

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 1 of 70

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- Traphagen, Tietz are winners at NSU Indoor Track Meet](#)
- [4- Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling](#)
- [5- SD SearchLight: Governor vetoes effort to restrict constitutional amendment process with geographic rule](#)
- [6- SD SearchLight: Prison opponents tell SD Supreme Court the state should have county permission to build](#)
- [8- SD SearchLight: Iowa lawmaker calls on Summit to withdraw pipeline application](#)
- [9- SD SearchLight: Trump signs broad elections order requiring proof of citizenship](#)
- [10- SD SearchLight: Social Security nominee vows service will improve despite mass firings, office closures](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: National security officials insist no top secret info in leaked group chat on war plans](#)
- [14- SD SearchLight: Trump's school choice push adds to momentum in statehouses](#)
- [17- Weather Pages](#)
- [21- Daily Devotional](#)
- [22- Subscription Form](#)
- [23- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [24- Upcoming Groton Events](#)
- [25- News from the Associated Press](#)

Wednesday, March 26

Senior Menu: Pork chop, scalloped potatoes, winter blend, oranges, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Quesadilla, southwest corn.

Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

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

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lenten Service, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.



Thursday, March 27

Senior Menu: Beef noodle stroganoff, mixed vegetables, pineapple, cookie, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Old school chili, cornbread.

Friday, March 28

Senior Menu: Meatballs, mashed potato and gravy, carrots, strawberry ambrosia, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Garlic cheese bread, cooked carrots.

Groton Daily Independent
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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 2 of 70

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.

Signal Leak Fallout

Top US intelligence officials faced criticism during an annual hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee yesterday over a national security breach unveiled this week. The breach occurred when National Security Adviser Mike Waltz inadvertently added The Atlantic's Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Goldberg to a Signal group chat earlier this month, during which Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth shared upcoming military strategies against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The hearing, which was previously scheduled and supposed to focus on worldwide threats, came a day after Goldberg published a firsthand account of the Signal incident. CIA Director John Ratcliffe and Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard—both among 16 other high-ranking officials in the Signal group—denied any classified information under US intelligence agencies' purview was shared and declined to provide specific details about the mishap. Last night, Waltz said he takes full responsibility for organizing the group chat.

The incident raised concerns about national security protocols within the federal government, particularly around using the Signal app, which offers end-to-end encryption for texts, calls, and file sharing.

Black Sea Breakthrough

Ukraine and Russia have agreed to separate US-brokered deals to pause attacks in the Black Sea, allowing ships to pass safely and preventing the use of commercial vessels for military operations. The breakthrough comes after US officials met with Ukrainian and Russian delegates separately in Saudi Arabia this week.

Under the agreement with Russia, the US has agreed to help Moscow increase exports of agriculture and fertilizer to global markets, lower maritime insurance costs, and restore its access to international payment systems. Russia said the Black Sea deal was contingent on lifting some European port and banking sanctions against its banks involved in food and fertilizer trade, which Ukraine opposes. Russia and Ukraine will now need to hammer out details on how to carry out the maritime ceasefire and work toward a truce related to energy infrastructure.

The deal comes roughly two years after Russia terminated a 2022 agreement to ensure safe shipping in the Black Sea.

British Iron Age Hoard

Archaeologists have uncovered a once-in-a-lifetime trove of Iron Age artifacts in northern Britain—the results of an early analysis of a site known as the Melsonby hoard in Yorkshire, United Kingdom. The discovery has major implications for historians' understanding of the relative wealth of natives in northern Britain roughly 2,000 years ago.

First discovered in 2021 by metal detectorist Peter Heads, the trove contains roughly 800 objects, all believed to have been burnt or broken before being buried as a demonstration of wealth. The iron tires of at least seven four-wheeled wagons and two-wheeled chariots were discovered at the site, as well as decorative wine-mixing bowls, cauldrons, and spears, among other items. The breadth of the objects suggests northern Britain's elites were more wealthy and connected to European trade networks than previously thought.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 3 of 70

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Track and field to become first Olympic sport to require genetic testing on female athletes.

USC star JuJu Watkins tears ACL, will miss the remainder of March Madness.

