislation Introduced

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senator Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) released a statement following the U.S. Postal Service's (USPS) announcement that they will be retaining local mail processing operations at the Dakota Central processing facility in Huron. Rounds led the push to keep local processing at this facility since the initial decision to downsize the location was announced in February 2024.

"I am pleased to see that leaders at the USPS have reconsidered their decision to move local processing operations away from the Dakota Central facility in Huron," said Rounds. "South Dakotans rely on USPS's rural services to receive their mail. Transferring local processing operations to Fargo, North Dakota would have resulted in a slower delivery time for packages and letters, particularly for letters originating in Huron that simply need to be sent across town.

"In addition to keeping local processing, USPS is also investing up to \$3 million in improvements at Dakota Central which will further streamline mail processing in South Dakota. I've appreciated working with USPS leadership on this issue and look forward to our continued partnership to sustain and improve mail delivery services in South Dakota."

BACKGROUND:

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.

In addition, Rounds first introduced the Postal Processing Protection Act in June 2024, legislation that would require USPS to consider consequences for rural areas during their closure or downsizing review process in order to protect rural mail processing facilities. Rounds recently reintroduced this legislation in the 119th Congress.

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Region 1A in Groton

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Groton Area Tigers vs. Sisseton Redmen

7 p.m.



Good Luck Lady Tigers from these GDILIVE.COM sponsors!

Bary Keith of Valley Plains Equipment

Bierman Farm service

Blocker Construction

Dacotah Bank

Farmers Union Coop of Ferney and Conde

Greg Johnson Construction of Bristol

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John Sieh Agency

Ken's Food Fair

Lori's Pharmacy

Olive Grove Golf Course

Rix Farms/R&M Farms

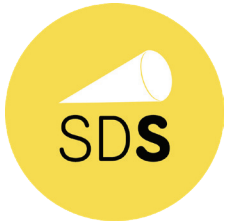
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Sun & Sea Travel

The MeatHouse of Andover

Weismantel Agency of Columbia



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South Dakota lawmakers send Mickelson Trail e-bike limitation to governor

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 4:58 PM

The two chambers of the South Dakota Legislature agree that only the slowest class of e-bikes should be allowed on the scenic Mickelson Trail.

They sent that limitation Wednesday to Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden, who will decide whether to sign it into law.

The trail, named for the late Gov. George Mickelson, runs 109 miles through the Black Hills on a former railroad route. As Rapid City Republican Rep. Tim Goodwin said Wednesday in the House of Representatives, e-bikes were "not even thought of" when the trail was developed in the 1990s and designated for non-motorized use by hikers, runners, bicyclists and horseback riders.

During the past few years, bicycles with electric-motor assistance have surged in popularity. They can help a rider achieve higher speeds, especially on uphill trail segments, and Hartford Republican Rep. Tesa Schwans said that's created a safety problem.

"I want you to imagine being on a horse in one of the tunnels on the Mickelson, or jogging or having your granddaughter out there on her first real bicycle ride, and having an e-bike coming through at 30 miles an hour," Schwans said.

The legislation would allow only Class I e-bikes on the trail. They provide pedal assistance up to 20 mph. Class II e-bikes are throttle-powered up to 20 mph, and Class III e-bikes provide pedal assistance up to 28 mph.

Violations would fall under the state's lowest class of misdemeanors, punishable by a maximum of 30 days in jail and a \$500 fine.

The bill passed the House 65-5 with opponents saying the law would be difficult to enforce, could criminalize some riders who don't know what class of e-bike they're riding, and would prevent some riders — especially elderly people — from enjoying the trail.

Goodwin said the bill strikes a balance between those concerns and other concerns about safety and serenity.

"I think it's a great bill, and it's a way to kind of control it," Goodwin said. "I don't want to get to the point where we say no electric bikes at all, so I think this is a good compromise."

The bill was approved 33-2 last month by the Senate, where it was introduced by Sen. Taffy Howard, R-Rapid City.

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.

There's a 'very real chance' of federal Medicaid expansion funding cuts, lieutenant governor says

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 3:49 PM

PIERRE — Citing his discussions with South Dakota's congressional delegation, Republican Lt. Gov. Tony Venhuizen told lawmakers at the state Capitol that federal support for Medicaid expansion could decline.

The concern helped advance Venhuizen's bill tying South Dakota's Medicaid expansion to federal sup-

port for it.

The legislation, which had already passed the state House, advanced out of a Senate committee Wednesday on a 7-1 vote. If the Senate approves it, the bill would send a state constitutional amendment to voters in 2026 asking them to authorize the end of Medicaid expansion if the federal government reduces its share of the funding below 90%.

Supporters said the measure is necessary as the Trump administration and a Republican-controlled Congress weigh potential cuts to the federal match.

"From what I've read, heard, and even in talking to our congressional delegation, I think there's a very real chance that there are cuts of the nature we are discussing here today," Venhuizen said.

Medicaid is government-funded health insurance for people with low incomes, and for adults and children with disabilities. In 2022, South Dakota voters expanded Medicaid eligibility to adults with incomes up to 138% of the poverty level, to capitalize on the 90% federal funding for expansion included in the Obama-era Affordable Care Act. The expansion is part of the state constitution and can only be altered by voters.

Nearly 150,000 South Dakotans are enrolled in Medicaid, including nearly 30,000 through the expansion.

Venhuizen said if Congress reduces the match rate from 90% to 80%, South Dakota could be forced to come up with an additional \$36 million to continue the expansion.

"It would be a huge amount to digest in the current budget," he said.

Health care advocates and the lone Democrat on the committee opposed the measure. They said it introduces unnecessary uncertainty into a program that provides insurance to thousands of South Dakotans, and could lead to abrupt coverage losses.

The offices of U.S. Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds and Rep. Dusty Johnson did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Venhuizen introduced his Medicaid measure earlier this year when he was a state representative, before he was appointed as lieutenant governor following former Gov. Kristi Noem's departure to become U.S. secretary of homeland security and then-Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden's elevation to governor.

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.

While SD lawmakers consider limits on property tax growth, opting out of limits could get tougher

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 3:31 PM

As South Dakota lawmakers consider tighter limits on the growth of property tax collections, several have said local taxing entities could still choose to "opt out" of those limits.

But there's also legislation that would impose a new requirement on opt-out decisions by school boards.

The House Education Committee advanced legislation Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre that would require school boards to hold elections on opt-outs. Boards currently have the option to pass an opt-out without sending it to a public vote, although the public can refer it to a vote.

Sen. Sue Peterson, R-Sioux Falls, said she introduced Senate Bill 208 as part of the effort to solve the state's "property tax problem."

School boards would be required to hold elections for opt-outs and to issue capital outlay certificates, which school boards use from their capital outlay funds to purchase equipment, improve facilities or for emergency expenditures. Currently, school boards are only required to put general obligation bond votes to an election. General obligation bonds are more expensive and focus on building new facilities.

"This brings school boards into line with what counties are required to do," Peterson said. "Spending limits for local political subdivisions were put into place for a reason, but the current system of optional

referral of opt-outs is making spending limits obsolete.”

The bill already passed the Senate in a 19-15 vote. It heads to the House next.

Nearly 42% of school boards opted out of property tax limits payable in 2024, totaling \$34 million collected above the limits on property taxes, according to the Associated School Boards of South Dakota. In fiscal year 2023, the latest data available on the state Department of Education’s website, 163 capital outlay certificates were in play across the state, totaling \$832 million issued.

Americans for Prosperity-South Dakota supported the legislation, with Deputy State Director Jen Beving saying it could increase transparency, engagement and voter turnout. Americans for Prosperity is a conservative political organization that has supported proposed diversions of public funds to pay for nonpublic education options.

Public school education lobbyists opposed the legislation, saying it is unnecessary and would cost taxpayers more money to fund more elections.

“This is not one of the property tax bills I think that should be a priority,” said Dianna Miller, representing the Large School Group.

Several property tax bills are still on the table, such as Gov. Larry Rhoden’s property tax proposal including a cap on countywide assessment increases, and an assessment rollback bill — both of which passed the Senate — and a House-endorsed bill that would lower limits on local governments’ annual increases in property tax collections to 2.5% or inflation, whichever is less.

The sponsor of the House bill, Rep. Greg Jamison, R-Sioux Falls, referenced opt-outs during the floor debate on his legislation.

“All of these bodies, taxing districts, all have the authority and ability to opt themselves out to raise the revenues that they need,” he said.

Another pending bill from Sen. Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs, would require local governments to publish an extra public notice 10 days before any hearing on an opt-out proposal.

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.

State House will vote on future of South Dakota’s felony ingestion law

Panel of lawmakers sends bill reducing penalties for drug tests to floor with no recommendation

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 2:33 PM

The state House of Representatives will vote on whether a failed drug test deserves a felony charge in South Dakota.

On Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre, the House Judiciary Committee voted 10-3 to advance a bill that would lessen the charge levied for ingesting drugs like methamphetamine, cocaine or fentanyl from a felony to a misdemeanor for first and second offenses. Ingestion of marijuana is a misdemeanor under South Dakota law.

The panel first failed to endorse Senate Bill 83, then failed to defeat it before opting to send it to the House floor with no recommendation.

The bill cleared the full Senate by a single vote earlier this month, making it the most successful thus far of multiple legislative efforts to change the law in recent years.

South Dakota is the only state in the nation with a law that explicitly treats drugs in a person’s body as drugs in their possession for criminal prosecution purposes.

Prosecutors and police organizations have long argued that the charge rarely results in prison time, but

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can serve as a catalyst for behavior change by threatening it. Those charged with ingestion typically get several chances to complete treatment and probation before they go to prison, they say.

"Rarely, if ever, are you going to go to the state penitentiary on your first ingestion case," Attorney General Marty Jackley said Wednesday during his opposition testimony.

Supporters of the law also point to the law's utility as a tool that helps prosecutors impose consequences on drug users charged with more serious offenses.

Those offenses, Jackley said, are typically fueled by drugs.

"You're kind of looking at the root of the problem," he said. "It's an addiction problem. So rather than put you in as a violent offender, maybe we ought to put you in for that ingestion charge."

The law's detractors see it as a failed policy that contributes to the state's prison population without improving public safety. They argue the law perpetuates cycles of addiction by tagging users with felony charges that can add stressors and contribute to continued drug use.

"Now you have a felony, so good luck finding or holding on to your current job, renting an apartment, getting a license in specialty areas," Sen. Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule, said Wednesday in support of the bill, for which she is the prime sponsor.

Drug courts and probation are cheaper than prison, Grove said, and drug courts in particular have a better track record for inspiring change.

"I just want you to see which system works," Grove told the committee. "The system that they're talking about does not work."

Grove's bill drew the ire of Rep. David Kull, R-Brandon, a former police chief. Kull said he has a heart for drug users, but believes that sometimes a felony charge is what it takes to convince them to make a change.

"We have a number of off-ramps for people to succeed in their recovery," Kull said.

He also argued that reducing the penalties for drug use is a step toward decriminalization.

Howard Republican Rep. Tim Reisch, a former state Department of Corrections secretary, told the committee that a person with a two-year sentence for ingestion typically only spends a few months in prison before being released on parole supervision.

"We do a terrible job," with treatment in prison, Reisch said, "and we don't have time" with users to do much better.

"Even if they did have time, even if they spent two years in prison – which is not ever going to happen – we don't have the capacity right now to give them treatment," Reisch said.

Reisch voted to send the bill to the House floor with a "do pass" recommendation. That effort failed 5-8.

Kull was among the members who voted to defeat the bill, but that motion also failed on a 7-7 vote.

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, voted against endorsing the bill, then against defeating it. He moved to advance it with a neutral recommendation after the tie vote, and joined nine others on the committee to support that outcome. A vote in the full House will be scheduled for a later date.

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.

USDA rolls out \$1 billion plan to combat bird flu after egg prices rise

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 5:15 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture announced Wednesday it plans to spend up to \$1 billion in Commodity Credit Corporation funds to try to reduce the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza in poultry.

The virus, also known as bird flu or H5N1, has disrupted the work of poultry farmers for years and began infecting dairy herds last year. But a recent spike in egg prices has led to renewed public attention

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to the disease.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said the new five-point plan would implement increased biosecurity measures for poultry farms to help reduce interactions between domestic flocks and wild birds, provide funding for farmers to quickly repopulate after having to cull infected flocks, remove some regulations, import eggs from other countries and research a vaccine.

Rollins said she was "confident" that the firing of probationary federal employees and efforts to reduce the size of the federal workforce wouldn't negatively affect USDA.

"As we look to streamline and make more efficient the U.S. Department of Agriculture, will we have the resources needed to address the plan I just laid out?" she said. "We are convinced that we will, as we re-align and evaluate where USDA has been spending money, where our employees are spending their time."

The USDA scrambled earlier this month to rehire employees working on H5N1 issues, who were fired as part of government efficiency moves.

Bird flu vaccine

Rollins was lukewarm on the idea of using a vaccine to address bird flu, saying she believes the issue needs further research before the United States would potentially begin vaccinating poultry against H5N1.

"We got a lot of feedback from those who think that's the immediate solution, and that we should be doing it," Rollins said.

But after she "really dug in" and spoke with officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Institutes of Health and veterinarians, Rollins said she concluded there needs to be more research.

"A lot of the feedback I got was, as I mentioned, that it could be a solution," Rollins said. "But to push that out now and require it — we're just not ready, we don't have enough information and we need to fully understand how it will affect the food supply."

Details from USDA

Kailee Tkacz Buller, chief of staff at USDA, said on a call with reporters that up to \$500 million of the \$1 billion total investment would go toward helping farmers bolster their biosecurity measures.

The USDA plans to begin that work with egg-laying hens before expanding to other poultry farms and will cover 75% of the costs of upgrading farms with best practices, she said.

Rosemary Sifford, deputy administrator of veterinary services and chief veterinary officer at USDA's Animal & Plant Health Inspection Service, said on the call that the agency will help coordinate biosecurity audits for flocks that have been affected by H5N1 as well as flocks that haven't contracted the virus.

USDA will then work with the farmers to cover that 75% share of fixing the highest risks to the poultry flocks, Sifford said.

Buller said up to \$400 million of the \$1 billion in Commodity Credit Corporation funds would go toward helping farmers repopulate their farms quickly with an indemnity rate "based on fair market value."

The final pot of funding, up to \$100 million, would go toward research into vaccines and therapeutics for poultry.

"We're going to make sure that we work to limit any impact on export trade markets, if there ever were vaccinations rolled out," Buller said.

Egg imports

USDA officials, speaking on background during the call with reporters, said that in addition to trying to find a vaccine for bird flu and helping farmers with biosecurity measures, the department is working to bolster egg imports.

One of the USDA officials said they were laying the groundwork to increase the number of eggs coming from the nation of Türkiye from about 70 million to 420 million annually.

The official didn't provide many details about the arrangement other than to say it will last until egg prices within the United States go down and that the USDA would not subsidize any private purchases.

An official declined to answer a question about whether that would mean no tariffs on eggs coming into the country.

"This is just an opportunity for us to have the conversation," the official said. "So we'll continue to have those discussions."

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.

Trump demands plans for large-scale layoffs of more federal employees

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 3:00 PM

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration on Wednesday ordered all federal departments and agencies to submit reorganization plans outlining how they would implement large-scale layoffs before March 13.

Office of Management and Budget Director Russ Vought and Office of Personnel Management Acting Director Charles Ezell wrote in a seven-page memo the reason for the expected layoffs is that the "federal government is costly, inefficient, and deeply in debt."

"At the same time, it is not producing results for the American public," they wrote. "Instead, tax dollars are being siphoned off to fund unproductive and unnecessary programs that benefit radical interest groups while hurting hard-working American citizens."

The reorganization plans should include "significant reduction in the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions by eliminating positions that are not required, a reduced real property footprint" and lower spending levels for each department or agency.

Possible relocations from D.C.

The memo says the planning and the laying off of federal workers will happen in at least two phases, with the first step calling on departments and agencies to submit their reduction in force and reorganization plans to OMB and OPM before March 13.

That proposal is supposed to include each "agency's suggested plan for congressional engagement to gather input and agreement on major restructuring efforts and the movement of fundings between accounts, as applicable, including compliance with any congressional notification requirements."

Agencies are also supposed to send OMB and OPM a "timetable and plan for implementing each part of its Phase 1" reorganization proposal.

The second deadline comes on April 14, when agencies must submit "a positive vision for more productive, efficient agency operations going forward." Those plans are slated to go into effect before Sept. 30.

That proposal is supposed to include any proposed relocations from the Washington, D.C., area to "less-costly parts of the country."

Departments and agencies that "provide direct services to citizens (such as Social Security, Medicare, and veterans' health care)" are supposed to ensure that their phase 2 reorganization plans "will have a positive effect on the delivery of such services," according to the memo.

Trump sees 'bloated and fat' country

President Donald Trump said during a Cabinet meeting held shortly after the memo was released that he fully supports firing federal workers en masse.

"This country has gotten bloated and fat and disgusting and incompetently run," Trump said.

Elon Musk, a billionaire who supported Trump extensively during his most recent campaign for the Oval Office, spoke at length during the Cabinet meeting ahead of any of the actual Cabinet secretaries or nominees in attendance.

Musk said that an email sent from OPM to more than 2 million federal employees late last week asking them to list five accomplishments was intended more as a "pulse check" than a performance review.

Musk indicated there would be another email at some point, but didn't clarify when or what exactly it would ask federal workers to do.

"We wish to keep everyone who is doing a job that is essential and doing that job well," Musk said. "But if the job is not essential, or they're not doing the job well, they obviously should not be on the public payroll."

Firings, lawsuits

The Trump administration's decision to fire probationary federal employees, some of whom had to be rehired after officials realized they performed essential tasks like nuclear security, has led to concerns by some GOP lawmakers.

There are also numerous lawsuits against actions the Trump administration has taken to reduce the federal workforce or cancel spending already approved by Congress. Several of the cases have led to court rulings halting implementation of the proposals.

Musk, who is technically a special government employee and not a Senate-confirmed Cabinet member, is named in many of the lawsuits.

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.

Cash rehash: Legislators again consider payment acceptance requirement for schools

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 11:44 AM

It was deja vu in the South Dakota House Education Committee on Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre. Earlier in the legislative session, the committee passed a bill that would require public and accredited private schools to accept cash at events. But the House of Representatives later rejected it.

Sen. Greg Blanc, R-Rapid City, then filed his own, similar bill in the Senate, where it was approved last week.

Blanc's legislation was assigned to the House Education Committee, which rehashed its discussion of the idea Wednesday. Supporters of the bill shared similar stories to those told earlier this session about parents not being able to attend high school activities in some parts of the state, especially in the Sioux Falls area, because some schools exclusively use smartphone app-based, cashless ticketing.

Opponents of the bill included the South Dakota High School Activities Association, organizations representing private businesses, and some activities directors at Sioux Falls high schools.

They worried that Senate Bill 219 would force separate entities to accept cash if they host school-affiliated games. The South Dakota state basketball tournaments, for example, are hosted at city- and state-owned facilities. If the venue decides not to comply, then schools or state tournaments would lose a venue, said Dan Swartos, executive director of the activities association.

Rep. Amber Arlint, R-Sioux Falls, told lawmakers the legislation isn't needed because it already spotlighted a problem and has encouraged school districts and organizations to reevaluate their cashless policies and make cash accommodations on their own. But a majority of lawmakers on the committee decided a state statute is needed.

The bill heads to the House next.

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.

That \$5,000 check from Elon Musk? Don't spend it quite yet.

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 26, 2025 11:18 AM

WASHINGTON — Elon Musk, the world's richest man, claims American taxpayers could receive a \$5,000 refund from the federal government — despite no apparent support in Congress, which controls the nation's purse strings.

Soon after Musk began floating the idea, President Donald Trump told investors at a conference in Miami on Feb. 19: "There's even under consideration a new concept where we give 20% of the DOGE savings to American citizens and 20% goes to paying down debt, because the numbers are incredible, Elon."

Musk and Trump's statements excited Trump supporters on social media. "That would be a great START," one X user under the moniker "MAGAmom" wrote.

Others online dismissed the claim as a "bad idea" and a "steaming pile of horses-t."

Right-wing media outlet Newsmax wrote that the proposal is "meant to incentivize the public to report government waste."

The U.S. DOGE Service Temporary Organization, established by Trump via executive order, was born out of Trump and Musk's campaign promise to establish a Department of Government Efficiency with the goal of slashing up to \$2 trillion in federal spending — an almost certainly unattainable figure that Musk has since walked back.

Who first talked about DOGE refund checks?

Musk, a senior White House adviser and Trump's top reelection campaign donor, posted on Feb. 18 to his social media platform X that he would "check with the president" about returning government savings directly to taxpayers.

The proposal for a "DOGE Dividend" was suggested on X by an investment firm CEO who reportedly has advised Musk's government savings project.

James Fishback, of the firm Azoria, shared a four-page plan, calculating that Musk and Trump could divide up 20% of \$2 trillion in government savings for the roughly 79 million U.S. taxpaying households, ultimately sending about \$5,000 to each one. The proposal only includes "net payers of federal income tax" in 2025, meaning that lower-income Americans would not see a refund.

Can Musk and Trump even find \$2 trillion in savings?

"Not even close," Matt Dallek, presidential and political historian at George Washington University, told States Newsroom during an interview Tuesday.

"You can save some money, but relative to the overall federal budget, you're talking about a relative pittance," Dallek said.