"Good Night, and Good Luck," starring George Clooney, hauls in \$3.3M to break weekly box office record for a Broadway play.

"Adolescence" pulls in 66.3 million views in its first two weeks, a Netflix record for a limited series.

Two-time UFC heavyweight champion Cain Velasquez sentenced to five years in prison on attempted murder charges.

Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter and French soccer star Michel Platini acquitted by Swiss court of corruption charges.

Science & Technology

OpenAI announces image generation capabilities wrapped into its ChatGPT chatbot; integration effectively merges DALL-E image generator into the company's flagship product.

Climate researchers recreate shifts in the Atlantic jet stream over the past 600 years, linking shifts in the global winds to historic weather events.

Study reveals the neurotransmitter dopamine helps baby birds learn how to sing; the reward molecule helps reinforce learning circuitry in the brain.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.2%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq +0.5%).

Consumer confidence index over future of US economy falls to 12-year low.

Pioneer music streaming service Napster acquired by 3D technology firm Infinite Reality for \$207M.

Vertical farming company Plenty files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy after raising nearly \$1B.

Online trading platform eToro Files for US initial public offering.

Chinese EV giant BYD reports record annual revenue of roughly \$107B for 2024, outpacing Tesla (\$98B).

Samsung co-CEO Han Jong-Hee, credited with helping to boost Samsung's television business, dies of heart attack at 63.

Politics & World Affairs

PBS, NPR heads testify today on federal support for public broadcasting in House subcommittee hearing.

Senate committee advances nomination of Dr. Mehmet Oz to lead the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Social Security chief nominee Frank Bisignano testifies at confirmation hearing.

Japanese court orders Unification Church to dissolve after 2022 assassination of former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe led to probe into group's political ties.

World's longest-serving death row inmate, Iwao Hakamata, receives record \$1.4M payout after being acquitted of 1966 murders.

Pope Francis' doctor says medical team considered ending treatment when he came close to death over a breathing issue during his hospitalization.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 4 of 70

Traphagen, Tietz are winners at NSU Indoor Track Meet

The first track meet of the season was held Tuesday with two Groton Area athletes taking first place. Faith Traphagen won the 800m run and McKenna Tietz won the 55m hurdles.

Ashlynn Warrington took third in the 400m dash. Placing fourth were Jayden Schwan in the 800m and 1600m run events, Laila Roberts in the 200m dash, Ryelle Gilbert in the 1600m run and Emerlee Jones in the triple jump.

Boy's Division

55 Meter Dash: 16. Brevin Fliehs, 7.15; 22. Lincoln Krause, 7.22

200 Meters: 21. Lincoln Krause, 26.21; 28. Brevin Fliehs, 26.51

400 Meters: 12. Tristin McGannon, 1:01.28

800 Meters: 4. Jayden Schwan, 2:13.65

1600 Meters: 4. Jayden Schwan, 5:12.73

Shot Put - 12lb: 19. Karter Moody, 36' 5"

Long Jump: 27. Tristin McGannon, 15' 11.5"

Triple Jump: 14. Tristin McGannon, 30' 11.75"

Girl's Division

55 Meter Dash: 5. MaKenna Krause, 7.84; 7. McKenna Tietz, 7.87; 9. Rylee Dunker, 7.93; 10. Laila Roberts, 7.94; 50. Elizabeth Fliehs, 8.78

200 Meters: 4. Laila Roberts, 28.81; 6. McKenna Tietz, 29.11; 7. MaKenna Krause, 29.22; 8. Taryn Traphagen, 29.29; 14. Rylee Dunker, 29.68; 39. Talli Wright, 32.25; 43. Elizabeth Fliehs, 32.42

400 Meters: 3. Ashlynn Warrington, 1:09.50; 9. Taryn Traphagen, 1:12.81

800 Meters: 1. Faith Traphagen, 2:35.07; 4. Ryelle Gilbert, 2:39.40

1600 Meters: 4. Ryelle Gilbert, 6:14.49

55m Hurdles - 33": 1. McKenna Tietz, 9.64; 6. Talli Wright, 10.72; 8. Emerlee Jones, 11.07; 12. Teagan Hanten, 11.51; 15. Hannah Sandness, 11.57