The Trump administration has so far fired thousands of federal workers, most probationary employees, though the exact figure is unclear. The White House, under Musk's guidance, slashed any positions and contracts related to diversity initiatives, largely dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development and all but shut down the Consumer Protection Financial Bureau.

DOGE and the Trump administration have been met with protests and lawsuits for the temporary organization's access to sensitive data and employment records that ultimately led to the firing of thousands of federal employees.

"These are kind of ideological targets that are not really designed to achieve real cost savings," Dallek said.

The majority of federal spending goes to Social Security, Medicare and defense, areas that Trump and lawmakers are reluctant to touch.

Democrats contend House Republicans' latest budget proposal also targets Medicaid, a federal-state program that provides health care for low-income Americans. Trump has said he does not want to touch Medicaid benefits.

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DOGE touts questionable savings

DOGE, which is not a federal department but rather an 18-month executive office project, claims on its website to have saved the government an estimated \$65 billion through "fraud detection/deletion, contract/lease cancellations, contract/lease renegotiations, asset sales, grant cancellations, workforce reductions, programmatic changes, and regulatory savings."

The New York Times reported Tuesday that DOGE deleted five of the biggest "savings" on the original list even as the sum climbed to \$65 billion.

DOGE.gov features a "wall of receipts," or entries that must be individually viewed to reveal claims, and sometimes screenshots, of what the temporary service organization claims to have slashed.

Entries purport DOGE cancelled access to news subscriptions and other resources for federal employees, nixed numerous contracts, and terminated leases for federal office spaces around the country.

"A lot of it is smoke and mirrors," Dallek said.

"If you're really trying to save the government money, why would you fire 7,000 IRS employees as tax season is approaching, which, you know, is going to hinder the ability of the IRS to collect the taxes that every year go unpaid?" he added.

An NPR analysis of more than 1,100 entries on the DOGE website found that the temporary organization fell way short of its savings claims. The analysis, published Feb. 19, calculated only \$2 billion in actual savings.

Twenty-one employees resigned in protest from the U.S. DOGE Service Tuesday, according to The Associated Press. The department was previously the U.S. Digital Service, which handles government technology, before Trump renamed the agency.

Can Trump cut checks without Congress?

Americans have received refund or stimulus checks in recent history.

Both the first Trump administration and former President Joe Biden signed laws that included direct payments to households as part of the COVID-19 pandemic relief efforts.

Former President George W. Bush sent rebate checks to taxpayers as part of his tax plan, passed by Congress in 2001. And, as part of legislation to address the economic slowdown in 2008, Bush sent a round of stimulus checks.

While experts argue about the nuances of whether presidents can unilaterally direct spending via executive order, the Oval Office most likely cannot send direct payments to Americans without Congress appropriating the money, as it did in these previous cases.

"Trump and Musk are doing a lot of things that are likely illegal and or unconstitutional, and they're still doing them. But if we live in the constitutional realities of what the Constitution says and what Congress' power is, sending checks to people is not something (the administration) can do by fiat," Dallek said.

The White House did not respond to a request for further details about sending direct payments to taxpayers.

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

COMMENTARY

For SD's congressional delegation, it's enable and deflect instead of advise and consent

by Dana Hess

The second Donald Trump administration is barely more than a month old and it's already exhausting. The flurry of moves made by the president are designed to "flood the zone" to keep his detractors from focusing on any one thing he does amid an avalanche of executive orders meant to dismantle the federal government.

All of this is taking place while South Dakota's representatives in Washington are enabling the president's wishes with legislation, casting votes for questionable nominees or agreeing with his off-the-wall plans.

With so much going on in the Trump administration, a recent South Dakota News Watch interview with Rep. Dusty Johnson seemed outdated by the time it appeared. In the interview, Johnson tried to explain why he offered legislation that would allow for the purchase of the Panama Canal. In an earlier South Dakota Searchlight story, Johnson explained that his bill would allow Trump to arrange for the purchase of the Panama Canal "if he could get a good deal."

That particular flight of the president's fancy seems like old news now, way back in the days when he was looking lovingly at welcoming Canada or Greenland into the Union. Now the former real estate mogul is fixated on turning war-torn Gaza into some kind of Middle Eastern Riviera.

Trump's plan is to push out the Palestinians that live there, forcing them on Jordan and Egypt before making the area a playground for rich folks. He obviously doesn't see the irony in forcing thousands of refugees into countries that don't want them while he has Kristi Noem's Homeland Security working overtime here trying to ferret out immigrants living in the country illegally.

Here's hoping Johnson doesn't come up with legislation opening the way for Trump to get a "good deal" on the purchase of Gaza. His original bill seeking a purchase of the Panama Canal is the kind of enabling of bad ideas that Congress is doing too much of as the members of the Republican majorities in the House and Senate try to stay on Trump's good side.

Johnson isn't alone in his play to stay in the president's good graces. His Republican compatriots in the House deflect questions about the president's actions with praise for the way he is using executive orders to reshape the federal government. They claim that he's just watching out for our tax dollars. Again, there is more irony-impairment at play as they fail to see that Trump's funding cuts in scientific research, education and agriculture come from the very bills that were passed by Congress. So much for Congress having the power of the purse.

As the leader of the influential Main Street Caucus in the House, Johnson should be standing up for the traditional, legal role of Congress, not offering legislation that enables Trump's latest flight of fancy.

Over in the Senate, another South Dakotan is likely seeing the wisdom of the old saying, "Be careful what you wish for." Sen. John Thune, as the new majority leader of the Senate, has been the overseer of a party caught in Trump's double-barreled plan to surround himself with sycophants while insulting a revered institution.

With the exception of the doomed candidacy of Matt Gaetz for attorney general, Thune, South Dakota's Sen. Mike Rounds and their Republican colleagues have proven that they live in an alternate reality where the likes of Pete Hegseth, Tulsi Gabbard and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. are worthy to run the Pentagon, oversee the nation's security agencies and serve as the next guardian of the nation's health care.

By putting forth such lackluster candidates, Trump is surrounding himself with people who will do his bidding without question. He's also sending a message to the Senate, that he can nominate any clod as a Cabinet secretary and the Senate will have to back his play, or else. This sets a disturbing trend for the time when Trump gets behind a particularly egregious piece of legislation and wants the Senate to continue to march in lockstep to do his bidding.

As expected, Noem, as a Trump appointee, is embracing the president's ideas, going so far as to agree

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with his estimation that FEMA should be dismantled. It's hard to name a federal office that's taken it on the chin more in recent times as the emergency management agency deals with a seemingly never-ending cycle of wildfires, floods, tornadoes and hurricanes. If FEMA goes away, let's hope there's a plan for how the federal government will help the victims of natural disasters.

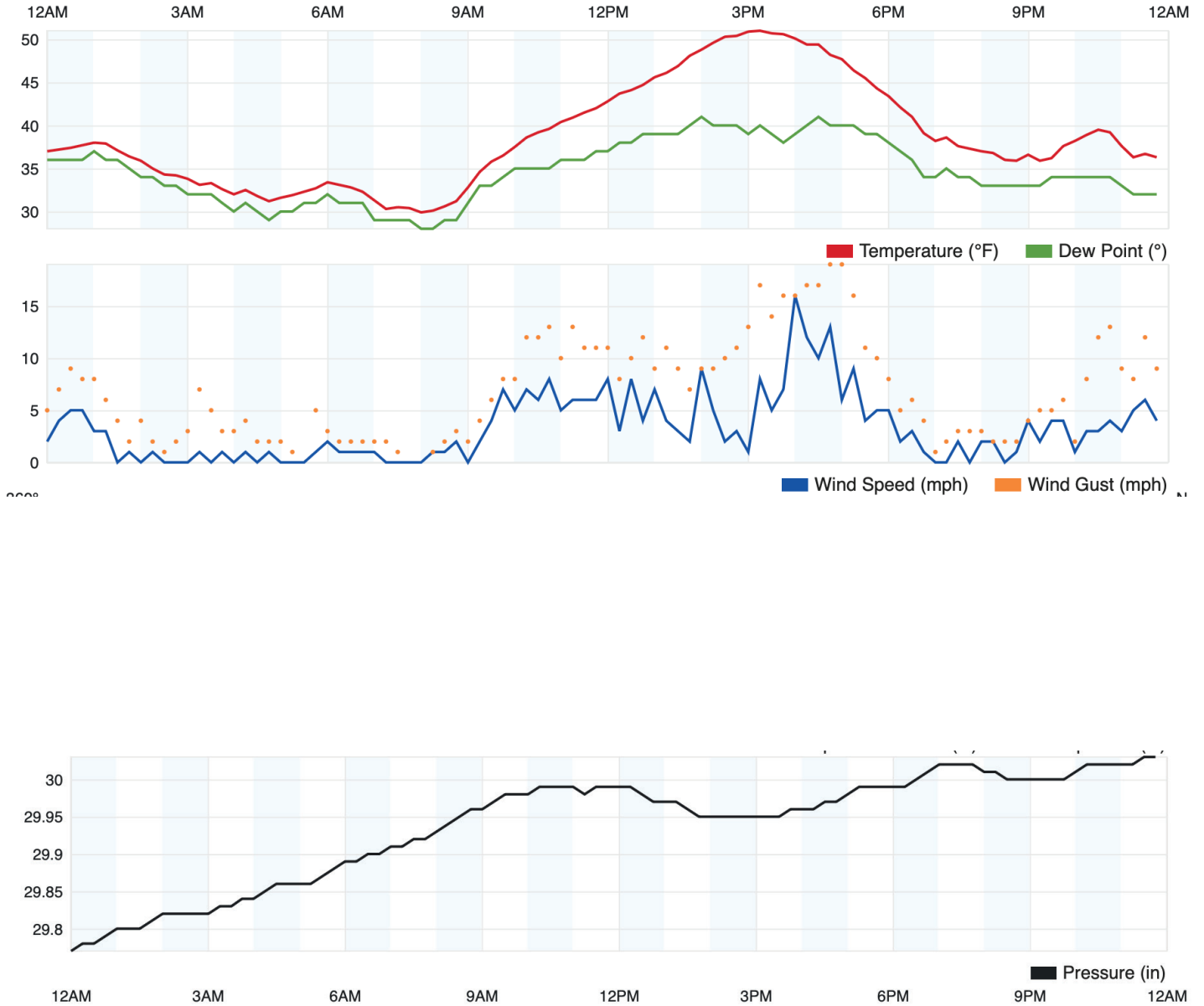
Trump's dismantling of government is taking place with the Republican majorities in Congress either cheering him on or huddled on the sidelines in silence. So far, it has been up to the courts to tamper down Trump's many plans. If the day comes when Trump decides he doesn't have to abide by the courts' decisions, maybe then Congress will get back in the game.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 57 °F

Sunny

Tonight



Low: 35 °F

Mostly Clear
then Partly
Cloudy and
Breezy

Friday



High: 46 °F

Increasing
Clouds and
Windy

Friday Night



Low: 15 °F

Partly Cloudy
and Blustery
then Partly
Cloudy

Saturday



High: 35 °F

Mostly Sunny

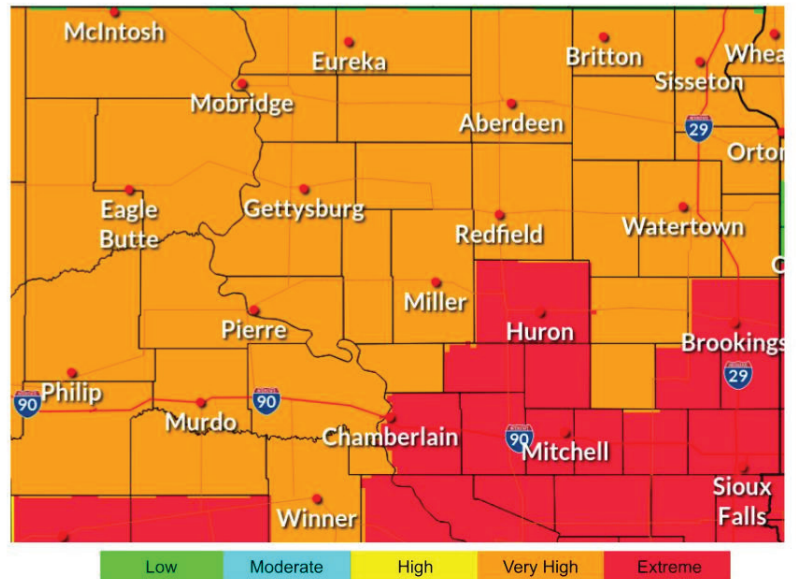


Very High/Extreme Grassland Fire Danger Friday

February 27, 2025
3:24 AM

Key Messages

- Very High to Extreme Fire Danger across the State
- Strong northwest winds developing early Friday & continue into the evening.
 - Peak wind gusts up around 50mph around mid-day.
- **Very High Grassland Fire Danger**
 - Fires will spread easily and be difficult to put out.
 - Ensure any fires & burn barrels are completely out/cool to the touch before leaving them unattended.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Strong winds, warm temperatures and low humidity will result in very high to extreme grassland fire danger across the state Friday. Take precautions now to ensure that when the winds start to blow tomorrow, that all fires are cool/out, secure anything that could cause sparks and be extra cautious disposing of cigarettes.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 51 °F at 3:06 PM

Low Temp: 30 °F at 7:56 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 4:37 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 6 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 68 in 2016

Record Low: -23 in 2001

Average High: 33

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.59

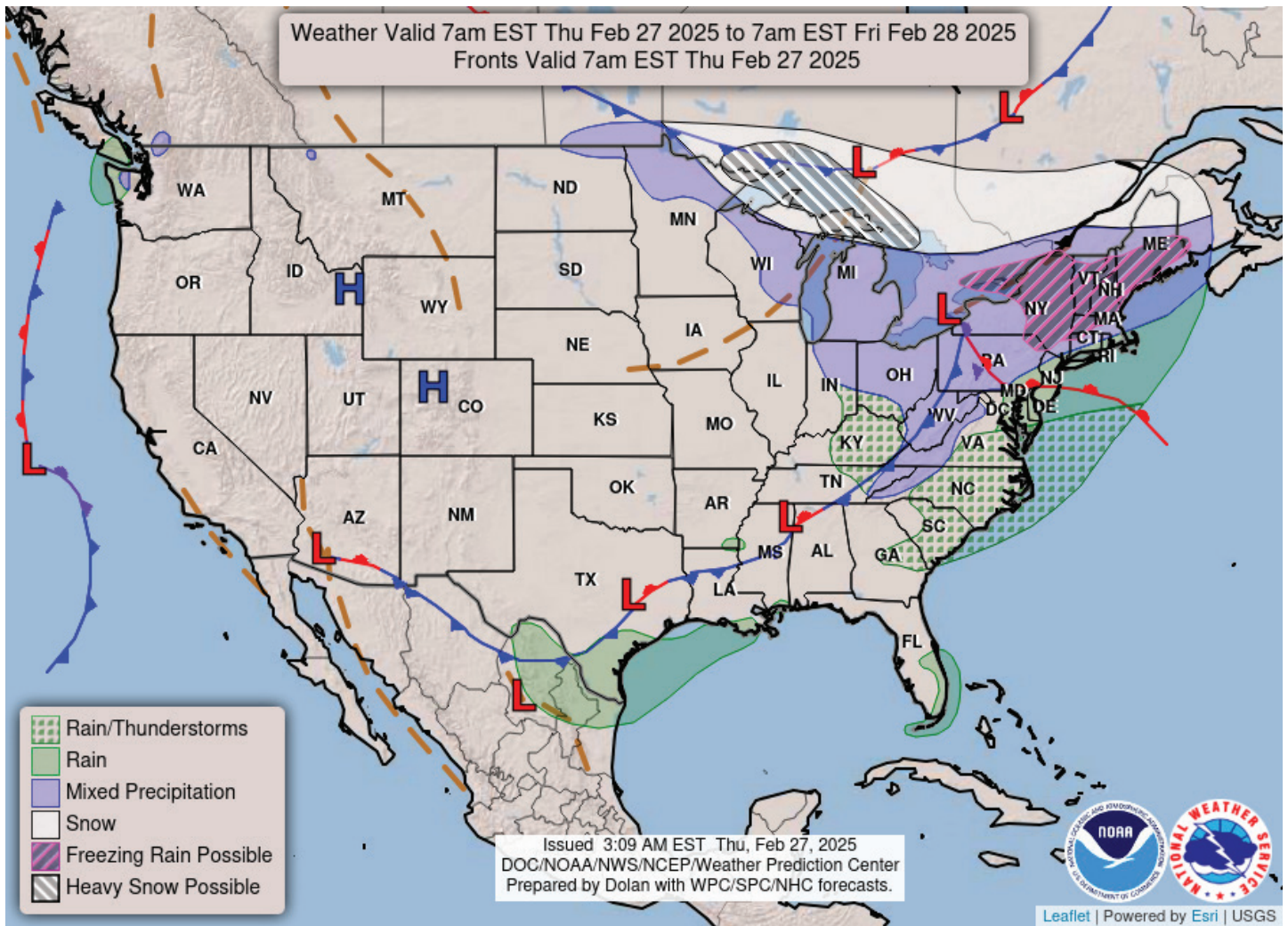
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.45

Average Precip to date: 1.14

Precip Year to Date: 0.45

Sunset Tonight: 6:18:24 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:09:47 am



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Today in Weather History

February 27, 1969: Snowfall of up to 15 inches blocked many roads in South Dakota. In addition, freezing rain formed a glaze on many utility lines resulting in extensive damage. The most considerable damage occurred in the north-central part of the state.

February 27, 1996: Across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, a strong area of low pressure brought 4 to 11 inches of snow from the late afternoon of the 26th to the evening of the 27th. Along with the snow came strong north winds of 20 to 40 mph, creating near-blizzard conditions. Wind chills were from 20 below to 60 below. As a result, some schools were closed or started late on the 27th, along with some activities canceled. Snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Sisseton, 5 inches at Aberdeen, Redfield, near Reliance, Wheaton, Browns Valley, Britton, and Gettysburg. Other snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Lebanon, Hoven, Miller, Webster, Eden, Frederick, and Seneca, 7 inches near Chelsea and Mellette, 8 inches at Roscoe and east of Hosmer, Tulare, and near Milbank, 9 inches south of Ree Heights, 8 to 10 inches in the Ortonville area, and 11 inches at Wilmot.

1717 - What was perhaps the greatest snow in New England history commenced on this date. During a ten day period a series of four snowstorms dumped three feet of snow upon Boston, and the city was snowbound for two weeks. Up to six feet of snow was reported farther to the north, and drifts covered many one story homes. (David Ludlum)

1969 - A record snowstorm in Maine came to an end. Two to four feet of snow buried southern and central Maine, with a state record of 57 inches reported at West Forks. Drifts covered many single story homes, and the weight of the snow collapsed many roofs. Two to four feet of snow also buried northeastern Vermont and northeastern Massachusetts. In New Hampshire, Mount Washington NH reported 97.8 inches of snow, a record storm total for New England. (24th-28th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1986: It was 99 degrees in Palm Springs, California, the highest temperature on record for February. Palm Springs also reached 99 degrees on February 26, 1986.

1987 - A storm spread heavy snow into the Central High Plains Region, and produced severe thunderstorms in the Southern Plains. Snowfall totals in western Nebraska ranged up to 19 inches at Sydney. Severe thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced baseball size hail at Stringtown and Atoka. A storm in the eastern U.S. produced heavy rain over the Carolinas and heavy snow in the southern Appalachians and piedmont region. Five inches of rain left four feet of water in the streets of Greenville SC. Snowfall totals in southwestern Virginia ranged up to 20 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms along a cold front produced heavy rain in southern California, with up to 2.52 inches reported in Ventura County. Strong winds accompanying the rain gusted to 55 mph in the Tehachapi Mountains. Rapid City SD established a February record with an afternoon high of 75 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Rain and snow prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Up to eight inches of snow blanketed north central Tennessee, and snowfall totals in western North Carolina ranged up to 14 inches at Mount Mitchell. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in southeastern Colorado, with 12 inches reported at Lamar. The same storm produced severe thunderstorms over the Southern High Plains, with wind gusts to 93 mph reported at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. Low pressure brought high winds to the Prince William Sound area of Alaska. Big River Lakes reported wind gusts to 92 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010 - A weak EF0 tornado causes no damage as it moved across California's southern San Joaquin Valley. However it is the only tornado reported in the United States during the month. According to the Storm Prediction Center only five months since 1950 have lacked a tornado report. The Weather Doctor

2010: A magnitude 8.8 earthquake occurred off the coast of central Chili at 3:34 local time. The quake triggered a tsunami that devastated several coastal towns in south-central Chile. Tsunami warnings were issued in 53 countries. In addition, waves caused minor damage in the San Diego area and the Tohoku region of Japan.



THEORIES AND REALITIES

A mother recently said, "Before I had children I read every book I could on how to raise children. I must have developed at least a hundred theories on how I should bring them up and train them. Now, after raising seven children, I have only two: Love them even when they least deserve love and hold them accountable for everything they do even when it hurts."

That sounds like advice that would come from God – not only about how we are to raise our children, but how He "raises" His children.

Everyone needs love – especially the type of love that has its source in God. His love is a love that is undeserved, fair, just, essential and life-giving. It is a love that may require a self-sacrificial act for the good of anyone who God brings into our lives – whether a family member, friend or someone who enters our life for a brief moment. It is a way of acting "with grace and mercy" toward another person rather than a feeling that may be fleeting.

But there is also a need for accountability – being responsible, first to God and then to others for sharing His love. Although God has given each of us the freedom of choice, we are also responsible to Him for each and every choice we make. Whatever we do and wherever we do it, we are accountable to Him to show His love. When we are born again, we are born to live His love, show His grace and demonstrate His mercy.