Shot Put - 4kg: 6. Emma Kutter, 31' 6.75"; 35. Ashley Johnson, 24' 11.25"; 40. Avery Crank, 23' 9.5"

High Jump: 8. Emerlee Jones, 4' 2"

Long Jump: 15. Teagan Hanten, 12' 6.75"; 19. Addison Hoffman, 12' 1.25"

Triple Jump: 4. Emerlee Jones, 28' 9.25"; 7. Teagan Hanten, 26' 1.5"

Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #18 Results

Team Standings: Cheetahs 11, Chipmunks 10, Jackelopes 9, Coyotes 9, Shihtzus 6, Foxes 3

Men's High Games: Vern Meyers 250, Butch Farmen 222, Brad Larson 203

Women's High Games: Vicki Walter 181, Sam Bahr 173, Michelle Johnson 171

Men's High Series: Vern Meyers 571, Butch Farmen 553, Brad Larson 522

Women's High Series: Sam Bahr 484, Vicki Walter 475, Lori Giedt 425

Important Dates:

Our last week of League is April 9th!

Championship Bowling (Bowl-off between the three winning teams from each third) will happen sometime between the 10th and the 16th!

Fun Night/End of the Year Party = April 16th!



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Governor vetoes effort to restrict constitutional amendment process with geographic rule

Rhoden signs flurry of other election bills into law, including deepfake labeling requirement and restrictions on RVer's voting rights

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 25, 2025 6:10 PM

South Dakota Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden issued his second veto of the legislative session, rejecting a bill that would place new restrictions on citizen-initiated constitutional amendments.

He also signed a large group of other election-related bills into law Tuesday, including a bill requiring labels on political deepfakes within 90 days of an election, and legislation limiting full-time travelers such as RVers to federal-only ballots when they vote in South Dakota elections.

The vetoed legislation, House Bill 1169, would require constitutional amendment petitions to receive signatures from registered voters in each of the 35 state Senate districts. Groups would need signatures equal to 5% of the total votes cast for governor in each district during the last general election.

That would be in addition to current requirements that petitions have a total number of signatures equal to at least 10% of the votes cast statewide for governor in the last general election. Current law says those signatures can be from anywhere in the state.

Voter advocacy groups raised alarms last week, urging the governor to veto the bill and pledging to petition it to the ballot if he signed it. The Voter Defense Association of South Dakota praised the governor's veto in a press release Tuesday and urged lawmakers to sustain it.

"House Bill 1169 was a deeply flawed bill that would have severely and unjustly restricted the initiated amendment process in South Dakota," the release said.

In a letter to lawmakers, Rhoden said the 35-district requirement risks creating a system where "dark money out-of-state groups" with more financial resources are the only entities that could effectively undertake a statewide petition drive.

He added that the bill's requirements might not be upheld in state or federal court. A federal court could determine the bill imposes an illegally severe burden on political speech, he wrote, and he questioned whether the baseline level of petition signatures required in the state constitution can be modified by a statute.

"I swore an oath to support both the South Dakota and the United States Constitutions – and I am concerned about this bill in both regards," Rhoden wrote.

Lawmakers could override Rhoden's action with a two-thirds vote of each chamber when they gather on Monday to consider his vetoes. The bill had more than two-thirds support from the House when it passed, but had less than two-thirds support in the Senate.

Rhoden vetoed another bill earlier this session, which would have offered more child care tuition assistance to child care workers. The Legislature considered that veto earlier this month and failed to override it.

Election bills signed

Gov. Larry Rhoden approved 20 other election-related bills Tuesday:

SB 68 requires an individual to be a citizen of the United States before being eligible to vote and provides a penalty.

SB 73 requires that an individual registering as a voter when applying for a driver license be a resident of the state for the purposes of voting.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 6 of 70

SB 75 requires an indication of U.S. citizenship status on a motor vehicle operator's license or permit, and on a nondriver identification card (valid identification is required to vote).

SB 89 repeals the requirement that judicial officers be listed on a separate nonpolitical ballot.

SB 91 revises the requirements, including minimum font sizes, for a petition to initiate a measure or constitutional amendment or to refer a law.

SB 92 requires that the director of the Legislative Research Council and the secretary of state review an initiated measure and determine if the measure embraces more than one subject.

SB 106 requires an individual be registered as a voter of the state before being eligible to be a petition sponsor for a ballot measure.

SB 164 prohibits the use of a deepfake to influence an election and provides a penalty.

SB 173 revises the process by which a recount may be requested.

SB 185 amends provisions pertaining to the process for verifying voter qualifications.

HB 1062 amends provisions pertaining to the maintenance and publication of the statewide voter registration file.

HB 1066 revises residency requirements for voter registration, and says registrants must have spent 30 consecutive days at a single physical location in the state.

HB 1126 modifies provisions pertaining to the compensation of a recount board.

HB 1127 requires that notice of a county's canvass, post-election audit, and testing of automatic tabulating equipment be posted to the secretary of state's website.

HB 1130 provides permissible dates in June and November for municipal and school district elections.

HB 1164 revises the process for nominating candidates for lieutenant governor, allowing candidates for governor, rather than state political conventions, to choose running mates.

HB 1184 moves the deadline for filing a petition to initiate a measure or constitutional amendment from May to February, shortening the window by three months.

HB 1208 limits a voter using the address of a mail forwarding service or post office box — such as a full-time traveling RVer — to a federal-only ballot.

HB 1256 requires the inclusion of certain information on a candidate's nominating petition or on a ballot question petition.

HB 1264 requires the disclosure of an outstanding loan balance on a campaign finance disclosure report.

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.

Prison opponents tell SD Supreme Court the state should have county permission to build

Ruling for Lincoln County group, state says, could let unhappy neighbors prevent 'essential government functions'

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 25, 2025 2:56 PM

If the state wants to build a prison on land zoned for agriculture, it should get the county's permission first. Or it shouldn't.

A 45-minute session of oral arguments Tuesday at Black Hills State University in Spearfish laid the groundwork for the South Dakota Supreme Court to decide, for the first time, whether the state should bow to local zoning officials under certain circumstances. The justices will rule at a later date.

The high court's call on the matter has implications for a Lincoln County prison project that's proven controversial — and is now paused, thanks to its lukewarm reception during the 2025 legislative session. But there are wider implications for the state as a whole.

If the justices rule in favor of the proposed prison's neighbors and force the state to seek permission

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 7 of 70

to build, the state argues, locals could brow-beat planning boards into saying no to nearly any building project that's necessary for the general public but unpopular with its neighbors.

State officials, Assistant Attorney General Grant Flynn argued, "would not be able to perform their essential governmental functions" if they had to follow county ordinances.

Prison opponents: State can't act unilaterally

The case is an appeal from a group called Neighbors Opposed to Prison Expansion, or NOPE. Lincoln County Judge Jennifer Mammenga ruled against the group late last year, saying the state is immune from lawsuits over county zoning.

NOPE sued in 2023, shortly after the state Department of Corrections (DOC) announced its intent to build a 1,500-bed prison on a farm site 14 miles south of Sioux Falls.

The neighbors argued that such a massive project would fundamentally alter the character of land Lincoln County had envisioned as agricultural in its long-term zoning plan.

If the state wants to build something industrial in an area zoned for farming, they argued, it ought to ask for a conditional use permit, like anyone else.

A.J. Swanson, the lawyer for a group of prison opponents, told the justices there's no solid reason to strip a county of its right to plan its land use.

The high court has never waded directly into the question of state vs. county supremacy in zoning matters. There's another complication in this case, Justice Mark Salter pointed out. Lincoln County didn't sue the state over the DOC's failure to seek its approval. The neighbors did. The county eventually filed a "friend of the court" brief that sided with the neighbors, but it's not leading the charge.

Salter asked Swanson if there's a place in state law or a Supreme Court decision to suggest that neighbors can file a private lawsuit to enforce public zoning laws.

"I'm not aware of a prior case in South Dakota that would have involved a comparable set of circumstances," Swanson replied. "I have found that, generally speaking, county boards are pretty vigilant about enforcing their comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances. And I think in this case, Lincoln County was the clear exception."