Prayer: Your Word, Lord, clearly states that others will know that we are Your disciples if we show them Your love. Help each of us to accept and fulfill this obligation. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. John 13:35

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: 02.25.25

4 8 11 32 52 13

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$197,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 10 Mins
32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.26.25

8 11 21 27 39 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$25,410,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 25
Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.26.25

5 18 27 33 38 10

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 40 Mins 31
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.26.25

7 10 13 17 28

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$48,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 40
Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.26.25

21 26 45 46 64 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 9 Mins
32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.26.25

28 48 55 60 62 20

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$272,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 9 Mins
32 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
- 05/12/2025 High School Girls Golf Meet at Olive Grove
- 05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 06/13/2025 SDSU 4 Person Scramble at Olive Grove
- 06/21/2025 Groton Triathlon
- 06/23/2025 Ladies 2 Person Scramble at Olive Grove
- 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
- 07/16/2025 Men's Pro Am Golf at Olive Grove
- 07/25/2025 Ferney Open Scramble Golf at Olive Grove
- 08/01/2025 Wine on Nine Fundraiser at Olive Grove
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm
- 12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Little Wound 62, Lower Brule 52

McLaughlin 51, Wakpala 47

St. Francis Indian 58, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 52

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

White's 20 lead North Dakota State over South Dakota 82-78

By The Associated Press undefined

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Jacari White had 20 points and North Dakota State closed its regular season with an 82-78 win over South Dakota on Wednesday night.

White shot 5 for 13 (2 for 7 from 3-point range) and 8 of 10 from the free-throw line for the Bison (21-10, 10-6 Summit League). Tajavis Miller scored 19 points and added six rebounds. Darik Dissette shot 6 of 10 from the field and 4 for 5 from the line to finish with 16 points, while adding 13 rebounds.

Chase Forte led the way for the Coyotes (17-13, 8-7) with 21 points and six rebounds. Isaac Bruns added 17 points. Paul Bruns also had 14 points, 11 rebounds and two steals.

South Dakota hosts North Dakota in its next matchup on Saturday.

Gene Hackman, prolific Oscar-winning actor, found dead at home at 95 years old

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Gene Hackman, the prolific Oscar-winning actor whose studied portraits ranged from reluctant heroes to conniving villains and made him one of the industry's most respected and honored performers, has been found dead along with his wife at their home. He was 95.

Hackman was a frequent and versatile presence on screen from the 1960s until his retirement. His dozens of films included the Academy Award favorites "The French Connection" and "Unforgiven," a breakout performance in "Bonnie and Clyde," a classic bit of farce in "Young Frankenstein," a turn as the comic book villain Lex Luthor in "Superman" and the title character in Wes Anderson's 2001 "The Royal Tenenbaums."

He seemed capable of any kind of role — whether an uptight buffoon in "Birdcage," a college coach finding redemption in the sentimental favorite "Hoosiers" or a secretive surveillance expert in Francis Ford Coppola's Watergate-era release "The Conversation."

Although self-effacing and unfashionable, Hackman held special status within Hollywood — heir to Spencer Tracy as an every man, actor's actor, curmudgeon and reluctant celebrity. He embodied the ethos of doing his job, doing it very well, and letting others worry about his image. Beyond the obligatory appearances at awards ceremonies, he was rarely seen on the social circuit and made no secret of his disdain for the business side of show business.

"Actors tend to be shy people," he told Film Comment in 1988. "There is perhaps a component of hostility in that shyness, and to reach a point where you don't deal with others in a hostile or angry way, you choose this medium for yourself ... Then you can express yourself and get this wonderful feedback."

He was an early retiree — essentially done, by choice, with movies by his mid-70s — and a late bloomer. Hackman was 35 when cast for "Bonnie and Clyde" and past 40 when he won his first Oscar, as the rules-bending New York City detective Jimmy "Popeye" Doyle in the 1971 thriller about tracking down Manhattan drug smugglers, "The French Connection."

Jackie Gleason, Steve McQueen and Peter Boyle were among the actors considered for Doyle. Hackman

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was a minor star at the time, seemingly without the flamboyant personality that the role demanded. The actor himself feared that he was miscast. A couple of weeks of nighttime patrols of Harlem in police cars helped reassure him.

One of the first scenes of "The French Connection" required Hackman to slap around a suspect. The actor realized he had failed to achieve the intensity that the scene required, and asked director William Friedkin for another chance. The scene was filmed at the end of the shooting, by which time Hackman had immersed himself in the loose-cannon character of Popeye Doyle. Friedkin would recall needing 37 takes to get the scene right.

"I had to arouse an anger in Gene that was lying dormant, I felt, within him — that he was sort of ashamed of and didn't really want to revisit," Friedkin told the Los Angeles Review of Books in 2012.

The most famous sequence was dangerously realistic: A car chase in which Det. Doyle speeds under elevated subway tracks, his brown Pontiac (driven by a stuntman) screeching into areas that the filmmakers had not received permits for. When Doyle crashes into a white Ford, it wasn't a stuntman driving the other car, but a New York City resident who didn't know a movie was being made.

Hackman also resisted the role which brought him his second Oscar. When Clint Eastwood first offered him Little Bill Daggett, the corrupt town boss in "Unforgiven," Hackman turned it down. But he realized that Eastwood was planning to make a different kind of Western, a critique, not a celebration of violence. The film won him the Academy Award as best supporting actor of 1992.

"To his credit, and my joy, he talked me into it," Hackman said of Eastwood during an interview with the American Film Institute.

Hackman played super-villain Lex Luthor opposite Christopher Reeve in director Richard Donner's 1978 "Superman," a film that established the prototype for the modern superhero movie. He also starred in two sequels.

Eugene Allen Hackman was born in San Bernardino, California, and grew up in Danville, Illinois, where his father worked as a pressman for the Commercial-News. His parents fought repeatedly, and his father often used his fists on Gene to take out his rage. The boy found refuge in movie houses, identifying with such screen rebels as Errol Flynn and James Cagney as his role models.

When Gene was 13, his father waved goodbye and drove off, never to return. The abandonment was a lasting injury to Gene. His mother had become an alcoholic and was constantly at odds with her mother, with whom the shattered family lived (Gene had a younger brother, actor Richard Hackman). At 16, he "suddenly got the itch to get out." Lying about his age, he enlisted in the U.S. Marines. In his early 30s, before his film career took off, his mother died in a fire started by her own cigarette.

"Dysfunctional families have sired a lot of pretty good actors," he observed ironically during a 2001 interview with The New York Times.

His brawling and resistance to authority led to his being demoted from corporal three times. His taste of show business came when he conquered his mic fright and became disc jockey and news announcer on his unit's radio station.

With a high school degree he earned during his time as a Marine, Hackman enrolled in journalism at the University of Illinois. He dropped out after six months to study radio announcing in New York. After working at stations in Florida and his hometown of Danville, he returned to New York to study painting at the Art Students League. Hackman switched again to enter an acting course at the Pasadena Playhouse.

Back in New York, he found work as a doorman and truck driver among other jobs waiting for a break as an actor, sweating it out with such fellow hopefuls as Robert Duvall and Dustin Hoffman. Summer work at a theater on Long Island led to roles off-Broadway. Hackman began attracting attention from Broadway producers, and he received good notices in such plays as "Any Wednesday," with Sandy Dennis, and "Poor Richard," with Alan Bates.

During a tryout in New Haven for another play, Hackman was seen by film director Robert Rossen, who hired him for a brief role in "Lilith," which starred Warren Beatty and Jean Seberg. He played small roles in other films, including "Hawaii," and leads in television dramas of the early 1960s such as "The Defenders" and "Naked City."

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When Beatty began work on "Bonnie and Clyde," which he produced and starred in, he remembered Hackman and cast him as bank robber Clyde Barrow's outgoing brother. Pauline Kael in the New Yorker called Hackman's work "a beautifully controlled performance, the best in the film," and he was nominated for an Academy Award as supporting actor.

Hackman nearly appeared in another immortal film of 1967, "The Graduate." He was supposed to play the cuckolded husband of Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), but director Mike Nichols decided he was too young and replaced him with Murray Hamilton. Two years later, he was considered for what became one of television's most famous roles, patriarch Mike Brady of "The Brady Bunch." Producer Sherwood Schwartz wanted Hackman to audition, but network executives thought he was too obscure. (The part went to Robert Reed).

Hackman's first starring film role came in 1970 with "I Never Sang for My Father," as a man struggling to deal with a failed relationship with his dying father, Melvyn Douglas. Because of Hackman's distress over his own father, he resisted connecting to the role.

In his 2001 Times interview, he recalled: "Douglas told me, 'Gene, you'll never get what you want with the way you're acting.' And he didn't mean acting; he meant I was not behaving myself. He taught me not to use my reservations as an excuse for not doing the job." Even though he had the central part, Hackman was Oscar-nominated as supporting actor and Douglas as lead. The following year he won the Oscar as best actor for "The French Connection."

Through the years, Hackman kept working, in pictures good and bad. For a time he seemed to be in a contest with Michael Caine for the world's busiest Oscar winner. In 2001 alone, he appeared in "The Mexican," "Heartbreakers," "Heist," "The Royal Tenenbaums" and "Behind Enemy Lines." But by 2004, he was openly talking about retirement, telling Larry King he had no projects lined up. His only credit in recent years was narrating a Smithsonian Channel documentary, "The Unknown Flag Raiser of Iwo Jima."

In 1956, Hackman married Fay Maltese, a bank teller he had met at a YMCA dance in New York. They had a son, Christopher, and two daughters, Elizabeth and Leslie, but divorced in the mid-1980s. In 1991 he married Betsy Arakawa, a classical pianist.

When not on film locations, Hackman enjoyed painting, stunt flying, stock car racing and deep sea diving. In his latter years, he wrote novels and lived on his ranch in Sante Fe, New Mexico, on a hilltop looking out on the Colorado Rockies, a view he preferred to his films that popped up on television.

"I'll watch maybe five minutes of it," he once told Time magazine, "and I'll get this icky feeling, and I turn the channel."

North Korea appears to have sent more troops to Russia to back its war against Ukraine, Seoul says

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's spy agency said Thursday that North Korea appears to have sent additional troops to Russia, after its soldiers deployed on the Russian-Ukraine fronts suffered heavy casualties.

The National Intelligence Service said in a brief statement it was trying to determine exactly how many more troops North Korea has deployed to Russia.

The NIS also assessed that North Korean troops were redeployed at fronts in Russia's Kursk region in the first week of February, following a reported temporary withdrawal from the area. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in an address on Feb. 7, confirmed a new Ukrainian offensive in Kursk and said North Korean troops were fighting alongside Russian forces there.

North Korea has been supplying a vast amount of conventional weapons to Russia, and last fall it sent about 10,000-12,000 troops to Russia as well, according to U.S., South Korean and Ukraine intelligence officials. North Korean soldiers are highly disciplined and well trained, but observers say they've become easy targets for drone and artillery attacks on Russian-Ukraine battlefields due to their lack of combat experience and unfamiliarity with the terrain.

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In January, the NIS said about 300 North Korean soldiers had died and another 2,700 had been injured. Zelenskyy earlier put the number of killed or wounded North Koreans at 4,000, though U.S. estimates were lower at around 1,200.

Earlier Thursday, South Korea's JoongAng Ilbo newspaper, citing unidentified sources, reported that an additional 1,000-3,000 North Korean soldiers were deployed to Kursk between January and February.

South Korea, the U.S. and their partners worry that Russia could reward North Korea by transferring high-tech weapons technologies that can sharply enhance its nuclear weapons program. North Korea is expected to receive economic and other assistance from Russia as well.

During talks in Saudi Arabia last week, Russia and the U.S. agreed to start working toward ending the war and improving their diplomatic and economic ties. Ukrainian officials weren't present at the talks. That marked an extraordinary shift in U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump and a clear departure from U.S.-led efforts to isolate Russia over its war in Ukraine.

Observers say North Korean leader Kim Jong Un could send more troops to Russia to win further Russian assistance before the war ends.

Oscar-winning actor Gene Hackman and his wife and dog found dead in their New Mexico home

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Oscar-winning actor Gene Hackman, his wife and their dog were found dead in their New Mexico home, authorities said Thursday.

Foul play was not suspected, but authorities did not release circumstances of their deaths and said an investigation was ongoing.

Hackman, 95, was found dead with his wife Betsy Arakawa and their dog when deputies preformed a welfare check at the home around 1:45 p.m., Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Denise Avila said.

The gruff-but-beloved Hackman was among the finest actors of his generation, appearing as both villains, heroes and antiheroes in dozens of dramas, comedies and action films from the 1960s until his retirement in the early 2000s.

He was a five-time Oscar nominee who won for "The French Connection" and "Unforgiven" 21 years apart. His death comes just four days before this year's ceremony.

The couple's home is in a gated community just outside New Mexico's capital city. Hackman moved to the area in the 1980s, where he was often seen around town and served as a board member of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in the 1990s, according to the local paper, The New Mexican.

Aside from appearances at awards shows, he was rarely seen in the Hollywood social circuit and retired about 20 years ago. His was the rare Hollywood retirement that actually lasted.

In his later years, he wrote novels from the hilltop ranch that provided a view of the Rocky Mountains. An email sent to his publicist was not immediately returned early Thursday.

Andrew Tate, who faces rape and trafficking charges in Romania, has left for the US

By STEPHEN McGRATH and ANDREEA ALEXANDRU Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP) — Influencer brothers Andrew and Tristan Tate, who are charged with human trafficking in Romania, have left for the U.S. after a travel ban on them was lifted, an official said Thursday.

The brothers are also charged with forming a criminal gang to sexually exploit women. Andrew Tate also faces an additional charge of rape.

It wasn't clear under what conditions the Tates — who are avid supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump and boast millions of online followers — were allowed to leave Romania.

An official at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the case, said that the decision was at the discretion of prosecutors.

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Romania's anti-organized crime agency, DIICOT, said in a statement Thursday that prosecutors approved a "request to modify the obligation preventing the defendants from leaving Romania," but that judicial control measures remained in place. The agency didn't say who had made the request.

"These include the requirement to appear before judicial authorities whenever summoned," the statement read. "The defendants have been warned that deliberately violating these obligations may result in judicial control being replaced with a stricter deprivation of liberty measure."

Andrew Tate, 38, and Tristan Tate, 36 — who are dual U.S.-British citizens — were arrested near Romania's capital in late 2022 along with two Romanian women. Romanian prosecutors formally indicted all four last year. In April, the Bucharest Tribunal ruled that a trial could start but didn't set a date. All four deny all of the allegations.

The Tates' departure came after Foreign Minister Emil Hurezeanu said this month that a U.S. official in the current Trump administration had expressed interest in the brothers' legal case in Romania at the Munich Security Conference. The minister insisted it didn't amount to pressure.

While it is unclear whether the request to lift the brothers' travel ban came from the U.S., Cristi Danilet, a former judge in Romania's northern city of Cluj, said that such an agreement would be unprecedented.

"I have never heard of a foreign government asking Romania to lift preventive measures to allow some suspects to leave the country," he told The Associated Press. "If I had been a judge, this would not have happened."

"If it is true, it means that there is no more rule of law and sovereign countries," he added.

In December, a court in Bucharest ruled that the case against the Tates and the two Romanian women couldn't go to trial because of multiple legal and procedural irregularities on the part of the prosecutors.

That decision by the Bucharest Court of Appeal was a huge setback for DIICOT, but it didn't mean the defendants could walk free. The case hasn't been closed, and there is also a separate legal case against the brothers in Romania.

Last August, DIICOT also launched a second case against the Tate brothers, investigating allegations of human trafficking, the trafficking of minors, sexual intercourse with a minor, influencing statements and money laundering. They have denied all of the charges.

Andrew Tate, a former professional kickboxer and self-described misogynist who has amassed more than 10 million followers on X, has repeatedly claimed that prosecutors in Romania have no evidence against him and that there is a political conspiracy to silence him.

The Tates brothers' legal battles, however, aren't limited to Romania.

Late last year, a U.K. court ruled that in a separate case against the Tate brothers, police can seize more than 2.6 million pounds (\$3.3 million) to cover years of unpaid taxes from the pair and froze some of their accounts. Andrew Tate called it "outright theft" and called it "a coordinated attack on anyone who dares to challenge the system."

Last March, the Tate brothers appeared at the Bucharest Court of Appeal in a separate case after U.K. authorities issued arrest warrants over allegations of sexual aggression in a case dating back to 2012-2015.

The appeals court granted the U.K. request to extradite the Tates, but only after legal proceedings in Romania have concluded.

Israeli official says the army won't withdraw from a Gaza corridor in potential jolt to truce

By MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH, WAFAA SHURFA and NATALIE MELZER Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel will not withdraw from a strategic corridor in the Gaza Strip as called for by the ceasefire, an official said Thursday. Israel's refusal could spark a crisis with Hamas and key mediator Egypt at a sensitive moment for the fragile truce.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, said Israeli forces needed to remain in the so-called Philadelphi corridor, on the Gaza side of the border with Egypt, to prevent weapons

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smuggling.

The official spoke hours after Hamas released the remains of four hostages in exchange for over 600 Palestinian prisoners, the last planned swap of the ceasefire's first phase, which ends this weekend. Talks over the second and more difficult stage have yet to begin.

Israel was supposed to begin withdrawing from the Philadelphi corridor on Saturday, the last day of the first phase, and complete it within eight days.

Much could hinge on a visit by U.S. President Donald Trump's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, who is expected in the region in the coming days.

There was no immediate comment from Hamas or Egypt. But in a statement earlier on Thursday, the militant group said the only way for Israel to secure the release of dozens of hostages still held in Gaza was through negotiations and adhering to the ceasefire agreement.

Remains of 4 hostages are identified

The remains released Thursday were confirmed to be those of Ohad Yahalomi, Itzhak Elgarat, Shlomo Mantzur and Tsachi Idan, according to the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, which represents families of the captives.

Mantzur, 85, was killed in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack that triggered the war, and his body was taken into the territory. Israel said the other three were killed in captivity, without elaborating.

"Our hearts ache upon receiving the bitter news," Israeli President Isaac Herzog said. "In this painful moment, there is some solace in knowing that they will be laid to rest in dignity in Israel."

French President Emmanuel Macron said he shared the "immense pain" of the family and loved ones of Yahalomi, who had French citizenship.

Hamas confirmed that over 600 prisoners had been released overnight. Most were detainees returned to Gaza, where they had been rounded up after the Oct. 7 attack and held without charge on security suspicions.

A joyful return for released prisoners

Some of the released prisoners fell to their knees in gratitude after disembarking from buses in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis. In the West Bank town of Beitunia, dozens of prisoners were welcomed by crowds of relatives and well-wishers.

The released prisoners wore shirts issued by the Israeli prison service bearing a message in Arabic about pursuing one's enemies. Some of the prisoners threw the shirts on the ground or set them on fire.

Israel delayed the release of the prisoners on Saturday over Hamas' practice of parading hostages before crowds and cameras during their release. Israel, along with the Red Cross and U.N. officials, have called the ceremonies humiliating for the hostages.

Hamas released the four bodies to the Red Cross in Gaza overnight without a public ceremony.

The prisoners released Thursday included 445 men, 21 teenagers and one woman, according to lists shared by Palestinian officials that did not specify their ages. Only around 50 Palestinians were released into the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem in this round, while dozens sentenced to life over deadly attacks against Israelis were exiled.

The truce is in peril

The latest handover was the final one planned under the ceasefire's first six-week phase, which expires this weekend. Hamas has returned 33 hostages, including eight bodies, in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

Trump's envoy, Witkoff, has said he wants the sides to move into negotiations on the second phase. Those talks were supposed to begin the first week of February.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to return all the hostages and destroy the military and governing capabilities of Hamas, which remains in control of Gaza. The Trump administration has endorsed both goals.

But it's unclear how Israel would destroy Hamas without resuming the war, and Hamas is unlikely to release the remaining hostages — its main bargaining chips — without a lasting ceasefire.

The ceasefire, brokered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, ended 15 months of war that erupted

after Hamas' 2023 attack on southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people. About 250 people were taken hostage.

If the identities of the four bodies are confirmed, then 59 captives will remain in Gaza, 32 of whom are believed to be dead. Nearly 150 have been released in ceasefire agreements or other deals, while dozens of bodies have been recovered by Israeli forces and eight captives have been rescued alive.

Israel's military offensive has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, according to Palestinian health officials, who don't differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths but say over half the dead have been women and children.

The fighting displaced an estimated 90% of Gaza's population and decimated the territory's infrastructure and health system.

A school helps migrants in Mauritania. Is it enough to keep them from leaving for Europe?

By SAM METZ Associated Press

NOUADHIBOU, Mauritania (AP) — Eager students from throughout west Africa raise their hands as teachers guide them through math and classical Arabic. Then they race outdoors to meet their parents, who clean houses, drive informal taxis or gut sardines in Chinese factories.

Outside, government billboards urge these families and others to fight "migrant smuggling," showing overcrowded boats navigating the Atlantic's thrashing waves. Inside, posters warn the ocean can be deadly.

Such messaging is hard to escape in Nouadhibou, Mauritania's second largest city and a launch point on an increasingly popular migrant route toward Europe. As authorities strengthen security measures on long-established routes, migrants are resorting to longer, more perilous ones. From Mauritania, they risk hundreds of miles of sea and howling winds to reach Spain's Canary Islands.

The route puts new strain on this port city of 177,000 people at the edge of the Sahara. Outdated infrastructure and unpaved roads have not kept pace as European and Chinese investment pours into the fishing industry, and as migrants and their children arrive from as far away as Syria and Pakistan.

The school for children of migrants and refugees, set up in 2018 as an early response to the growing need, is the kind of program envisioned as part of the 210 million euro (\$219 million) accord the European Union and Mauritania brokered last year.

The deal — one of several that Europe has signed with neighboring states to deter migration — funds border patrol, development aid and programs supporting refugees, asylum-seekers and host communities.

It's a response to rising alarm and anti-migration politics in Europe. Nearly 47,000 migrants arrived on boats in the Canaries last year, a record "fueled by departures from Mauritania, even as flows from other departure points declined," according to the EU border agency Frontex. Almost 6,000 were unaccompanied children under 18.

Tracking deaths at sea is difficult, but the Spanish nonprofit Walking Borders says at least 6,800 people died or went missing while attempting the crossing last year. Conditions are so harsh that boats drifting off course can end up in Brazil or the Caribbean.

Though many praise initiatives that fulfill migrants and refugees' overlooked needs, few believe they will be effective in discouraging departures for Europe — even the head of the group that runs the Nouadhibou school.

"We can't stop migration," said Amsatou Vepouyoum, president of the Organization for the Support of Migrants and Refugees, the city's leading migrant aid group. "But through raising awareness, we want to improve the conditions under which people leave."

Preparing for an uncertain future

The organization years ago surveyed the migrant population and found that education was one of the biggest barriers to integration in Mauritania.

Bill Van Esveld, a children's rights researcher at Human Rights Watch, said that's true around the world. Many countries that migrants and refugees pass through erect bureaucratic hurdles to school access, he

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said.

"Without literacy or numeracy, how can you advocate for yourself as someone who has human rights in today's world?" Van Esveld said.

Mauritania's Education Ministry in a January directive affirmed that refugee children have the right to attend public school. But that hasn't applied for many migrants who don't qualify as refugees and face difficulty enrolling because they lack birth certificates, residency papers or school records.

The school for Nouadhibou's migrant and refugee children ages 5 to 12 runs parallel to Mauritania's school system and teaches a similar curriculum as well as Arabic, aiming to integrate children into public classrooms by sixth grade.

Families often don't plan to stay in Mauritania, but parents still describe the school as a lifeline for kids' futures, wherever they will be.

"Sometimes life's circumstances leave you somewhere, so you adapt, and what ends up happening leads you to stay," Vepouyoum said.

Weak oversight and worried parents

From Europe's perspective, funneling aid toward such initiatives is part of a larger effort to persuade people not to migrate. Some experts say it also demonstrates a disconnect between political goals and on-the-ground realities.

"The European Union always announces these big sums, but it's very difficult to figure out how the money is actually spent," said Ulf Laessing, the Sahel program director at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, a German think tank.

Both the school and the Organization for the Support of Migrants and Refugees have had their work highlighted by the EU and member states, along with United Nations agencies. None have said how much money they have spent on the school or on other programs aimed at migrants in Mauritania.

The school said it also charges students based on what families can afford so it can pay rent on its two-story cinderblock building and utilities, Vepouyoum said.

But four parents, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they worried about their children getting kicked out, said the baseline monthly fee of 600 Mauritanian Ouguiya (\$15) per child was too much.

"If you can't pay, they'll kick you out," a father of two students from Mali said.

He said many parents want to give children opportunities they lacked in their home countries. He has heard from other parents that enrolling in school is easier in the Canary Islands, but limited access to education is also a problem there.

The school in Nouadhibou says it has educated over 500 students. It has not tracked the number who continue on toward Europe.

Pressures to move on

Times are changing in Nouadhibou. Community leaders and business owners worry that increasing competition for jobs has fueled suspicion toward foreign-born communities.

That includes workers from neighboring Senegal and Mali who settled in the city years ago. Aid groups say outreach is easier among long-term migrants because newcomers worry about drawing attention to themselves — sometimes because they're looking for smugglers to help them move on, said Kader Konate, a community leader from Mali.

Many migrants say they just need help.

"We are doing this because we feel we have no other choice," Boureima Maiga said.

The 29-year-old graduate with a teaching degree fled Mali as extremist violence escalated. On many days, he waits at the Nouadhibou port alongside hundreds of other migrants, hoping for work in fish factory "cold rooms."

But without residency or work visas, they are often turned away, or have pay withheld — an abuse they fear would bring retaliation if reported.

Maiga feels trapped in a country where deep racial divisions between Arab and Black Africans make integration nearly impossible, with discrimination by employers widespread. He is unsure where to go next.

"Just let me work. I can do a lot of jobs," he said. "Everyone knows how to do something."

Meanwhile, every day, he picks up his nieces at a Catholic school, hoping it will give them a life beyond such worries.

Texas says this doctor illegally treated trans youth. He says he followed the law

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

EL PASO, Texas (AP) — On the Texas border, Dr. Hector Granados treats children with diabetes at his El Paso clinics and makes hospital rounds under the shadow of accusations that have thrown his career into jeopardy: providing care to transgender youth.

In what's believed to be a U.S. first, Texas is suing Granados and two other physicians over claims that they violated the state's ban on gender-affirming care for minors, calling the doctors "scofflaws" in lawsuits filed last fall that threaten to impose steep fines and revoke their medical licenses. He denies the accusations, and all three doctors have asked courts to dismiss the cases.

The cases are a pivotal test of intensifying Republican efforts to prevent such treatments, including President Donald Trump's executive order that would bar federal support for gender-affirming care for youth under 19.

Some hospitals have already begun unwinding services for pediatric patients. But, so far, only Texas is demonstrating what punishing doctors looks like when bans are allegedly broken.

Granados, in an interview with The Associated Press, said he was meticulous in halting transgender care before Texas' ban took effect in 2023. He denied that he continued prescribing puberty blockers and cross-sex hormones to transitioning patients and said he was initially unclear which patients, who are not named in the lawsuit, he is accused of wrongfully treating.

The other accused doctors — both in Dallas — are under temporary court orders not to see patients and only practice medicine in research and academic settings.

"Looking at the patients was hard because they were kind of disappointed of what was going on," Granados said of ending their care. "But it was something that needed to be followed because it's the law."

The lawsuits are believed to be the first time a state has brought enforcement under laws that ban or restrict gender-affirming care for minors, which Republicans have enacted in 27 states, including this month in Kansas over the Democratic governor's veto. Although those accused of violating bans face criminal charges in some states, they do not in Texas.

Nationwide, doctors and hospital executives are reevaluating transgender health programs that carry a widening risk of litigation and losing federal funding. For transgender Americans, the climate has narrowed options for care and deepened fears.

Trump has launched a broad charge against transgender rights quickly in his second term, signing executive orders that include barring schools from using federal education dollars to support students who are socially transitioning. Supporters say restrictions protect vulnerable children from what they see as a "radical" ideology about gender and making irreversible medical decisions.

The Texas lawsuits were brought by Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, who has previously gone beyond the state's borders to launch investigations into gender-affirming treatment.

His office did not respond to requests for an interview. At a court hearing Wednesday involving the Dallas doctors, an attorney in Paxton's office declined to comment and referred questions to the agency's press office.

"I will enforce the law to the fullest extent to prevent any doctor from providing these dangerous drugs to kids," Paxton said in a statement this month.

A practice in El Paso

Granados is one of two pediatric endocrinologists in El Paso, a desert city of about 700,000 where mountains rise in the distance.

Granados, 48, is from Ciudad Juarez, the neighboring Mexican city that sprawls out south of El Paso.

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He said that after attending medical school in Mexico he completed additional training in New York and Connecticut but he wanted to return to what he said is an underserved region.

He opened a gender clinic at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center in El Paso before starting his own practice in 2019. Before the ban, Granados said, treating transgender youth was just an extension of his practice that also treats youth with diabetes, growth problems and early puberty.

He said he accepted transgender patients only if they had first received a diagnosis of gender dysphoria from a mental health provider.

"It was not different from doing everything else that a pediatric endocrinologist does," he said. "It was just taking care of children who required that specific therapy."

Emiliana Edwards was among them. Now 18, she called Granados an "amazing" caregiver who carefully explained her gender-affirming treatment. But at her first appointment after Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed the ban in 2023, Edwards said the room felt different, "like there were wires everywhere."

"It felt like we couldn't talk about anything really, even the most simple stuff," she said.

Her mother, Lorena Edwards, said Granados put a "cold stop" to her daughter's care.

"It was just: 'I don't provide that care anymore.' And it was done," she said.

Bringing cases to court

At the heart of Texas' lawsuits against Granados, Dr. May Lau and Dr. M. Brett Cooper are allegations of prescribing treatment to transition their patients' sex after the ban took effect.

In one instance, the state accuses Granados of prescribing testosterone to a 16-year-old, alleging that although the doctor's records identify the patient as male, the teenager's sex assigned at birth is female. Granados and Lau are also accused of having instructed patients to wait until after the ban was in place to fill prescriptions.

Granados does not dispute that he has continued prescribing puberty blockers and hormone replacement therapy. He said those treatments are not for gender transition but for children with endocrine disorders, which occur when hormone levels are too high or too low.

He said he prescribes testosterone for many reasons, including for patients whose testicles don't work or had to be removed because of cancer. Others have brain tumors, or surgery or radiation to the brain, that impact puberty. Patients with early onset puberty also need puberty blockers, he said.

Attorneys for Lau said she has always complied with the law and the claims have no merit. Attorneys for Cooper did not respond to requests for comment.

"This is really part of a bigger pattern of extremism within the state that even other states have shied away from replicating," said Sarah Warbelow, vice president of legal for the Human Rights Campaign.

Transgender adults and youth make up less than 1% of the U.S. population, according to estimates by the Williams Institute, an LGBTQ+ research center at the UCLA School of Law.

Going elsewhere for care

Granados' trial has been set for late October; trial dates have not yet been set yet for Lau and Cooper. While the cases are pending, Lau and Cooper agreed to practice medicine only in research and academic settings and not see patients.

Neither Lau or Cooper attended the Wednesday hearing in their cases by a judge who is set to decide where their trials will be held.

Under Texas' ban, the state medical board is instructed to revoke the licenses of doctors who are found to have violated the law.

Lorena Edwards said she watched her daughter thrive during her transition then descend into melancholy as laws targeting transgender rights gained steam.

Emiliana Edwards has switched to receiving treatment in neighboring New Mexico — where gender-affirming care is legal — but she said attacks on the transgender community have taken a toll on her mental health.

"We're normal people, too, and we're just trying to live," she said.

Author behind Oscar-nominated film finds praise and ire for his rebuke of Brazil's dictatorship

By MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

SAO PAULO (AP) — Brazilian author Marcelo Rubens Paiva happily swung his wheelchair from side to side, dancing with thousands of Carnival revelers there to celebrate him and his work. Seconds later, an unidentified man showed Paiva his middle finger, then threw a beer can and a backpack that hit him in the head.

Paiva, a popular author in Brazil for four decades, has had intense days and exchanges since the movie based on his 2015 book "I'm Still Here" became a box-office success. The film, a rare blockbuster in the South American nation, garnered three Oscar nominations ahead of the awards ceremony Sunday.

While millions of Brazilians love the story for its long-overdue truth-telling about the country's 1964-1985 military dictatorship, others see it as left-wing propaganda. Paiva has been dismayed at the outpouring of hatred, mostly online, directed at him.

"It is simply (our) history being told in the way we believe it must be told, the way our family lived it, so it never happens again," Paiva, 65, told The Associated Press in his Sao Paulo apartment. "I assure you that some of those on the far-right or on the right have watched it and maybe changed their opinion."

"I'm Still Here" is up for best picture and best international feature, while Fernanda Torres, who portrayed Paiva's mother Eunice, is competing for best actress. The film centers on the disappearance of Rubens Paiva, the author's father, and Eunice's decadeslong quest to force authorities to confirm his death.

An important story to tell

Paiva, one of five siblings, has known success, but not as much controversy. His 1982 book "Happy Old Year" narrating his life before and after a diving accident put him in a wheelchair, sold more than 1.5 million copies. He is also an award-winning playwright, former TV talk show host and political activist.

But he says nothing prepared him for the sudden impact "I'm Still Here" had since it won best screenplay at the Venice Film Festival. Many other awards followed since.

"This is very different; it is more intense because of social networks," Paiva said. "People (around the world) react in the same way to this movie, with the same emotion that Brazilians felt."

After his book about his accident, he knew he still had another important story to tell.

"I was the son of a disappeared politician; few people knew what had happened during the dictatorship," he said.

That was largely because Congress passed an amnesty law in 1979, as the dictatorship neared its end, sparing perpetrators of political crimes from prosecution.

Cracks started to emerge in 2011 after then President Dilma Rousseff — a former guerrilla who was tortured during the dictatorship — established a national truth commission to investigate its abuses. It was one of the seeds for Paiva's book and, later, the film.

"People were asking for reparations for families of missing politicians, they sued my father's torturers," he said. "The military showed they were upset, because their colleagues and their fellow coup mongers were under fire. The accusations were being published, so they started to threaten Brazil's democracy. And little by little it was once again in doubt."

Condemnation from Bolsonaro

Past ire toward the Paiva family has notably come from one man: Jair Bolsonaro, the former army captain who rode a wave of anti-establishment populism to his presidency (2019-2022).

In 2014, then-lawmaker Bolsonaro spat on a statue of the late Paiva in Congress, accusing him and his family of being at the service of communist terrorists. His claims date to the 1990s and falsely link a farm the Paiva family owned, near where Bolsonaro grew up, to a guerrilla group.

"Every year, he made a speech against my father, making up stories," Paiva said. "Once, he said my father had been killed by his comrades who were in the armed struggle, because he had revealed things during the torture sessions. It was the first time I heard anyone tell such an absurd story, with no evidence, and

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people believed it. It was the first time I saw the power of social media in creating a new narrative, a lie.”

Bolsonaro said in an interview Monday he hasn't seen the film, but his allies have railed against it, saying Paiva died in a war, as did many on both sides. Brazil's Truth Commission found that at least 434 people died at the hands of the military regime, including 136 who disappeared.

Paiva published "I'm Still Here" as Alzheimer's disease washed away his mother's memory. Director Walter Salles bought the rights in 2017, but chose not to make the film during Bolsonaro's presidency. Last week, Brazil's prosecutor-general indicted Bolsonaro for allegedly staging a coup to remain in power. It included inciting a riot in capital Brasilia by encouraging his supporters to riot marking an echo of the Capitol insurrection in the U.S.

"People everywhere are afraid of watching their democracies become dictatorships," Paiva said. "This movie glorifies democracy and the understanding that human rights, empathy are in short supply."

'Mission accomplished'

Adding to Paiva's recent achievements since the film premiered, his father's death certificate, first obtained by his mother in 1996, was updated in January to go beyond mere confirmation to include: "violent death caused by the Brazilian State in the context of systematic persecution to the population identified as dissidents of the policies of the dictatorial regime installed in 1964."

Brazil's Supreme Court said earlier this week it will rule whether the sole survivor among Rubens Paiva's torturers, Gen. José Antônio Nogueira Belham, can be tried. Brazilian human rights activists have argued that concealing bodies is a continuous crime not covered by the country's amnesty law.

"I see literature as a mission, and I feel mine was accomplished," said Paiva. "The movie's mission is accomplished, even if it doesn't win any Oscars."

USAID workers will be given 15 minutes to clear their workspaces as the agency gets dismantled

By GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of U.S. Agency for International Development workers who have been fired or placed on leave as part of the Trump administration's dismantling of the agency are being given a brief window Thursday and Friday to clear out their workspaces.

USAID placed 4,080 staffers who work across the globe on leave Monday. That was joined by a "reduction in force" that will affect another 1,600 employees, a State Department spokesman said in an emailed response to questions.

USAID has been one of the biggest targets so far of a broad campaign by President Donald Trump and the Department of Government Efficiency, a project of Elon Musk, to slash the size of the federal government. The actions at USAID leave only a fraction of its employees on the job.

Trump and Musk have moved swiftly to shutter the foreign aid agency, calling its programs out of line with the president's agenda and asserting without evidence that its work is wasteful. In addition to its scope, their effort is extraordinary because it has not involved Congress, which authorized the agency and has provided its funding.

A report from the Congressional Research Service earlier this month said congressional authorization is required "to abolish, move, or consolidate USAID," but the Republican majorities in the House and Senate have made no pushback against the administration's actions. There's virtually nothing left to fund, anyway: The administration now says it is eliminating more than 90% of USAID's foreign aid contracts and \$60 billion in U.S. assistance around the world.

It's unclear how many of the more than 5,600 USAID employees who have been fired or placed on leave work at the agency's headquarters building in Washington. A notice on the agency's website said staff at other locations will have the chance to collect their personal belongings at a later date.

The notice laid out instructions for when specific groups of employees should arrive to be screened by security and escorted to their former workspaces. Those being let go must turn in all USAID-issued assets. Workers on administrative leave were told to retain their USAID-issued materials, including diplomatic

passports, "until such time that they are separated from the agency."

Many USAID workers saw the administration's terms for retrieving their belongings as insulting. In the notice, the employees were instructed not to bring weapons, including firearms, "spear guns" and "hand grenades." Each worker is being given just 15 minutes at their former workstation.

The administration's efforts to slash the federal government are embroiled in various lawsuits, but court challenges to temporarily halt the shutdown of USAID have been unsuccessful.

However, a federal judge on Tuesday gave the Trump administration a deadline of this week to release billions of dollars in U.S. foreign aid, saying it had given no sign of complying with his nearly two-week-old court order to ease the funding freeze. Late Wednesday, the Supreme Court temporarily blocked that order, with Chief Justice John Roberts saying it will remain on hold until the high court has a chance to weigh in more fully.

That court action resulted from a lawsuit filed by nonprofit organizations over the cutoff of foreign assistance through USAID and the State Department. Trump froze the money through an executive order on his first day in office that targeted what he portrayed as wasteful programs that do not correspond to his foreign policy goals.

Virginia Democratic Rep. Gerald Connolly said in a statement that the attack on USAID employees was "unwarranted and unprecedented." Connolly, whose district includes a sizable federal workforce, called the aid agency workers part of the "world's premier development and foreign assistance agency" who save "millions of lives every year."

As Trump's deadline to eliminate DEI nears, few schools openly rush to make changes

By COLLIN BINKLEY, JOCELYN GECKER and CHEYANNE MUMPHREY AP Education Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Schools and colleges across the U.S. face a Friday deadline to end diversity programs or risk having their federal money pulled by the Trump administration, yet few are openly rushing to make changes. Many believe they're on solid legal ground, and they know it would be all but unprecedented — and extremely time-consuming — for the government to cut off funding.

State officials in Washington and California urged schools not to make changes, saying it doesn't change federal law and doesn't require any action. New York City schools have taken the same approach and said district policies and curriculum have not changed.

Leaders of some colleges shrugged the memo off entirely. Antioch University's chief said "most of higher education" won't comply with the memo unless federal law is changed. Western Michigan University's president told his campus to "please proceed as usual."

A memo issued Feb. 14 by President Donald Trump's administration, formally known as a Dear Colleague Letter, gave schools two weeks to halt any practice that treats people differently because of their race.

Opponents say it's an overreach meant to have a chilling effect. The guidance appears to forbid everything from classroom lessons on racism to colleges' efforts to recruit in diverse areas, and even voluntary student groups like Black student unions.

Education organizations have been urging a measured approach, warning institutions not to make any hasty cuts that would be difficult to undo. Ted Mitchell, president of the American Council on Education, is telling colleges that if they were in compliance with federal law before the memo, they still are.

"There's nothing to act on until we see the administration or its agencies try to stop something," Mitchell said. "And then we'll have the argument."

Investigations rarely come close to cutting schools' federal funding

A loss of federal money would be devastating for schools and colleges, but imposing that penalty would not be quick or simple.

The Education Department office that conducts civil rights investigations had fewer than 600 employees last year — before the Trump administration began cutting staff — while the U.S. has more than 18,000

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school districts and 6,000 colleges.

Even when a school or state faces an investigation, it can take years to terminate funding. Under former President Joe Biden, the Education Department tried to pull federal money from Michigan's education agency after finding it violated the rights of students with disabilities. The investigation began in 2022 and is still tied up in federal court.

"I hope very much that schools charged with providing inclusive, equal education to every student in their school community will stand for that principle," said Catherine Lhamon, who led the department's Office for Civil Rights under Biden.

Still, some education leaders say resistance is too risky. At the University of Cincinnati, President Neville G. Pinto said officials are evaluating jobs related to diversity, equity and inclusion, and removing DEI references from school websites.

"Given this new landscape, Ohio public and federally supported institutions like ours have little choice but to follow the laws that govern us," Pinto wrote.

Tony Frank, chancellor of the Colorado State University system, wrote in a campus letter that he weighed taking a stand against the department. But he advised the system's campuses to comply, saying there's too much at stake for students and staff. "If we gamble here and are wrong, someone else will pay the price," he wrote.

New guidance brings a shift in interpretation of nondiscrimination laws

In many Republican-led states, education chiefs applauded the memo.

"We never felt it was appropriate to use race in making these types of decisions in the first case, so I do not foresee any interruptions in our day-to-day business," Alabama's state superintendent, Eric G. Mackey, said in a statement released by the Trump administration.

The memo said schools have promoted DEI efforts often at the expense of white and Asian American students.