State: Neighbors can't ask for a hearing on behalf of county

Flynn told the justices that the neighbors "do not qualify" for the kind of legal remedy they're after. In her ruling, Judge Mammenga referred to the "general rule" of sovereign immunity, which essentially shields the state from most legal actions that might stem from the carrying out of its public responsibilities.

Housing prisoners is part of a state's essential functions, Flynn said.

Justices Salter and Patricia DeVaney both pointed out, however, that the neighbors didn't ask Judge Mammenga to stop the prison. They only asked for a hearing before the county.

"I understand your response to the merits of that, but can they seek that?" DeVaney said.

Flynn didn't disagree with the justices' characterization of the case. But he said there's no state law or case law that gives private citizens a right to be heard in a situation where the state is acting to carry out an essential function.

Moreover, Flynn said, the motivations of the opponents are clear. The neighbors, he said, "simply do not want this prison in their backyard, and they're attempting to use the county zoning laws to prevent that from happening."

NOPE group: State wants to 'trample' due process

Swanson seized upon the due process issue in his rebuttal.

For decades, Swanson said, the state has been a good neighbor in the rural section of Lincoln County. The state obtained the property a few years before the county adopted an ordinance requiring landowners to ask for a conditional use permit to build something that doesn't fit.

Until its transfer to the DOC, the ground had been leased for farming by the state's School and Public

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 8 of 70

Lands Office, with profits from the operation used to help fund education.

The decision to bring the "catastrophic change" of a large prison to the neighborhood, Swanson said, shouldn't be made with the stroke of a pen by the DOC secretary.

"That these due process interests mean nothing to the state, quite frankly, is startling," Swanson said. "I can't believe they can so easily trample those interests. I find that incomprehensible."

Prison site's uncertain future

The arguments over the prison site came one week before the first meeting of a task force dubbed "Project Prison Reset" by Gov. Larry Rhoden. The governor had hoped to convince lawmakers to approve the final round of funding for prison construction during the 2025 legislative session, but was unable to convince enough of them to sign off on the \$825 million project.

As envisioned by the state's executive branch, the prison would largely replace the oldest portions of the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, which was built in 1881.

In 2024, lawmakers allocated \$62 million to plan for a new men's prison at the Lincoln County site. All but \$7.9 million of that money has been spent to design and prepare for a 1,500-bed prison there.

The task force group, set to meet April 2 in Sioux Falls, is supposed to address the concerns that brought about the demise of that hoped-for facility: cost, size, necessity and location.

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.

Iowa lawmaker calls on Summit to withdraw pipeline application

State representative says there's 'no basis' for project after SD eminent domain ban

BY: CAMI KOONS, IOWA CAPITAL DISPATCH - MARCH 25, 2025 9:22 AM

Iowa Republican lawmaker Rep. Charley Thomson, at a press conference Monday, called on Summit Carbon Solutions to withdraw its already-approved permit application to build a carbon sequestration pipeline through the state.

The Republican Legislative Intervenors for Justice, consisting of more than 40 Iowa lawmakers, gathered for a press conference about their continued fight against what the group alleges are "unconstitutional" attacks on Iowa property rights.

The group formed in June 2023 and has sued the Iowa Utilities Commission for its decision to grant a permit to the Summit Carbon Solutions pipeline, which would span more than 1,000 miles in Iowa to transport liquid carbon dioxide from ethanol plants to underground storage in North Dakota.

The IUC approved Summit's permit in June, on the condition that the company secure permits in North Dakota, South Dakota and Minnesota.

Officials in North Dakota and Minnesota approved the pipeline routes through their states, but Summit requested a pause in proceedings for its application in South Dakota, following the recent passage of a law that blocks the company from condemning agricultural land for the project.

"I'm calling today for Summit to withdraw their petition from the IUC," Thomson, of Charles City, said at the press conference. "Now that we've seen what South Dakota has done with their view on eminent domain, there's no basis under the current IUC order to proceed."

A spokesperson for the commission said in a statement to Iowa Capital Dispatch, that the South Dakota law did "not affect the validity of the permit already granted" for the project.

Thomson said the IUC's initial decision to grant the permit did not comply with Iowa law, nor the constitution.