It doesn't carry the weight of law but explains how the new administration will interpret nondiscrimination laws. It dramatically expands a 2023 Supreme Court decision barring the use of race in college admissions to all aspects of education — including, hiring, promotion, scholarships, housing, graduation ceremonies and campus life.

The guidance is being challenged in court by the American Federation of Teachers, which said the memo violates free speech laws.

While some schools are keeping quiet out of fear of being targeted, many leaders also are still struggling to grasp the implications.

"We are looking to our attorney general for guidance because it's very confusing," said Christine Tucci Osorio, superintendent of the North St. Paul School District in Minnesota. When a teacher asked if their school could still mark African American History Month, she assured them they could.

Despite concerns that schools would rush to comply, it appears "cooler heads are largely prevailing," said Liz King, senior director for the education equity program at the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

"Once a school sends the message that they are not going to stand up for a member, a community within their school, that is broken trust, that is a lost relationship," King said.

Like no president before him, Trump wields funding threat to support his agenda

Trump has vowed to use education funding as political leverage on several fronts, threatening cuts for schools that do not get in line with his agenda on topics including transgender girls' participation in girls' sports and instruction related to race.

Usually, civil rights investigations by the Education Department take at least six months and often much longer. If a school is found in violation of federal law, department policy offers a chance to come into compliance and sign a resolution — typically a 90-day process.

Only if a school refuses to comply can the department move to revoke federal money. That can be done in the Education Department through a court-like process decided by an administrative law judge. If the

judge decides the penalty is justified, the school can appeal it to the education secretary and, after that, challenge it in court.

Instead of handling it internally, the department can also refer cases to the Justice Department for prosecution. That route is no faster.

The last time the Education Department was granted approval to cut federal funding was in 1992, against the Capistrano Unified School District in California, which was found to have retaliated against a teacher for filing sex discrimination complaints.

Before the penalty was carried out, the district reinstated the teacher and effectively ended the case. It never lost any money.

In lawsuit filing, Pentagon says transgender troops can't serve unless they meet a warfighting need

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon revealed the specifics of its new transgender troop policy in a court filing Wednesday that says any service member or recruit who has been diagnosed with or treated for gender dysphoria is disqualified from serving — unless they can prove they meet a specific warfighting need and adhere to severe restrictions on their day-to-day behavior.

The policy memo was included in the latest court filing in a lawsuit challenging President Donald Trump's executive order against transgender military service, one of many hot-button issues the president made a priority to address on his first days in office.

Like the executive order, the policy filed Wednesday suggests that the lethality and integrity of the military "is inconsistent" with what transgender personnel go through as they transition to the gender they identify with, and issues an edict that gender is "immutable, unchanging during a person's life."

The policy provides two exceptions — if transgender personnel who seek to enlist can prove on a case-by-case basis that they directly support warfighting activities, or if an existing service member, who was diagnosed with gender dysphoria, can prove they support a specific warfighting need and never transitioned to the gender they identify with and proves over 36 months they are stable in their biological sex "without clinically significant distress."

If a waiver is issued in either case, the applicant would still face a situation where only their biological sex was recognized for bathroom facilities, sleeping quarters and even in official recognition, such as being called "Sir" or "Ma'am."

Gender dysphoria occurs when a person's biological sex does not match up with their gender identity.

While the number of transgender troops serving is small compared to the size of the total force, it's taken up a large amount of time and attention both at the White House and within the Pentagon. The military services due to medical privacy laws do not provide an exact count of transgender troops, but a 2018 independent study by the Palm Center, which researched LGBTQ issues, assessed there were an estimated 14,000 transgender troops among the more than 2 million troops serving.

It was a policy Trump tried to overturn in his first term in office but the issue ended up mired in lawsuits until former President Joe Biden was elected and he overturned the ban.

Hamas hands over bodies of 4 hostages to Israel as dozens of Palestinians leave Israeli prison

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas handed over the bodies of four hostages to the Red Cross early Thursday in exchange for Israel's release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, days before the first phase of the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip was to end.

An Israeli security official confirmed that Hamas handed the hostages' bodies to the Red Cross. Israel said the caskets were delivered with the help of Egyptian mediators through an Israeli crossing and an

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identification process had begun.

At around the same time, a Red Cross convoy carrying several dozen released Palestinian prisoners left Israel's Ofer prison headed for the West Bank town of Beitunia, where hundreds of well-wishers jostled for a glimpse of the bus as it arrived.

Friends and family greeted the released prisoners, hugging them and snapping photos. One released man made a victory sign as he was carried on the shoulders of supporters, with the crowd chanting "God is Great." The released prisoners wore Israeli Prison Service T-shirts that some of them took off and set on fire.

Hours later, buses carrying hundreds of other Palestinian prisoners arrived in the Gaza city of Khan Younis, with some men kissing the ground as they emerged from the buses.

Israel had delayed the release of over 600 Palestinian prisoners since Saturday to protest what it called the cruel treatment of hostages during their handover by Hamas. The militant group has called the delay a "serious violation" of the ceasefire and said talks on a second phase aren't possible until the Palestinians are freed.

Earlier Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the latest release of hostages' bodies would be carried out without ceremony, as opposed to past Hamas releases with stage-managed events in front of crowds. Israel, along with the Red Cross and U.N. officials, have called the ceremonies humiliating for the hostages.

Among those scheduled to leave Israel early Thursday were hundreds of detainees arrested from Gaza, held on suspicion of militancy after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack, without charge for months. They include 445 men, 21 teenagers and one woman, according to lists shared by Palestinian officials that did not specify their ages.

Only around 50 Palestinians were released into the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem in this round. Dozens sentenced to life over deadly attacks against Israelis will be exiled out of the Palestinian territories and taken to Egypt at least temporarily until other countries accept them.

The latest handovers would complete both sides' obligations under the ceasefire's first phase, during which Hamas returned 33 hostages, including eight bodies, in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners.

The family of a hostage in Gaza said they were notified he is dead and his body was among those to be returned to Israel. The family did not say who informed them. Notifications typically come from Israel's military.

Tsachi Idan was taken from Kibbutz Nahal Oz. His eldest daughter, Maayan, was killed as militants shot through the door of the family's safe room. Hamas militants broadcast themselves on Facebook holding the family hostage in their home as two younger children pleaded to let them go.

French President Emmanuel Macron posted on X about Israeli-French hostage Ohad Yahalomi, whose body was also expected to be released: "In these suspended hours of pain and anguish, the nation stands by their side."

A fragile ceasefire in peril

The ceasefire's six-week first phase expires this weekend. U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, has said he wants the sides to move into negotiations on the second phase, during which all remaining hostages held by Hamas would be released and an end to the war would be negotiated.

Talks on the second phase were supposed to begin the first week of February.

The ceasefire, brokered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, ended 15 months of war that erupted after Hamas' 2023 attack on southern Israel that killed about 1,200 people. About 250 people were taken hostage.

Israel's military offensive has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, according to Palestinian health officials, who don't differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths but say over half the dead have been women and children.

The fighting also displaced an estimated 90% of Gaza's population and decimated the territory's infrastructure and health system.

Israel buries mother, sons killed in captivity

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On Wednesday, tens of thousands of Israelis lined highways as the bodies of a mother and her two young sons, killed in captivity in Gaza, were taken for burial on Wednesday.

The bodies of Shiri Bibas and her sons, 9-month-old Kfir and 4-year-old Ariel, were handed over earlier this month.

Israel says forensic evidence shows the children were killed by their captors in November 2023, while Hamas says the family was killed along with their guards in an Israeli airstrike.

The husband and father, Yarden Bibas, was abducted separately and released alive in a different handover. His wife and their children were buried in a private ceremony near Kibbutz Nir Oz near Gaza, where they were living when they were abducted. They were buried in a joint grave next to Shiri's parents, who were killed in the attack.

Another infant in Gaza dies of hypothermia

With people living in tent camps and damaged buildings in Gaza in chilly weather, health officials said another infant had died of hypothermia Wednesday, bringing the toll to seven over the past two weeks.

Dr. Munir al-Boursh, director general of Gaza's Health Ministry, said the baby less than two months old died due to the "severe cold wave" that has hit the Palestinian enclave.

Temperatures have been below 10 degrees Celsius (50 degrees Fahrenheit) at night and the last few days have been particularly cold.

Trump administration says it's cutting 90% of USAID foreign aid contracts

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MARK SHERMAN and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration said it is eliminating more than 90% of the U.S. Agency for International Development's foreign aid contracts and \$60 billion in overall U.S. assistance around the world, putting numbers on its plans to eliminate the majority of U.S. development and humanitarian help abroad.

The cuts detailed by the administration would leave few surviving USAID projects for advocates to try to save in what are ongoing court battles with the administration.

The Trump administration outlined its plans in both an internal memo obtained by The Associated Press and filings in one of those federal lawsuits Wednesday.

The Supreme Court intervened in that case late Wednesday and temporarily blocked a court order requiring the administration to release billions of dollars in foreign aid by midnight.

Wednesday's disclosures also give an idea of the scale of the administration's retreat from U.S. aid and development assistance overseas, and from decades of U.S. policy that foreign aid helps U.S. interests by stabilizing other countries and economies and building alliances.

The memo said officials were "clearing significant waste stemming from decades of institutional drift." More changes are planned in how USAID and the State Department deliver foreign assistance, it said, "to use taxpayer dollars wisely to advance American interests."

President Donald Trump and ally Elon Musk have hit foreign aid harder and faster than almost any other target in their push to cut the size of the federal government. Both men say USAID projects advance a liberal agenda and are a waste of money.

Trump on Jan. 20 ordered what he said would be a 90-day program-by-program review of which foreign assistance programs deserved to continue, and cut off all foreign assistance funds almost overnight.

The funding freeze has stopped thousands of U.S.-funded programs abroad, and the administration and Musk's Department of Government Efficiency teams have pulled the majority of USAID staff off the job through forced leave and firings.

Widely successful USAID programs credited with containing outbreaks of Ebola and other threats and saving more than 20 million lives in Africa through HIV and AIDS treatment are among those still cut off from agency funds, USAID officials and officials with partner organizations say. Meanwhile, formal notifications of program cancellations are rolling out.

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In the federal court filings Wednesday, nonprofits owed money on contracts with USAID describe both Trump political appointees and members of Musk's teams terminating USAID's contracts around the world at breakneck speed, without time for any meaningful review, they say.

"There are MANY more terminations coming, so please gear up!" a USAID official wrote staff Monday, in an email quoted by lawyers for the nonprofits in the filings.

The nonprofits, among thousands of contractors, owed billions of dollars in payment since the freeze began, called the en masse contract terminations a maneuver to get around complying with the order to lift the funding freeze temporarily.

So did a Democratic lawmaker.

The administration was attempting to "blow through Congress and the courts by announcing the completion of their sham 'review' of foreign aid and the immediate termination of thousands of aid programs all over the world," said Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

A coalition representing major U.S. and global businesses and nongovernmental organizations and former officials expressed shock at the move. "The American people deserve a transparent accounting of what will be lost — on counterterrorism, global health, food security, and competition," the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition said.

The State Department said Secretary of State Marco Rubio had reviewed the terminations.

In all, the Trump administration said it will eliminate 5,800 of 6,200 multiyear USAID contract awards, for a cut of \$54 billion. Another 4,100 of 9,100 State Department grants were being eliminated, for a cut of \$4.4 billion.

The State Department memo, which was first reported by the Washington Free Beacon, described the administration as spurred by a federal court order that gave officials until the end of the day Wednesday to lift the Trump administration's monthlong block on foreign aid funding.

"In response, State and USAID moved rapidly," targeting USAID and State Department foreign aid programs in vast numbers for contract terminations, the memo said.

Trump administration officials — after repeated warnings from the federal judge in the case — also said Wednesday they were finally beginning to send out their first or any payments after more than a month with no known spending. Officials were processing a few million dollars of back payments, officials said, owed to U.S. and international organizations and companies.

But U.S. District Judge Amir H. Ali's order to unfreeze billions of dollars by midnight Wednesday will remain on hold until the Supreme Court has a chance to weigh in more fully, according to the brief order signed by Chief Justice John Roberts.

Ali had ordered the federal government to comply with his decision temporarily blocking a freeze on foreign aid, ruling in a lawsuit filed by nonprofit groups and businesses. An appellate panel refused the administration's request to intervene before the high court weighed in.

The plaintiffs have until noon Friday to respond, Roberts said.

The administration has filed an emergency appeal to the Supreme Court in one other case so far, arguing that a lower court was wrong to reinstate the head of a federal watchdog agency after Trump fired him.

Michelle Trachtenberg, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' and 'Harriet the Spy' star, dies at 39

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Michelle Trachtenberg, a former child star who appeared in the 1996 "Harriet the Spy" hit movie and went on to co-star in two buzzy millennial-era TV shows — "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Gossip Girl" — has died. She was 39.

Police responded to a 911 call shortly after 8 a.m. at a 51-story luxury apartment tower in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood where officers found Trachtenberg "unconscious and unresponsive," according to an NYPD statement.

Paramedics pronounced her dead at the scene. No foul play was suspected and the New York Medical

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Examiner is investigating the cause of death, police said.

"The family requests privacy for their loss," Trachtenberg's representative, Gary Mantoosh, said in a statement Wednesday.

Trachtenberg was 8 when she began playing Nona Mecklenberg on Nickelodeon's "The Adventures of Pete & Pete" from 1994 to 1996 and then starred in the title role in the film adaptations of "Harriet the Spy" and "Inspector Gadget," opposite Matthew Broderick.

"Michelle comes off as genuine because she really is a genuine kid. Everyone can identify with her," said Debby Beece, president of Nickelodeon Movies in 1996.

In 2000 Trachtenberg joined the cast of "Buffy," playing Dawn Summers, the younger sister of the title character played by Sarah Michelle Gellar between 2000 and 2003.

Trachtenberg thanked Gellar for speaking out against Joss Whedon in 2021, following abuse allegations made against the "Buffy" showrunner. "I am brave enough now as a 35-year-old woman to repost this," she wrote on social media, and alluded to "his not appropriate behavior" she experienced as a teenage actor.

In 2001, she received a Daytime Emmy nomination for hosting Discovery's "Truth or Scare." Trachtenberg went on to recurring roles on "Six Feet Under," "Weeds" and "Gossip Girl," where she played the gang's scheming nemesis, Georgina Sparks.

For her fan-favorite role, she was nominated as a TV villain at the Teen Choice Award in 2012. "It's definitely a lot more fun than playing the good girl," she told Seventeen in 2009. "I love the reaction you get. I never understood why some actors don't want to play villains or evil characters."

She was one of the original series' stars to return for a pair of guest appearances in the 2021 "Gossip Girl" revival.

Blake Lively on Instagram on Tuesday honored her "Gossip Girl" co-star: "The world lost a deeply sensitive and good person in Michelle. May her work and her huge heart be remembered by those who were lucky enough to experience her fire."

As if to cement herself in millennial culture, Trachtenberg made a cameo in Fall Out Boy's music video for the "This Ain't a Scene, It's an Arms Race" alongside Seth Green.

Hollywood took to social media to mourn one of their own, one who had made the transition from kid star to teen queen to adult actor. "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" co-star David Boreanaz said on Instagram it was "so very sad.. horrible news." Melissa Gilbert, who starred with Trachtenberg in the 1996 film "A Holiday for Love," wrote on Instagram: "My heart aches for your family and all those who loved you so."

Rosie O'Donnell, who starred alongside Trachtenberg in her "Harriet the Spy" debut, said her death was "heartbreaking:" "I loved her very much. She struggled the last few years. I wish I could have helped." Glee star Chris Colfer remembered her this way: "Michelle was the absolute sweetest and one of the most supportive people I knew," he wrote.

Trachtenberg's later credits included "Ice Princess" in 2005, playing a math prodigy and aspiring figure skater. The AP said it had "a good, though feeble, heart and the best of intentions" and said Trachtenberg was "mining the same nervous twitter from her kid-sister days on 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer.'"

The New York City-born Trachtenberg also appeared in the 2004 teen sex comedy "EuroTrip," she co-starred with Zac Efron and Leslie Mann in 2009's "17 Again" and played a murderous stalker and abductor on an episode of "Criminal Minds."

For "Killing Kennedy," the 2013 film in which she played the wife of Lee Harvey Oswald, around 80% of Trachtenberg's dialogue was in Russian. She had learned the language from her mother growing up.

Other credits included supporting roles in the films "Mysterious Skin" in 2004 and "Black Christmas" in 2006. She also starred on the NBC medical series "Mercy" (2009-2010) opposite Taylor Schilling. More recently, she hosted the true-crime docuseries "Meet, Marry, Murder" on Tubi.

Private company rockets toward the moon in the latest rush of lunar landing attempts

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

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CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A private company launched another lunar lander Wednesday, aiming to get closer to the moon's south pole this time with a drone that will hop into a jet-black crater that never sees the sun.

Intuitive Machines' lander, named Athena, caught a lift with SpaceX from NASA's Kennedy Space Center. It's taking a fast track to the moon — with a landing on March 6 — while hoping to avoid the fate of its predecessor, which tipped over at touchdown.

Never before have so many spacecraft angled for the moon's surface all at once. Last month, U.S. and Japanese companies shared a rocket and separately launched landers toward Earth's sidekick. Texas-based Firefly Aerospace should get there first this weekend after a big head start.

The two U.S. landers are carrying tens of millions of dollars' worth of experiments for NASA as it prepares to return astronauts to the moon.

"It's an amazing time. There's so much energy," NASA's science mission chief Nicky Fox told The Associated Press a few hours ahead of the launch.

This isn't Intuitive Machines' first lunar rodeo. Last year, the Texas company made the first U.S. touchdown on the moon in more than 50 years. But an instrument that gauges distance did not work and the lander came down too hard and broke a leg, tipping onto its side.

Intuitive Machines said it has fixed the issue and dozens of others. A sideways landing like last time would prevent the drone and a pair of rovers from moving out. NASA's drill also needs an upright landing to pierce beneath the lunar surface to gather soil samples for analysis.

"Certainly, we will be better this time than we were last time. But you never know what could happen," said Trent Martin, senior vice president of space systems.

It's an extraordinarily elite club. Only five countries have pulled off a lunar landing over the decades: Russia, the U.S., China, India and Japan. The moon is littered with wreckage from many past failures.

The 15-foot (4.7-meter) Athena will target a landing 100 miles (160 kilometers) from the lunar south pole. Just a quarter-mile (400 meters) away is a permanently shadowed crater — the ultimate destination for the drone named Grace.

Named after the late computer programming pioneer Grace Hopper, the 3-foot (1-meter) drone will make three increasingly higher and longer test hops across the lunar surface using hydrazine fueled-thrusters for flight and cameras and lasers for navigation.

If those excursions go well, it will hop into the nearby pitch-black crater, an estimated 65 feet (20 meters) deep. Science instruments from Hungary and Germany will take measurements at the bottom while hunting for frozen water.

It will be the first up-close peek inside one of the many shadowed craters dotting both the north and south poles. Scientists suspect these craters are packed with tons of ice. If so, this ice could be transformed by future explorers into water to drink, air to breathe and even rocket fuel.

NASA is paying \$62 million to Intuitive Machines to get its drill and other experiments to the moon. The company, in turn, sold space on the lander to others. It also opened up the Falcon rocket to ride-sharing.

Tagalongs included NASA's Lunar Trailblazer satellite, which will fly separately to the moon over the next several months before entering lunar orbit to map the distribution of water below. Also catching a ride was a private spacecraft that will chase after an asteroid for a flyby, a precursor to asteroid mining.

Nurses' stories recount terror of armed man's attack at Pennsylvania hospital

By MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — A nurse who survived an armed man's attack on an intensive care unit in a Pennsylvania hospital said in a Facebook post on Wednesday that she was held against him as a shield at gunpoint, arms zip-tied behind her back, as they walked through a doorway and encountered a phalanx of responding police officers.

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Nurse Tosha Trostle wrote that she had begged the attacker to let her go and that he pushed the gun against her neck and spine. When they encountered police, she prayed as she heard gunshots and smelled smoke, then heard bullet casings hitting the floor, she wrote.

"I eventually fell into the floor under the weight of the shooter's body. The officers told me to run. I struggled to get out from under him," Trostle wrote. "I remember his limp cold hand against my face as I pushed away with my feet."

She fell twice trying to get to her feet before an officer guided her into another room.

Phone and Facebook messages were left for Trostle on Wednesday. A nurse from the hospital who didn't want to be identified by name because they weren't authorized to discuss the events confirmed the posting was from Trostle's Facebook account.

Authorities say Diogenes Archangel-Ortiz, 49, brought a gun and zip ties to UPMC Memorial Hospital in York on Saturday morning and was holding hostages when responding officers fatally shot him.

West York Patrolman Andrew Duarte, 30, was shot and killed. Two other officers and three hospital employees were wounded, authorities said.

Trostle recounted that she had been drawing blood when she heard a commotion and went into a hallway.

"After all I thought I was responding to a staff assist, patient fall, one in a dozen possible occurrences; not an active shooter. When I rounded the corner of the back hall I was met in the distance by the shooter holding my coworker, Jess, at gunpoint," she wrote.

Her colleague, Jessica Breighner, was forced to zip-tie her.

"I saw the fear in her eyes, fear does not sound like enough really though," Trostle wrote.

The attacker's shoes became etched into Trostle's mind as she lay at his feet, thinking the gun might have jammed and then hearing him reload, she added.

"So many things happened I cannot recount step by step," she wrote, "but how I remember those red sneakers."

Jason Huff, Breighner's partner of more than 20 years, also described the incident in a separate Facebook post on Wednesday that said the attacker had pulled the trigger three times with the gun against Breighner's head, but it was apparently out of ammunition.

"That's when she knew it was time to take her shot," Huff wrote. "She broke her zip ties while he reloaded and ran -- thank God."

Huff told The Associated Press she hopes to talk publicly about it later, with the others who survived the attack.

Huff wrote on Facebook that before fleeing, Breighner had to "listen to this criminal call and warn someone to clean out the apartment and get the jewelry because he's not coming home and was ready to die."

York County District Attorney Tim Barker said Saturday that Archangel-Ortiz appeared to have had recent contact with the intensive care unit "for a medical purpose involving another person" but declined to elaborate.

Asked about the nurses' accounts, a UPMC spokesperson said the health system prioritizes safety and privacy but referred questions to law enforcement.

Trostle said the attacker "hailed me off the floor pushing me into the adjacent wall," where Breighner's photo was among pictures of the group's leadership on the wall.

"Pushing the gun into my neck and spine. I begged to go home to my children. He petted my head and promised I would that I was doing everything right," Trostle wrote.

She said he directed her to take him to the floor where the most people were. As they went through a doorway, they encountered what she called "a wall of armed officers aimed at us."

After the shooting, she was led down a stairway. In the days since, the memory has haunted Trostle and her family, she said.

"My physical injuries do not even compare fractionally to what injuries are unseen," Trostle wrote. "I live with immense sadness and guilt of all who responded, their mental and physical injuries. Especially, brave Officer Andrew Duarte that gave his life to bring us home."

Duarte's funeral service is scheduled for Friday in York.

A Texas child who was not vaccinated has died of measles, a first for the US in a decade

By DEVI SHASTRI and AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

LUBBOCK, Texas (AP) — A child who wasn't vaccinated died in a measles outbreak in rural West Texas, state officials said Wednesday, the first U.S. death from the highly contagious — but preventable — respiratory disease since 2015.

The school-aged child had been hospitalized and died Tuesday night amid the widespread outbreak, Texas' largest in nearly 30 years. Since it began last month, a rash of 124 cases has erupted across nine counties.

The Texas Department of State Health Services and Lubbock health officials confirmed the death to The Associated Press. The child wasn't identified but was treated at Covenant Children's Hospital in Lubbock, though the facility noted the patient didn't live in Lubbock County.

"This is a big deal," Dr. Amy Thompson, a pediatrician and chief executive officer of Covenant Health, said Wednesday at a news conference. "We have known that we have measles in our community, and we are now seeing a very serious consequence."

In federal response, RFK Jr. appears to misstate several facts

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the nation's top health official and a vaccine critic, said Wednesday that the U.S. Department of the Health and Human Services is watching cases and dismissed the Texas outbreak as "not unusual."

He appeared to misstate a number of facts, including a claim that most who had been hospitalized were there only for "quarantine." Dr. Lara Johnson at Covenant contested that characterization.

"We don't hospitalize patients for quarantine purposes," said Johnson, the chief medical officer.

Kennedy also seemed to misspeak in saying two people had died of measles. A spokesman — Andrew Nixon, for the Department of Health and Human Services — later clarified that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified only one death.

The federal government is providing vaccines as well as technical and laboratory support in West Texas, but the state health department is leading the response, Nixon said.

The CDC has said it will provide only weekly updates on the measles outbreak, and had not yet updated its public webpage to reflect the child's death. Texas health department data shows that a majority of the reported measles cases are in children.

In rural Texas, some patients have needed oxygen or intubation

The virus has largely spread among rural, oil rig-dotted towns in West Texas, with cases concentrated in a "close-knit, undervaccinated" Mennonite community, state health department spokesperson Lara Anton said.

Gaines County, which has reported 80 cases so far, has a strong homeschooling and private school community. It is also home to one of the highest rates of school-aged children in Texas who have opted out of at least one required vaccine, with nearly 14% skipping a required dose last school year.

More than 20 measles patients have been hospitalized at Covenant, including the outbreak's first identified case, hospital officials said.

Some patients' respiratory issues progressed to bacterial pneumonia, and they needed an oxygen tube to breathe, Johnson told The Associated Press. Others had to be intubated, though Johnson declined to say how many due to privacy concerns.

"Unfortunately, like so many viruses, there aren't any specific treatments for measles," she said. "What we're doing is providing supportive care, helping support the patients as they hopefully recover."

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said through a spokesman that his office is in regular communication with the state health department and epidemiologists, and that vaccination teams are in the "affected area."

"The state will deploy all necessary resources to ensure the safety and health of Texans," said spokes-

man Andrew Mahaleris, calling the child's death a tragedy.

Later Wednesday, the state health department confirmed a new measles case in Rockwall County, east of Dallas. The person had traveled internationally and is not related to the West Texas outbreak.

Vaccines are safe and effective, and measles was once considered eliminated

The measles, mumps and rubella vaccine is safe and highly effective at preventing infection and severe cases. The first shot is recommended for children ages 12 to 15 months, and the second for ages 4 to 6 years.

The vaccine series is required for kids before entering kindergarten in public schools nationwide. Most kids will recover from measles, but infection can lead to dangerous complications such as pneumonia, blindness, brain swelling and death.

Vaccination rates have declined nationwide since the COVID-19 pandemic, and most states are below the 95% vaccination threshold for kindergartners — the level needed to protect communities against measles outbreaks.

Last week, Kennedy vowed to investigate the childhood vaccine schedule that prevents measles, polio and other dangerous diseases, despite promises not to change it during his confirmation hearings.

The U.S. had considered measles — a respiratory virus that can survive in the air for up to two hours — eliminated in 2000, which meant there had been a halt in continuous spread of the disease for at least a year. Measles cases rose in 2024, including a Chicago outbreak that sickened more than 60.

In the current outbreak, Lubbock's first case was in an unvaccinated child who sat in an emergency room with a kid who had measles, said Katherine Wells, director of the local health department, calling it a testament to how quickly the virus spreads.

"When you see it in real life, you really realize how contagious it is," said Wells, noting she expects more local cases, with a couple under investigation as of Wednesday. "An entire household gets sick so quickly. Whole families are getting sick with measles."

Man who was mad about Chinese spy balloon gets 4 years probation for threatening ex-Speaker McCarthy

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — A Montana man avoided prison and was sentenced to four years of probation on Wednesday for threatening to assault former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy after becoming upset with the government for not shooting down a Chinese spy balloon that floated over the defendant's home city.

Richard Rogers, 45, of Billings, was convicted by a federal jury last year on charges of threatening a member of Congress and making harassing phone calls to the FBI and congressional staff. He routinely made vulgar and obscene comments and berated officials during the calls.

Prosecutors urged Judge Susan Watters to sentence Rogers to two years in prison.

But Watters noted that Rogers did not act on his threats, and she compared his case to some perpetrators of the Jan. 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol by supporters of President Donald Trump, who received lighter sentences despite their more egregious crimes. Trump pardoned the perpetrators after he started his second term.

"I don't think you would have ever intended to carry out the threat," Watters said. "There will be sufficient monitoring that this kind of behavior won't repeat itself."

In asking for a light sentence for his client, defense attorney Daniel Ball had also referenced the attack on the Capitol.

"The actions of some of these individuals may have been violent and egregious. Yet, they were pardoned," Ball wrote in a court filing last week. "Richard's conduct, as determined by the jury, occurred in Montana. There was no imminent risk to any person. There was no imminent threat."

Rogers has said that he supports Trump and he was in Washington during the 2021 attack on the Capitol but did not take part.

Rogers pledged to appeal as he left the courtroom. He told an Associated Press reporter that he would

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not comply with conditions of his release set by the court, which included not smoking marijuana while he's under supervision.

The former telephone customer service representative delivered the assault threat to a McCarthy staffer during a series of more than 100 calls to the Republican speaker's office in just 75 minutes on Feb. 3, 2023, prosecutors said. That was one day after the Pentagon acknowledged it was tracking the spy balloon, which was later shot down off the Atlantic Coast.

"My actions were a form of performative shock jock," Rogers told the judge prior to his sentencing. "That's the style of protest. It was never intended to cause harm."

One of his lawyers said during the trial that Rogers "just wanted to be heard."

The threat against McCarthy carried a maximum penalty of six years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Prosecutors had asked the court to send a "strong deterrent message" that threats against public officials are not protected by the First Amendment.

"Rogers' conduct in this case contributes to a rising and concerning myth that the First Amendment somehow gives a person complete immunity from all consequences as long as their speech or conduct is framed as 'political protest,'" prosecutors wrote in a court filing.

Threats against public officials in the U.S. have risen sharply in recent years, including against members of Congress, their spouses, election workers and local officials. Rogers' case was among more than 8,000 threats to lawmakers investigated by the U.S. Capitol Police in 2023.

A 30-year-old Billings man was sentenced last year to 2 1/2 years in federal prison after leaving voicemail messages threatening to kill former Democratic U.S. Sen. Jon Tester and his family. Another Montana man was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in 2023 for threats against Tester.

Apple shareholders reject proposal to scrap company's diversity programs

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

Apple shareholders rebuffed an attempt to pressure the technology trendsetter into joining President Donald Trump's push to scrub corporate programs designed to diversify its workforce.

The proposal drafted by the National Center for Public Policy Research — a self-described conservative think tank — urged Apple to follow a litany of high-profile companies that have retreated from diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives currently in the Trump administration's crosshairs.

After a brief presentation about the anti-DEI proposal, Apple announced shareholders had rejected it. In a regulatory filing submitted Tuesday evening, Apple disclosed that 97% of the outstanding shares that cast ballots voted against the measure.

The outcome vindicated Apple management's decision to stand behind its diversity commitment even though Trump asked the U.S. Department of Justice to look into whether these types of programs have discriminated against some employees whose race or gender aren't aligned with the initiative's goals.

But Apple CEO Tim Cook has maintained a cordial relationship with Trump since his first term in office, an alliance that so far has helped the company skirt tariffs on its iPhones made in China. After Cook and Trump met last week, Apple on Monday announced it will invest \$500 billion in the U.S. and create 20,000 more jobs during the next five years — a commitment applauded by the president.

Tuesday's shareholder vote came a month after the same group presented a similar proposal during Costco's annual meeting, only to have it overwhelmingly rejected, too.

That snub didn't discourage the National Center for Public Policy Research from confronting Apple about its DEI program in a pre-recorded presentation by Stefan Padfield, executive director of the think tank's Free Enterprise Project, who asserted "forced diversity is bad for business."

In the presentation, Padfield attacked Apple's diversity commitments for being out of line with recent court rulings and said the programs expose the Cupertino, California, company to an onslaught of potential lawsuits for alleged discrimination. He cited the Trump administration as one of Apple's potential legal adversaries.

"The vibe shift is clear: DEI is out and merit is in," Padfield said in the presentation.

The specter of potential legal trouble was magnified last week when Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier filed a federal lawsuit against Target alleging the retailer's recently scaled-back DEI program alienated many consumers and undercut sales to the detriment of shareholders.

Just as Costco does, Apple contends that fostering a diverse workforce makes good business sense.

But Cook conceded Apple may have to make some adjustments to its diversity program "as the legal landscape changes" while still striving to maintain a culture that has helped elevate the company to its current market value of \$3.7 trillion — greater than any other business in the world.

"We will continue to create a culture of belonging," Cook told shareholders during the meeting.

In its last diversity and inclusion report issued in 2022, Apple disclosed that nearly three-fourths of its global workforce consisted of white and Asian employees. Nearly two-thirds of its employees were men.

Other major technology companies for years have reported employing mostly white and Asian men, especially in high-paid engineering jobs — a tendency that spurred the industry to pursue largely unsuccessful efforts to diversify.

What's next for Trump agenda after House GOP approves tax breaks and slashed spending in budget

By LISA MASCARO, KEVIN FREKING and LEAH ASKARINAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Now that House Republicans have passed an ambitious budget blueprint for President Donald Trump's agenda, it's time for the hard work of turning ideas for \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts and \$2 trillion of slashed spending into a bill that lawmakers warn could bring intense changes to Americans back home.

Republicans are insisting the costs of the tax breaks be partly paid for by the steep reductions in federal government spending as a way to ensure the nation's \$36 trillion debt load doesn't balloon to dangerous levels.

But deciding what to cut — health care, food stamps, green energy, government regulations or student aid — is a politically agonizing choice.

And it's not just the House that has to agree. GOP senators have their own plans. Their priority is to make the tax cuts permanent, rather than have them expire in a decade, as the House proposed. GOP senators see that as non-negotiable, but it would skyrocket the costs.

Eventually, the House and Senate must vote on a final package.

"We have a lot of hard work ahead of us," House Speaker Mike Johnson said after the late Tuesday vote.

It's the start of a weeks-long — if not months — slog that is expected to consume Congress as Republicans try to deliver on Trump's agenda and their own campaign promises.

Trump met Wednesday with Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune at the White House, after Republicans also met with Treasury Scott Bessent. Trump's chief of staff Susie Wiles huddled privately with GOP senators at the Capitol.

Republicans say if they fail to act, the lower tax rates first approved in 2017 will expire, which would amount to a massive tax hike for many Americans. They believe keeping the tax cuts in place will partly pay for themselves, unleashing economic growth and fresh revenues, though others say those projections are optimistic.

Democrats put up stiff opposition against the House GOP plan — one lawmaker dashed from California after a week's stay in the hospital and another returned to Washington for the vote with her newborn son. Democrats will spend the weeks ahead warning Americans what's at stake.

"Republicans and Trump promised to lower costs on day one, and instead their priorities have been focused on ripping health care away from kids, moms and others who need it most," said Brittany Petersen, D-Colo., cradling her 4-week-old son, Sam.

"All to fund tax breaks for billionaires like Elon Musk while increasing our national deficit by trillions of dollars," she said. "How can anyone show their face in their district after voting yes for this?"

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Trump, during a freewheeling Cabinet meeting Wednesday at the White House, insisted he will not touch the nation's premier safety net programs — Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security — but seek ways to root out what Republicans call waste, fraud and abuse.

"It won't be 'read my lips' anymore," Trump said, echoing President George H.W. Bush's no new taxes pledge. "We're not going to touch it."

But the math doesn't fully add up.

Without steep cuts to federal programs, Republicans won't be able to claim the savings they need to offset the costs of the tax breaks. And without offsetting the costs, conservative GOP lawmakers won't want to vote for the final package.

After the White House meeting, Johnson said Trump's tariff policies and his new plan for \$5 million gold cards for immigration "will change the math" as the lawmakers get down to work.

Johnson said he, too, wanted to make the tax cuts permanent. "That's our goal."

Now that the House has acted, it's the Senate's move.

Thune said it's "to be determined" when the Senate would act. "It's complicated," Thune said. "It's hard. Nothing about this is going to be easy."

Initially approved during Trump's first term, many of the tax cuts were temporary and are expiring later this year. Keeping them would cost \$4.5 trillion over the next decade.

And that's not counting the new tax cuts that Trump is asking for. The president wants to eliminate taxes on tips, which was a signature campaign promise, and has also talked about getting rid of taxes on overtime pay as well as Social Security benefits. Those would add to the price tag.

As GOP senators insist on making the tax cuts permanent, one idea supported by the Senate Budget Committee Chairman Mike Crapo of Idaho is to simply use a different accounting process.

It involves essentially treating the tax cuts as what's called "existing policy," which would mean they are not a new cost, and therefore would not need to be offset by cuts elsewhere.

Thune backs the idea, though it has run into resistance from other Republicans, including conservative House deficit hawks.

But Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden, top Democrat on the Finance committee, said Republicans are engaging in "funny math."

"It's all a big game in order to get more money to the billionaires through their tax breaks," Wyden said.

With reductions to the Pentagon off the table, Republicans are hunting for cost-cutting across the non-defense side of the budget. The next biggest pot of money available is the nation's health care programs.

The House GOP's bill directed the committee that handles Medicaid health care spending to come up with \$880 billion in savings over the decade, which would be the bulk of what's needed to offset the cost of the tax breaks.

Republicans insist there will be no direct cuts to people who receive their health care through Medicaid, some 80 million adults and children, and that they only will target waste, fraud and abuse to make it more efficient.

Mostly, Republicans talk about imposing work requirements or removing able-bodied men from the government-run Medicaid program. Doing that would save a small portion of what's needed, some \$100 billion over the decade.

For bigger savings, Republicans consider altering the way the federal government provides Medicaid money to the states. Some 40 states expanded their Medicaid programs with the Affordable Care Act, when Obamacare provided money to enroll people in the program.

The Republicans have also directed the House Agriculture Committee to come up with some \$230 billion in savings. One likely place it will turn is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. GOP chair Rep. Glenn Thompson of Pennsylvania said food stamps won't be cut.

Democrats are having none of this, and advocacy groups have started showing up at town hall meetings to protest what's happening.

At the same time, key GOP senators are still pushing their smaller \$340 billion package to provide the Trump administration with money it needs for border security and its mass deportation agenda. Their idea

was to include the tax cuts in a second package later in the year.

Trump sees 'a thirst' for his 'gold card' visa idea with \$5 million potential path to US citizenship

By ELLIOT SPAGAT and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Wednesday that he plans to start selling a "gold card" visa with a potential pathway to U.S. citizenship for \$5 million, seeking to have that new initiative replace a 35-year-old visa program for investors.

"I happen to think it'll sell like crazy. It's a market," Trump said. "But we'll know very soon."

During the first meeting of his second-term Cabinet, Trump suggested that the new revenue generated from the program could be used to pay off the country's debt.

"If we sell a million, that's \$5 trillion dollars," he said. Of the demand from the business community to participate, he said "I think we will sell a lot because I think there's really a thirst."

Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick told reporters during the same meeting that Trump's initiative would replace the EB-5 program, which offers U.S. visas to investors who spent about \$1 million on a company that employs at least 10 people.

Lutnick said that program "has been around for many years for investment in projects" but "it was poorly overseen, poorly executed."

The new program could mark a dramatic shift in U.S. immigration policy but isn't unprecedented elsewhere. Countries in Europe and elsewhere offer what have become known as "golden visas" that allow participants to pay in order to secure immigration status in desirable places.

Congress, meanwhile, determines qualifications U.S. for citizenship, but the president said "gold cards" would not require congressional approval.

Trump said of future possible recipients of the gold visa program: "They'll be wealthy and they'll be successful and they'll be spending a lot of money and paying a lot of taxes and employing a lot of people, and we think it's going to be extremely successful."

Henley & Partners, an advisory firm, says more than 100 countries around the world offer "golden visas" to wealthy individuals and investors. That list includes the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, Greece, Malta, Australia, Canada and Italy.

"Companies can buy gold cards and, in exchange, get those visas to hire new employees," Trump said. Despite similar programs already occurring outside the U.S., he insisted, "No other country can do this because people don't want to go to other countries. They want to come here."

"Everybody wants to come here, especially since Nov. 5," he said of his Election Day victory last fall.

Lutnick suggested that the gold card — which would actually work, at least to start, more like a green card, or permanent legal residency — would raise the price of admission for investors and do away with fraud and "nonsense" that he said characterize the EB-5 program.

A pathway to citizenship as part of the new program also would set it apart from the EB-5 program. Trump said vetting people who might be eligible for the gold card will "go through a process" that is still being worked out.

Pressed on if there would be restrictions on people from China or Iran not being allowed to participate, Trump suggested it will likely not "be restricted to much in terms of countries, but maybe in terms of individuals."

About 8,000 people obtained investor visas in the 12-month period ending Sept. 30, 2022, according to the Homeland Security Department's most recent Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.

The Congressional Research Service reported in 2021 that EB-5 visas pose risks of fraud, including verification that funds were obtained legally. Then-President Joe Biden signed a 2022 law bringing big changes to the EB-5 program, including steps meant to investigate and sanction individuals or entities engaged in fraud as part of it — meant to curb some of those risks.

Trump offered few details on how the new program might work, including making no mention of existing

EB-5 requirements for job creation. While the number of EB-5 visas is capped, meanwhile, the Republican president mused that the federal government could sell 10 million "gold cards" to reduce the deficit. He said it "could be great, maybe it will be fantastic."

"It's somewhat like a green card, but at a higher level of sophistication," the president said. "It's a road to citizenship for people — and essentially people of wealth or people of great talent, where people of wealth pay for those people of talent to get in, meaning companies will pay for people to get in and to have long, long term status in the country."

Who are the Mennonites in a Texas community where measles is spreading?

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

The Mennonite population being affected by a measles outbreak in West Texas is part of a larger, loosely affiliated group of churches worldwide with varied beliefs and leadership structures — and with sometimes strained or distant relations with health officials and other public authorities.

Who are the Mennonites?

Mennonites are part of the wider Anabaptist family of churches, which emerged in 1525 as the radical wing of the Protestant Reformation in Central Europe. Other Anabaptist branches today include the Amish, Brethren and Hutterites. Anabaptists believed that a true biblical church had to follow such principles as non-violence, unconditional forgiveness, adult baptism, church discipline, and a refusal to bear arms or swear oaths.

Early Anabaptists suffered persecution and martyrdom under Catholic and Protestant rulers in Europe, a history that still influences some groups today in their suspicion of governmental authorities, including public health officials.

Mennonites, named for an early leader, Menno Simons, vary widely in practice today.

Some Mennonites have largely assimilated into mainstream culture and dress, with a focus on working for peace and social justice in the larger society. Other Mennonites maintain traditions similar to the Amish, with tight-knit, separatist communities marked by such things as limited technology, nonviolence, male leadership and traditional dress, including women's head coverings. Still others are somewhere on a continuum between such practices.

There are more than 2 million baptized believers in 86 countries in Anabaptist-related churches, according to the Mennonite World Conference

What are Old Colony Mennonites in Texas?

The outbreak has particularly affected Gaines county and some adjacent areas.

While it's not immediately clear which Mennonite community has been affected, the Gaines County area includes a community with a distinctive history.

Many other North American Amish and Mennonites trace their roots to immigration directly from Western Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, said Steven Nolt, professor of history and Anabaptist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania.

In contrast, the Seminole area includes a community of Old Colony Mennonites, which has a much more circuitous history of migration, Nolt said.

Old Colony Mennonites migrated first to the Russian Empire, then to Canada, then to Mexico, fleeing government pressures to assimilate, according to Nolt. As economic conditions deteriorated in Mexico, some moved to such areas as Gaines County and other communities in Texas and nearby states in the 1980s and 1990s. All along, they have preserved their Low German dialect and other cultural distinctions.

Gaines County is also home to one of the highest rates of school-aged children in Texas who have opted out of at least one required vaccine, with nearly 14% skipping a required dose last school year.

What are Mennonite views on vaccines?

"Historically and theologically, there has not been any religious teaching against immunization in Mennonite circles," Nolt said via email. "There's no religious prohibition, no body of religious writing on it at all."

That said, more culturally conservative Mennonite (and Amish) groups have tended to be under-immunized or partially-immunized.”

Partly, he said, that’s because they don’t engage as regularly with health care systems as more assimilated groups do. Many traditional Anabaptist groups did accept vaccinations that were promoted in the mid-20th century, such as for tetanus and smallpox, but they have been more skeptical in recent years of newly introduced vaccines, Nolt said.

But Old Colony groups who arrived in the late 20th century also “missed the whole mid-century immunization push, as they weren’t in the U.S. at that time.”

What are state laws on student exemptions from vaccines?

All 50 states and the District of Columbia require vaccines for students to attend school, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Many states align their mandates with recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

All states allow exemptions for medical reasons, while most allow exemptions for religious or personal reasons, or both. Only five states — California, Connecticut, Maine, New York and West Virginia — have allowed no non-medical exemptions, according to the conference, but West Virginia is taking steps this year to allow religious or philosophical exemptions.

Texas law allows exemptions for “reasons of conscience, including a religious belief.”

U.S. kindergarten vaccination rates dipped in 2023, and the proportion of children with exemptions rose to an all-time high, according to federal data posted in 2024.

EPA head urges Trump to reconsider scientific finding that underpins climate action, AP sources say

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a potential landmark action, the head of the Environmental Protection Agency has privately urged the Trump administration to reconsider a scientific finding that has long been the central basis for U.S. action against climate change.

In a report to the White House, EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin called for a rewrite of the agency’s finding that determined planet-warming greenhouse gases endanger public health and welfare, according to four people who were briefed on the matter but spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the recommendation is not public.

The 2009 finding under the Clean Air Act is the legal underpinning of a host of climate regulations for motor vehicles, power plants and other pollution sources.

A spokesperson for the EPA on Wednesday declined to reveal Zeldin’s recommendation, which was made last week under an executive order from Republican President Donald Trump. The order, issued on Trump’s first day in office, directed the EPA to submit a report “on the legality and continuing applicability” of the endangerment finding.

The Washington Post first reported that Zeldin had urged the White House to strike down the endangerment finding.

The Obama-era finding “is the linchpin of the federal government’s policies for what the president and I call the climate hoax,” said Steve Milloy, a former Trump transition adviser who disputes mainstream science on climate change.

“If you pull this (finding) out, everything EPA does on climate goes away,” Milloy told the AP.

Trump, at a Cabinet meeting Wednesday, said Zeldin told him he is moving to eliminate about 65% of the EPA’s workforce. “A lot of people that weren’t doing their job, they were just obstructionist,” Trump said.

Myron Ebell, another former Trump transition adviser who has questioned the science behind climate change, said Wednesday he was “very excited” at Zeldin’s apparent recommendation on endangerment.

“It’s the basis of all the economically damaging rules to regulate carbon dioxide,” Ebell said, calling repeal “a hard step, but a very big step.”

Environmental groups and legal experts said any attempt to repeal or roll back the endangerment find-

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ing would be an uphill task with a slim chance of success.

"This would be a fool's errand," said David Doniger, a climate expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group. "In the face of overwhelming science, it's impossible to think that the EPA could develop a contradictory finding that would stand up in court."

Trump, who has repeatedly denounced what he calls a "green new scam" pushed by Democrats and environmentalists, may view a repeal of the endangerment finding as a "kill shot" that would allow him to make all climate regulations invalid, Doniger said.

"But it's a real long shot for them," he added, noting that courts repeatedly have upheld the EPA's authority to regulate pollution from greenhouse gases under the Clean Air Act.

"The directive to reconsider the endangerment finding comes straight from Project 2025 and is both cynical and deeply concerning given the mountain of scientific evidence supporting the finding, the devastating climate harms Americans are experiencing right now and EPA's clear obligation to protect Americans' health and welfare," said Peter Zalzal, a senior lawyer for the Environmental Defense Fund, another environmental group.

Project 2025, a nearly 1,000-page blueprint for a hard-right turn in American government and society, includes a recommendation to reconsider the endangerment finding.

Zeldin, a former Republican congressman from Long Island, New York, has been a longtime Trump ally but had little environmental experience before being named to the EPA post. At his confirmation hearing in January, he sparred with Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass., over a Supreme Court decision that led to the endangerment finding.

In a 2007 ruling in *Massachusetts v. EPA*, the court held that the agency has authority to regulate greenhouse gases as air pollutants under the Clean Air Act. Markey called the decision a "mandate" for the EPA to protect the public health from climate pollution, a point Zeldin disputed.

"The decision does not require the EPA" to act on greenhouse gases, "it authorizes it," Zeldin told Markey. "There are steps the EPA would have to take in order for an obligation to be created."

Ann Carlson, an environmental law professor at the UCLA School of Law, said any effort to overturn the endangerment finding would "raise more havoc — part of the administration's overall strategy to flood the zone" with chaotic actions and directives.

"The science could not be clearer that greenhouse gas emissions have already led the earth to warm — so much so that it now appears we have breached the 1.5 Celsius limit" set by the global community in the 2015 Paris climate agreement, Carlson said.

"We are seeing the effects of climate change on the ground and across the globe in the form of hotter temperatures, more frequent drought, more intense flooding, fiercer hurricanes and more intense wildfires," she said,

If the endangerment finding is upended, "the havoc will happen sooner and more sweepingly," she said.

University of Pennsylvania climate scientist Michael Mann called the EPA's action "just the latest form of Republican climate denial. They can no longer deny climate change is happening, so instead they're pretending it's not a threat, despite the overwhelming scientific evidence that it is, perhaps, the greatest threat that we face today."

"The notion that the greenhouse gases do not endanger public health and welfare by causing climate change is preposterous," added Michael Oppenheimer, professor of geosciences and international affairs at Princeton University. Climate change caused by greenhouse gas pollution "is already interrupting life as we knew it in the last century and threatening much worse to come. To believe otherwise is a fantasy."

A Project 2025 author carries out his vision for mass federal layoffs

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The Trump administration's demand that federal agencies plan to radically downsize is driven by a key figure in the conservative movement who has long planned this move.

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In President Donald Trump's first term, Russell Vought was a largely behind-the-scenes player who eventually became director of the influential but underappreciated Office of Management and Budget. He is back in that job in Trump's second term after being the principal author of Project 2025, the conservative governing blueprint that Trump insisted during the 2024 campaign was not part of his agenda.

The memo Vought co-signed Wednesday is the clearest assertion of his power and the latest seminal writing for a man who argues the federal bureaucracy is an existential threat to the country itself and that it should dramatically downsize. An OMB spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Here is the context of the Wednesday memo and Vought's previous work:

To Vought, the federal bureaucracy is itself a constitutional crisis

In Wednesday's memo, Vought framed the federal government as "costly, inefficient, and deeply in debt" and declared that it is "not producing results for the American public. Instead, tax dollars are being siphoned off to fund unproductive and unnecessary programs."

He used similar language in passages of Project 2025 and in a 104-page budget plan proposed by his think tank, the Center for Renewing America, in 2022.

"The overall situation is constitutionally dire, unsustainably expensive, and in urgent need of repair. Nothing less than the survival of self-governance in America is at stake," he wrote in Project 2025.

That tracks with what Vought said before Trump again nominated him to the role in November.

In a post-election appearance with conservative commentator Tucker Carlson, Vought was even more explicit: "The left has innovated over 100 years to create this administrative state ... that is totally unaccountable to the president."

Vought made clear he would leverage a second chance at OMB

In Project 2025, Vought wrote that OMB "is a President's air-traffic control system" and that "the Director must view his job as the best, most comprehensive approximation of the President's mind."

OMB, he wrote, should be "involved in all aspects of the White House policy process," becoming "powerful enough to override implementing agencies' bureaucracies."

He told Carlson that "OMB is the nerve center of the federal budget" and that "it has the ability to turn off the spending that is going on at the agencies" and control "all of government execution."

Presidents, he said, "use OMB to tame the bureaucracy, the administrative state."

Speaking with Carlson, Vought described the approach as "radical constitutionalism."

In his Project 2025 writing, Vought says the OMB director "should present a fiscal goal to the President early in the budget development process" without specifying a date.

Vought has praised DOGE and pushed back at Trump critics

Asked after the election about the president's proposal to empower billionaire Trump aide Elon Musk and, at the time, former presidential GOP candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, with sweeping power over the federal government, Vought was on board.

"I think they're bringing an exhilarating rush ... of creativity, outside the box thinking, comfortability with risk and leverage," he told Carlson.

Ramaswamy left DOGE by Inauguration Day.

As for concerns over constitutional separation of powers, meaning those who believe Trump's White House seeks to takeover spending decisions that rest with Congress, Vought said, "separation of powers is meant to have strong, opinionated conviction and leadership that go as fast as they can and hard as they can in their direction."

The memo goes into more detail than previous Vought writing

Vought's latest memo requires agencies to submit an initial overhaul plan by mid-March. This so-called "Phase I" deadline was introduced by Trump.

So-called "Phase II" plans are due by April 14. Among other details, they must include a "future-state organizational chart" and documentation of "all reductions, including (full-time) positions, term and temporary positions, reemployed annuitants, real estate footprint, and contracts."

Vought invokes religious imagery and texts with his agenda

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The latest OMB memo does not venture into religious texts or assertions. But Vought is an outspoken conservative Christian and invokes his faith as part of his governing philosophy.

The Center for Renewing America's 2022 budget outline begins by quoting the Old Testament, specifically the eighth chapter of the first book of Samuel, to set up a critique of the federal government's size and scope:

"He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to the officers and to his servants ... He will take the tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day, you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves."

Why the Trump administration may want Ukraine's minerals

By ALEXA ST. JOHN Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — The United States will have access to Ukraine's critical mineral wealth, including key ingredients for the clean energy transition, under a deal the two countries are expected to sign later this week.

President Donald Trump, who has pushed for the agreement, has long been critical of a transition to green energies, which include wind and solar power, along with electrification of transportation and appliances, all things that require the various minerals the U.S. will have access to in this deal. So if Trump is against this trend, why go after these minerals?

The quick answer could be they're used in a lot of other things, too. Here's a closer look:

Ukraine's mineral wealth

Countries vary in which minerals they deem strategically critical. The U.S. Department of the Interior has designated 50, and Ukraine has more than 20 of those.

Deposits of titanium, which is in high demand, are spread across the country. Titanium is used for making aircraft wings and other aerospace manufacturing, for marine uses, chemical processing and medical devices.

Ukraine has lithium, key to several current battery technologies, and it has uranium, used for nuclear power, medical equipment and weapons.

The country also has graphite and manganese, both used in batteries for electric vehicles.

Still, the data on Ukraine's geology is incomplete, according to Tom Moerenhout, adjunct associate professor at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. The maps date back to when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, which dissolved in 1991. So it's not clear how easy or profitable it will be to get the desired materials out of the ground.

"It's one thing to have a deal that talks about how might we manage their extraction and their revenue," Moerenhout said of the agreement. "It's another thing entirely to actually have extractive projects, to actually have mining operations going on, and that is something that the deal does not guarantee."

Some of the mineral riches lie in parts of the country currently occupied by Russia.

Ukraine's rare earth metals

Rare earths are a subset of critical minerals; there are 17 of them, and not one is a common word. For example, ytterbium and promethium are rare earths.

Rare earths are important for many kinds of technology and electronics, including medical care, military, aerospace as well as clean energy uses.

Ytterbium is used in infrared lasers, chemical reactions, rechargeable batteries and fiber optics. Lanthanum is used in batteries, specialty glass for eyeglasses and camera lenses and in petroleum refining. A single piece of military equipment can require hundreds of pounds of a rare earth.

Contrary to their name, rare earths are not necessarily rare. However, they do often occur in low concentrations, making processing complicated. It's mainly China that excels at this processing currently.

Geopolitical reasons for interest in Ukraine's supply

The Trump administration has steered clear of clean energy policy in favor of its "energy dominance"

agenda, focused on oil and gas. As promised during his campaign, the president's early executive orders slashed support for climate- and clean-energy related technologies, funding and programs.

Electric vehicles, wind turbines, solar photovoltaic panels and other clean energy technology require the rare earths for components such as magnets and batteries; broadly, renewable energy and decarbonization are placing high demand on minerals across the globe.

But clearly, the uses of the minerals Ukraine has go far beyond the energy transition. And Ukraine has tried hard to interest the new administration in its mineral wealth.

Also, China controls much of the world's supply of these materials. Opening access to Ukraine's supply could reduce U.S. dependence elsewhere.

"To the credit of the first Trump administration, they have always put critical minerals as a very important policy priority because they knew they were so heavily reliant on China," Moerenhout said. "That priority for the Trump administration doesn't change at all because they are less, let's say, less aggressive about clean energy deployment targets in the future."

What we know about the illnesses that have sickened over 400 people and killed more than 50 in Congo

By CHINEDU ASADU and JEAN-YVES KAMALE Associated Press

KINSHASA, Congo (AP) — Unidentified illnesses in northwestern Congo have killed more than 50 people over the past five weeks, nearly half of them within hours after they felt sick.

The outbreaks in two distant villages in Congo's Equateur province began on Jan. 21 and include 419 cases and 53 deaths. Health officials still do not know the cause, or whether the cases in the two villages, which are separated by more than 120 miles (190 kilometers), are related. It's also unclear how the diseases are spreading, including whether they are spreading between people.

The first victims in one of the villages were children who ate a bat and died within 48 hours, the Africa office of the World Health Organization said this week. More infections were found in the other village, where at least some of the patients have malaria.

Outbreaks in two remote villages

Illnesses have been clustered in two remote villages in different health zones of Equateur province, which is 400 miles (640 kilometers) from Kinshasa.

The first outbreak began in the village of Boloko after three children ate a bat and died within 48 hours. More than two weeks later a second and larger outbreak was recorded in the village of Bomate, where more than 400 people have been sickened. According to WHO's Africa office, no links have been established between the cases in the two villages.

Dr. Serge Ngalebato, medical director of Bikoro Hospital, a regional monitoring center, and one of the government experts deployed to respond to the outbreak, says the situations in the two villages are somewhat different.

"The first one with a lot of deaths, that we continue to investigate because it's an unusual situation, (and) in the second episode that we're dealing with, we see a lot of the cases of malaria," said Dr. Ngalebato.

The WHO Africa office said the quick progression from sickness to death in Boloko is a key concern, along with the high number of deaths in Bomate.

What are the symptoms?

Congo's Ministry of Health said about 80% of the patients share similar symptoms including fever, chills, body aches and diarrhea.

While these symptoms can be caused by many common infections, health officials initially feared the symptoms and the quick deaths of some of the victims could also be a sign of a hemorrhagic fever such as Ebola, which was also linked to an infected animal.

However, Ebola and similar diseases including Marburg have been ruled out after more than a dozen samples were collected and tested in the capital of Kinshasa.

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The WHO said it is investigating a number of possible causes, including malaria, viral hemorrhagic fever, food or water poisoning, typhoid fever and meningitis.

What is being done in response?

Congo's government says experts have been sent to the villages since Feb. 14, mainly to help investigate the cases and slow the spread.

Ngalebato said patients have been responding to treatments that target the different symptoms.

The remote location of the villages has hindered access to patients while the weak health care infrastructure has made it difficult to carry out surveillance and manage patients. Such challenges are common in disease outbreaks in Congo. In December, an unknown illness killed dozens.

In the latest outbreaks, several victims died even before experts could even reach them, Ngalebato said.

There needs to be an urgent action "to accelerate laboratory investigations, improve case management and isolation capacities, and strengthen surveillance and risk communication," the WHO Africa office has said.

The U.S. has been the largest bilateral donor to Congo's health sector and has supported the training of hundreds of field epidemiologists to help detect and control diseases across the vast country. The outbreaks were detected as the Trump administration put a freeze on foreign aid during a 90-day review.

Is there a link to Congo's forests?

There have long been concerns about diseases jumping from animals to humans in places where people regularly eat wild animals. The number of such outbreaks in Africa has surged by more than 60% in the last decade, the WHO said in 2022.

Experts say this might be what is happening in Congo, which is home to about 60% of the forests in the Congo Basin, home to the largest expanse of tropical forest on earth.

"All these viruses are viruses that have reservoirs in the forest. And so, as long as we have these forests, we will always have a few epidemics with viruses which will mutate," said Gabriel Nsakala, a professor of public health at Congo's National Pedagogical University, who previously worked at the Congolese health ministry on Ebola and coronavirus response programs.

Dolphins and Vikings finish 1-2 in NFLPA report cards for the second straight year

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — The Miami Dolphins are the top-ranked team, followed by the Minnesota Vikings, for the second consecutive season in the NFL Players Association report card.

The Atlanta Falcons, Las Vegas Raiders and Los Angeles Chargers rounded out the top five in the third annual NFLPA report card released Wednesday at the NFL scouting combine.

The Pittsburgh Steelers, New York Jets, Cleveland Browns, New England Patriots and Arizona Cardinals were the bottom five.

JC Tretter, the NFLPA's chief strategy officer, said 1,695 players responded to the survey, an average of 52 players per team and 77% of the union's membership. The report cards were compiled between Aug. 26 and Nov. 20.

NFLPA executive director Lloyd Howell pointed out the purpose of the report cards is not to be a "shame campaign" but "how do we improve working conditions for our guys."

Tretter said most teams improved in a positive direction.

The Washington Commanders made a huge jump, going from 32nd twice to No. 11.

"That really shows the point of the project," Tretter said, highlighting owner Josh Harris' efforts to improve staffing and culture.

Commanders coach Dan Quinn was ranked No. 1 by players.

The Falcons leaped from 25th to third and the Chargers went from 30th to fifth.

The Super Bowl champion Philadelphia Eagles fell to 22nd from fourth last year.

Owners were graded on two new categories this time around. Previously, players were asked to rate

how willing owners were to invest in the team's facilities.

Stephen Ross (Dolphins), Zygi Wilf (Vikings), Arthur Blank (Falcons), Greg Prentner (Broncos) and Dean Spanos (Chargers) finished 1-5 in that category.

Robert Kraft (Patriots), David Tepper (Panthers), Art Rooney II (Steelers), Michael Bidwell (Cardinals) and Woody Johnson (Jets) were the bottom five.

Players were asked to also rate how the owners contributed to positive team culture and to rate their commitment to building a competitive team. Ross, Blank, Wilf, Harris and Prentner were the top five in both categories.

Bidwell, Jimmy Haslam (Browns), Kraft, Tepper and Johnson were the bottom five for team culture. Mike Brown (Bengals), Haslam, Kraft, Johnson and Tepper were the bottom five for competitive building.

Only Johnson got an overall F rating for ownership.

Falcons coach Raheem Morris finished second behind Quinn in coach rankings and AP Coach of the Year Kevin O'Connell of the Vikings was third. Kansas City's Andy Reid and Detroit's Dan Campbell were fourth and fifth. Miami's Mike McDaniels also received an A-plus.

The lowest-graded coaches received a C. They were Kevin Stefanski, a two-time Coach of the Year with the Browns, Doug Pederson (Jaguars) and Matt Eberflus (Bears). Pederson and Eberflus were fired.

Thieves nab pricey bulldogs from a Colorado pet store after faking a seizure, sheriff says

DENVER (AP) — Thieves nabbed a pair of high-priced bulldogs from a Colorado pet store after a man allegedly faked a seizure to distract employees while an accomplice grabbed the puppies from a pen and ran out, authorities said.

The theft, which was captured on surveillance video, happened Sunday.

Three men walked into a pet store in suburban Denver a few minutes apart, walked around and asked questions about the puppies, which sell for \$4,299 each, the Arapahoe County Sheriff's Office said. While a 37-year-old man appeared to be having a seizure, one of the other men lifted the lid off the pen where the puppies were kept, took two and began running out of the store. An employee tried to tackle him and the man dropped the puppies but managed to grab them again and run out with a second man, the sheriff's office said.

They got into a gold Cadillac Escalade with tinted windows and no license plates that pulled up outside the store, the sheriff's office said.

The man who allegedly faked a seizure was arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to commit a felony, theft, and drug possession. Investigators are looking for the other two men and the getaway driver.

One of the puppies was later returned by a woman who bought it for \$1,500 from a street vendor and realized it looked like the dogs in photos shown in news coverage of the theft, the sheriff's office said.

Supreme Court seems likely to rule for Ohio woman claiming job bias because she's straight

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court seemed likely Wednesday to side with an Ohio woman who claims she suffered sex discrimination from her employer because she is straight.

The outcome of the case could remove an additional requirement that some courts apply when members of a majority group, including those who are white and heterosexual, sue for discrimination under federal law.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh stated a way of resolving the case, that seemed to enjoy broad support among his colleagues.

"Discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, whether you are gay or straight, is prohibited. The rules are the same whichever way it goes," Kavanaugh said.

The justices heard arguments in an appeal from Marlean Ames, who has worked for the Ohio Department of Youth Services for more than 20 years.

Ames contends she was passed over for a promotion and then demoted because she is heterosexual. Both the job she sought and the one she had held were given to LGBTQ people.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars sex discrimination in the workplace. A trial court and the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against Ames.

The question for the justices is that the Cincinnati-based 6th Circuit and several other appeals courts covering 20 states and the District of Columbia apply a higher standard when members of a majority group make discrimination claims. People alleging workplace bias have to show "background circumstances," including that LGBTQ people made the decisions affecting Ames or statistical evidence showing a pattern of discrimination against members of the majority group.

The appeals court noted that Ames didn't provide any such circumstances.

Ohio Solicitor General T. Elliot Gaiser told the justices that the officials who made the job decisions did not even know Ames' sexual orientation.

But even Geiser didn't object too much to the narrow outcome that seemed most likely. "Everyone here agrees that everyone should be treated equally," Gaiser said.

His concession prompted Justice Neil Gorsuch to note, "We're in radical agreement on that today."

America First Legal and other conservative groups filed briefs arguing that members of majority groups are as likely to face job discrimination, if not more so, because of diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

President Donald Trump has ordered an end to DEI policies in the federal government and has sought to end government support for DEI programs elsewhere. Some of the new administration's anti-DEI initiatives have been temporarily blocked in federal court.

Lawyers for America First, founded by Trump aide Stephen Miller, wrote that the idea that discrimination against members of majority groups is rare "is highly suspect in this age of hiring based on diversity, equity, and inclusion."

But there was no mention of DEI by the justices on Wednesday.

Recent aviation disasters and close calls stoke fears about the safety of flying

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

All the recent aviation disasters and close calls have people worried about the safety of flying.

The midair collision that killed 67 near Washington D.C. last month was the worst disaster. But there was also the plane that crashed and flipped over upon landing in Toronto, the fiery plane crash in Philadelphia and a plane crash in Alaska that killed 10, as well as two small planes that collided in Arizona. Those all came before the scary moment this week in Chicago when a Southwest Airlines plane had to abort its landing to avoid crashing into another plane crossing the runway. A plane landing at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport also had to perform a go-around maneuver Tuesday to avoid getting too close to another aircraft departing from the same runway.

That's not to mention the time earlier this month when a Japan Airlines plane clipped a parked Delta plane while it was taxiing at the Seattle airport, or the security concerns that arose after stowaways were found dead inside the wheel wells of two planes and aboard two other flights. In addition, a United Airlines plane caught fire during takeoff at the Houston airport and a passenger opened an emergency exit door on a plane while it was taxiing for takeoff in Boston.

So of course people are wondering whether their flight is safe?

What happened in the worst cases?

The Jan. 29 collision between an American Airlines passenger jet and an Army helicopter killed everyone aboard both aircraft. It was the deadliest plane crash in the U.S. since Nov. 12, 2001, when a jet slammed into a New York City neighborhood just after takeoff, killing all 260 people on board and five on the ground. After that, there hadn't been a deadly crash of any kind involving a U.S. airliner since February 2009.

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Earlier this month, 21 people were injured Feb. 17 when a Delta flight flipped and landed on its roof at Toronto's Pearson Airport. Everyone survived that crash.

Crashes are more common involving smaller planes, like the single-engine Cessna that crashed in Alaska on Feb. 6, or the two small planes that collided in Arizona on Feb. 19. Ten people including the pilot were killed in the Alaska crash, and two died in the Arizona one.

A medical transportation plane crashed in Philadelphia on Jan. 31, killing the six people onboard and another person on the ground. That Learjet generated a massive fireball when it smashed into the ground in a neighborhood not long after taking off from a small airport nearby.

How worried should I be?

Fatal crashes attract extraordinary attention partly because they are rare. The track record of U.S. airlines is remarkably safe, as demonstrated by the long stretch between fatal crashes.

But deadly crashes have happened more recently elsewhere around the world, including one in South Korea that killed all 179 people aboard in December. There were also two fatal crashes involving Boeing's troubled 737 Max jetliner in 2018 and 2019. And last January, a door plug blew off a 737 Max while it was in flight, raising more questions about the plane.

Federal officials have been raising concerns about an overtaxed and understaffed air traffic control system for years, especially after a series of close calls between planes at U.S. airports. Among the reasons they have cited for staffing shortages are uncompetitive pay, long shifts, intensive training and mandatory retirements.

President Donald Trump added to those concerns when he blamed the midair collision over Washington D.C. on the "obsolete" air traffic control system that airports rely on and promised to replace it.

Even with all that, officials have tried to reassure travelers that flying is the safest mode of transportation. And statistics back that up.

The National Safety Council estimates that Americans have a 1-in-93 chance of dying in a motor vehicle crash, while deaths on airplanes are too rare to calculate the odds. Figures from the U.S. Department of Transportation tell a similar story.

What is being done?

The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration are investigating these recent crashes and close calls to determine what caused them and look for ways to prevent recurrences.

There have already been troubling revelations about the midair collision, but it will take more than a year to get the full report on what happened.

The NTSB always recommends steps that could be taken to prevent crashes from happening again, but the agency has a long list of hundreds of previous recommendations that have been ignored by other government agencies and the industries it investigates.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy has said the public is right to say that crashes like the recent ones are unacceptable. That is why he plans to make sure "safety is paramount" as he leads the agency that regulates all modes of transportation.

"I feel really good about where we're at and where we're going and the plans we have in place to make sure we even make the system safer and more efficient than it is today," Duffy said in a Fox News interview.

Iran accelerates production of near weapons-grade uranium, IAEA says, as tensions with US ratchet up

By STEPHANIE LIECHTENSTEIN Associated Press

VIENNA (AP) — Iran has accelerated its production of near weapons-grade uranium as tensions between Tehran and Washington rise after the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, a report by the United Nations' nuclear watchdog seen by The Associated Press on Wednesday showed.

The report by the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency said that as of Feb. 8, Iran has 274.8 kilograms (605.8 pounds) of uranium enriched up to 60%. That's an increase of 92.5 kilograms (203.9 pounds) since the IAEA's last report in November.

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That material is a short, technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

A report in November 2024 put the stockpile at 182.3 kilograms (401.9 pounds). It had 164.7 kilograms (363.1 pounds) last August.

"The significantly increased production and accumulation of high enriched uranium by Iran, the only non-nuclear weapon State to produce such nuclear material, is of serious concern," the confidential report stated. According to the IAEA, approximately 42 kilograms of 60% enriched uranium is theoretically enough to produce one atomic bomb, if enriched further to 90%.

The IAEA also estimated in its quarterly report that as of Feb. 8, Iran's overall stockpile of enriched uranium stands at 8,294.4 kilograms (18,286 pounds), which represents an increase of 1,690.0 kilograms (3,725.8 pounds) since the last report in November.

Trump administration warns Tehran

The Trump administration said Iran must be prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons.

"President Trump has put the Iran Regime on notice by reimposing Maximum Pressure and is committed to ensuring the regime never gets a nuclear weapon. He has also made clear he is open to talks with Iran to come to an agreement that fully addresses the outstanding issues between our two countries," National Security Council spokesperson Brian Hughes said.

Trump's first term in office was marked by a particularly troubled period in relations with Tehran. In 2018 he unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers, leading to sanctions hobbling the economy, and ordered the killing of the country's top general.

Under the original 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium only up to 3.67% purity and maintain a stockpile of uranium of 300 kilograms.

Iran's accelerated production of near weapons-grade uranium puts more pressure on Trump as he's repeatedly said he's open to negotiations with the Islamic Republic while also increasingly targeting Iran's oil sales with sanctions as part of his reimposed "maximum pressure" policy.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters, in a speech in August opened the door to talks with the U.S., saying there is "no harm" in engaging with the "enemy."

However, more recently he tempered that, saying that negotiations with America "are not intelligent, wise or honorable" after Trump floated nuclear talks with Tehran.

"Regarding the nuclear negotiations, the position of the Islamic Republic of Iran is very clear. We will not negotiate under pressure, threat or sanctions," Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on Tuesday during a press conference with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov.

Iran's mission at the United Nations in New York did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

IAEA inspectors banned as Iran begins operating more centrifuges

Iran has maintained its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, but IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi has previously warned that Tehran has enough uranium enriched to near-weapons-grade levels to make "several" nuclear bombs if it chose to do so.

Iranian officials have increasingly suggested Tehran could pursue an atomic bomb. U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to begin a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so."

The IAEA already warned last December that Iran was poised to "quite dramatically" increase its stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium as it has started operating cascades of advanced centrifuges.

That move came as a response to the Board of Governors at the IAEA passing a resolution condemning Iran for failing to cooperate fully with the agency. In the past, Iran has repeatedly responded to the board's resolutions by further enhancing its nuclear program.

Wednesday's report also said that Iran has also not reconsidered its September 2023 decision to ban some of the agency's most experienced inspectors from monitoring its nuclear program.

"The Director General deeply regrets that Iran, despite having indicated a willingness to consider accepting the designation of four additional experienced Agency inspectors, did not accept their designations," the report said.

Unanswered questions remain, despite 2023 deal

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Additionally, the report says that “no progress was made towards resolving the outstanding safeguards issues in relations to Varamin and Turqzabad,” the two locations in Iran where the nuclear watchdog has questions about the origin and location of man-made uranium particles found there.

The report also said that Grossi held telephone discussions with Araghchi at the beginning of this year, during which he “reiterated his readiness to work with Iran to resume implementation” of a deal the agency and Tehran agreed two years ago.

The Joint Statement included a pledge by Iran to resolve issues around Varamin and Turqzabad, where inspectors have questions about possible undeclared nuclear activity, and to allow the IAEA to “implement further appropriate verification and monitoring activities.”

“Foreign Minister Araghchi indicated Iran’s preparedness to cooperate with the Agency and raised the possibility of the Director General visiting Tehran again,” the report said.

The IAEA report also said the agency verified that Tehran had increased the number of operating cascades of advanced centrifuges, powerful machines that spin rapidly to enrich uranium. Cascades are clusters of centrifuges.

The report said Iran had increased the number of IR-6 centrifuges by 5 to a total of 7 at its underground nuclear plant at Fordo.

The nuclear watchdog also verified that Iran had increased the number of operating cascades of IR-2m centrifuges by 12 to a total of 27 at its underground nuclear plant in Natanz.

Under the original 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium to only 3.67% with a limited number of its first-generation centrifuges at the underground Natanz Fuel Enrichment Plant only.

The more advanced model of centrifuges that Iran is using now enrich uranium at a much faster pace than the baseline IR-1 centrifuges.

The US Christian population has declined for years. A new survey shows that drop leveling off

By TIFFANY STANLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans who identify as Christian has declined steadily for years, but that drop shows signs of slowing, according to a new survey Wednesday from the Pew Research Center.

The Religious Landscape Study finds 62% of U.S. adults call themselves Christians. While a significant dip from 2007, when 78% of Americans identified as Christian, Pew found the Christian share of the population has remained relatively stable since 2019.

The rapid rise of the religiously unaffiliated — the so-called “nones” — has also reached at least a temporary plateau, according to Pew. Approximately 29% of U.S. adults identify as religiously unaffiliated, including those who are atheist (5%), agnostic (6%) or “nothing in particular” (19%).

“It’s striking to have observed this recent period of stability in American religion after that long period of decline,” said Pew’s Gregory Smith, one of the study’s co-authors. “One thing we can’t know for sure is whether these short-term signs of stabilization will prove to be a lasting change in the country’s religious trajectory.”

By some measures, the U.S. remains overwhelmingly spiritual. Many Americans have a supernatural outlook, with 83% believing in God or a universal spirit and 86% believing that people have a soul or spirit. About seven in 10 Americans believe in heaven, hell or both.

Young adults are less religious than their elders

Despite this widespread spirituality, there are harbingers of future religious decline. Most notably, Pew found a huge age gap, with 46% of the youngest American adults identifying as Christian, compared to 80% of the oldest adults. The youngest adults are also three times more likely than the oldest group to be religiously unaffiliated.

“These kinds of generational differences are a big part of what’s driven the long-term declines in American religion,” Smith said. “As older cohorts of highly religious, older people have passed away, they have been replaced by new cohorts of young adults who are less religious than their parents and grandparents.”

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Michele Margolis, a University of Pennsylvania political scientist not affiliated with the Pew survey, has studied how religious involvement changes over a lifetime.

Young adults frequently move away from religion. "Then when you get married and have kids, this is a time where scholars have noted that religion is more likely to become important," Margolis said.

Margolis said one question going forward is whether the youngest American adults firmly reject organized religion, or if some of them will return to the religious fold as they age.

Between 2007 and 2024, Pew religious landscape studies haven't indicated that Americans are growing more religious as they get older.

Smith at Pew said "something would need to change" to stop the long-term decline of American religion, whether that's adults becoming more religious with age or new generations becoming more religious than their parents.

How partisan politics intertwines with religious identity

The long-term decline of U.S. Christianity and rise of the "nones" has occurred across traditions, gender, race, ethnicity, education and region. But it is much more evident among political liberals, according to Pew. The survey shows 51% of liberals claim no religion, up 24 points from 2007. Only 37% of U.S. liberals identify as Christian, down from 62% in 2007.

Penny Edgell, a University of Minnesota sociologist and expert adviser for the Pew study, said this religious and political sorting aligns with whether people "support traditional, patriarchal gender and family arrangements."

Edgell also notes that Black Americans defy the assumption that all Democrats are less religious than Republicans.

"More Black Americans percentagewise are Democrats, but their rates of religious involvement are still really high," Edgell said. "That has something to do with the way that religious institutions and politics have been intertwined in historically unique ways for different groups."

Roughly seven in 10 Black Protestants told Pew that religion is very important to them — about the same rate as evangelicals and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. But Black Protestants are likely to identify as Democrats (72%), whereas evangelicals and Latter-day Saints are likely to identify as Republican (70% and 73%, respectively).

The Pew survey tracks many religious traditions

It's been nearly 10 years since the last Religious Landscape Study, which tracks religious data that the U.S. census does not.

The new survey found that a majority of immigrants to the U.S. are Christian (58%), but they also follow the upward trend of the religiously unaffiliated, with a quarter of foreign-born U.S. adults claiming no religion.

The number of Americans who belong to religions besides Christianity has been increasing, though it's still a small portion of the population (7%). That includes the 2% who are Jewish, and the 1% each who are Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu.

Of U.S. Christian adults, 40% are Protestant and 19% are Catholic. The remaining 3% in Pew's survey include Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and smaller Christian groups.

The two largest Protestant denominations in the Pew survey remain the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church — though both have lost many members since the first Religious Landscape Study in 2007.

The Pew Religious Landscape Study was conducted in English and Spanish between July 2023 and March 2024, among a nationally representative sample of 36,908 respondents in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The survey's margin of error for results based on the full sample is plus or minus 0.8 percentage points.

Meet the musician who taught Timothée Chalamet to play guitar like Bob Dylan

By DAVID BAUDER AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — He's not a movie buff, so New York musician Larry Saltzman doesn't always watch the Oscars. This year, however, he's got a rooting interest.

Saltzman taught actor Timothée Chalamet how to play guitar for the role of Bob Dylan in "A Complete Unknown." In turn, Chalamet earned a best actor nomination and the film is also up for best picture at the Academy Awards on Sunday.

A guitarist who's performed with Simon & Garfunkel, Bette Midler and David Johansen, as well as in the pit at Broadway productions "Hairspray" and "Ain't Too Proud to Beg," Saltzman has developed a specialty in teaching actors how to play music for their roles. Besides Chalamet, recent pupils have included Adam Driver and Sadie Sink of "Stranger Things."

On a fellow musician's recommendation, Saltzman first got a call from a movie studio about a decade ago. He admits to being cranky as discussions dragged on. "I almost did everything to talk them out of hiring me," he said.

Not until the fifth phone call did the studio identify the client: Meryl Streep.

She needed to learn the electric guitar for her starring role in the 2015 film "Ricki and the Flash," where she portrayed an aging rocker trying to keep her career and life together in the wake of a series of disappointments.

Working with Streep is a little like a political consultant's first client being elected president. If she likes you and word gets around, other students will follow. Teaching actors now represents about 40% of his business, the 69-year-old said.

"My time spent with her was excellent," he said of Streep. "She's smart. She knows how to learn things. There was a steady progress over three or four months. She did very well."

Faking it just won't do for serious actors and film directors. It's like lip-syncing — the audience is going to tell the difference, and the characters will be less believable. That was especially true with Chalamet, who needed to sing and play at the same time for a character whose artistry is the centerpiece of the film.

"When the actors come to you, they're kind of vulnerable," Saltzman said. "They want to do a great job."

Saltzman had more than 50 sessions with Chalamet, starting in person and retreating to Zoom during the pandemic. It wasn't easy. Chalamet had to learn some 25 songs in the script.

"Sometime in 2018 I had my first lesson with this great guitar teacher named Larry Saltzman who at some point became less of a teacher and more a co-sanity artist through COVID," Chalamet recalled during a recent interview with The Associated Press. "I think we were keeping each other sane. We would Zoom three, four times a week and doing songs that never made it into the movie."

It helped that Saltzman is a Dylan buff. Focusing on imparting "the guitar playing of 'pre-electric Bob,'" he taught his charge so well that Chalamet was a musical guest as well as host on "Saturday Night Live," performing obscure Dylan cuts last month. Saltzman says, in the course of their sessions, Chalamet "went the extra mile" and unearthed "very early, obscure" Dylan songs that weren't even in the script.

Saltzman generally likes teaching actors more than common folk, in part because there's a specific goal: They need to learn certain songs to inhabit a particular character. When it's open-ended — someone just wants to learn the guitar — it can be more of a challenge, he said. Saltzman also believes that it's an advantage to not be a regular teacher, someone who may approach clients with a more rigid style.

Actor Johnny Cannizzaro said he appreciated Saltzman's calming "bedside manner" and felt welcome in an apartment filled with guitars. Cannizzaro has the role of E Street Band member "Little Steven" Van Zandt in the upcoming Bruce Springsteen biopic, "Deliver Me From Nowhere."

"There was never really a moment where he expressed any sort of frustration or impatience with me during a session," said Cannizzaro, who has background playing keyboards but not guitar. "If anything, he would express some excitement when you grasped something he was teaching. That put me at ease."

Saltzman also studied film of Van Zandt so he wasn't just teaching Cannizzaro guitar — he was showing specifics of how Van Zandt plays, the actor said.

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Beyond teaching, Saltzman's time is divided between studio work, playing in New York clubs accompanying different artists and Broadway — he's just about to begin "Smash."

It's an eye-opening experience for him to later see his students on screen. That was particularly the case when he saw "A Complete Unknown" and marveled at Chalamet's ability as an actor.

All the more reason to watch the Oscars, and to take some pride in his own work.

"In my own humble way, I'm a small gear in that machinery," he said. "What is rewarding is knowing that in some small way I'm contributing to making a better film."

Today in History: February 27, the German Reichstag fire

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Feb. 27, the 58th day of 2025. There are 307 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 27, 1933, Germany's parliament building, the Reichstag, was gutted by fire; Chancellor Adolf Hitler, blaming communists, used the fire to justify suspending civil liberties.

Also on this date:

In 1942, the Battle of the Java Sea began during World War II; Imperial Japanese naval forces scored a decisive victory over the Allies.

In 1951, the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, limiting a president to two terms in office, was ratified.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai issued the Shanghai Communique, which called for normalizing relations between their countries, at the conclusion of Nixon's historic visit to China.

In 1973, members of the American Indian Movement occupied the hamlet of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, the site of the 1890 massacre of Sioux men, women and children; the occupation would last for over two months.

In 1991, Operation Desert Storm came to a conclusion as President George H.W. Bush declared in a White House address that "Kuwait is liberated, Iraq's army is defeated," and announced that the allies would suspend combat operations at midnight, Eastern time.

In 1997, Ireland became one of the last countries in the world to legalize divorce. Divorce remains illegal in just two countries: the Philippines and Vatican City.

In 1998, with the approval of Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's House of Lords agreed to end 1,000 years of male preference by giving a monarch's first-born child the right to take the throne, regardless of the child's sex.

In 2010, in Chile, an 8.8 magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami killed 525 people and caused up to \$30 billion in damage.

In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin dramatically escalated East-West tensions by ordering nuclear forces put on high alert while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy agreed to talks with Moscow as Putin's troops and tanks drove deeper into the country.

Today's birthdays: Actor Joanne Woodward is 95. Football Hall of Famer Raymond Barry is 92. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader is 91. Broadcast journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault is 83. Rock musician Neal Schon (Journey) is 71. Actor Timothy Spall is 68. U.S. Sen. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., is 67. Basketball Hall of Famer James Worthy is 64. Actor Noah Emmerich is 60. Jockey Kent Desormeaux is 55. Singer Chilli (TLC) is 54. Football Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez is 49. Author Chelsea Clinton is 45. Singer Josh Groban is 44. Actor Kate Mara is 42.