"Iowans have a tradition of very clean government — this is not clean government," Thomson said.

A spokesperson for Summit Carbon Solutions said the IUC reviewed the project "thoroughly" after "years of public input, regulatory review, and strong support from farmers, landowners, ethanol producers, and

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 9 of 70

business leaders across the state.”

“We respect the role of elected officials in the policymaking process and remain focused on delivering a project that supports Iowa agriculture, ethanol, and national energy dominance,” the spokesperson said, asked about Thomson’s request.

Thomson also pointed to a proposed rule from Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, or PHMSA, on CO2 pipelines, which he said “confirmed” that “it’s not the same risk to have a carbon dioxide pipeline running through your land as it is for natural gas.”

“It’s far riskier,” Thomson said.

Rep. Cindy Golding said she fears the South Dakota law, and Summit’s request for a stay on the proceedings in the state, will lead Iowans to think the project “is done.”

“This has not gone away,” Golding said. “It’s still hanging over your head.”

This session representatives put forward a number of bills pertaining to eminent domain and CO2 pipeline regulations. Rep. Steven Holt said the bills might be combined into one or two bills to fit the time constraints of the session.

Last week, Democratic Senator Tony Bisignano introduced an amendment to the resolution on Senate rules that would have allowed a majority to force a Senate floor vote on a bill. Bisignano noted the Senate’s history of not debating pipeline related bills in his arguments for the amendment, which was defeated 30-18.

Sen. Dennis Guth, said he voted against the amendment in favor of a commitment he made with Sen. Mike Bousset, R-Ankeny, to advance some of the eminent domain bills through the Senate.

“I apologize to those that are disappointed, because I think if I had to do over again, I would have changed my vote,” Guth said at the press conference.

Sen. Lynn Evans from Aurelia said he’s not sure the effort from the Democrats was a “genuine” effort to fight for property rights, and noted that no one from the other side of the aisle was in the room.

“If they want to join us in this fight, this is an official invitation, that they can join us and stand shoulder to shoulder with us,” Evans said.

Sen. Cherielynn Westrich and the rest of the group applauded the pipeline fighters who show up at the Iowa Capitol every Tuesday to voice their opposition to the pipeline. “We see you, we hear you, and we’re fighting for you,” Westrich said.

Kathy Carter, a landowner and regular pipeline opponent at the Capitol said landowners are “exhausted.”

“You tell us to continue to pursue with the senators, which we have been continually doing,” Carter said. “I’m not sure what else we can do, but we’re not going to give up.”

Cami Koons is an Iowa Capital Dispatch reporter covering agriculture and the environment. She previously worked at publications in Kansas and Missouri, covering rural affairs.

Trump signs broad elections order requiring proof of citizenship

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MARCH 25, 2025 6:21 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump Tuesday signed a sweeping executive order that overhauls the administration of U.S. elections, including requiring proof of citizenship to register to vote.

It’s likely to face legal challenges from voting rights groups and Democratic state attorneys general.

The order is an extension of the president’s rhetoric on the campaign trail about noncitizens voting in federal elections and his crackdown on immigration since returning to office.

Trump has often pushed back against other issues in elections administration, railing against early voting and vote-by-mail. He falsely claimed the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him through voter fraud.

Tuesday’s order aligns with a priority for House Republicans to pass the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, or SAVE, Act that would require proof of citizenship in federal elections. That bill, if signed into law, would codify parts of the executive order.

States are responsible for administering elections — even those at the federal level — but the order uses federal funding to compel states to follow it. Those that do not comply with the order will have federal

funds revoked, according to the order.

The order directs the federal Election Assistance Commission, which distributes grants to states, within 30 days to start requiring people registering to vote to provide proof of citizenship, such as a passport or state-issued identification that indicates citizenship.

The order also prohibits the counting of absentee or mail-in ballots that are received after Election Day. States set their own rules for ballot counting and many allow those that arrive after Election Day but postmarked before.

The order also instructs the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, along with Trump megadonor Elon Musk's U.S. DOGE Service, to gain access to state voter rolls in order to ensure the voter lists are up to date. Those entities will also have access to immigration databases and states will be allowed to request DHS to verify if any noncitizen is on the state's list of voters.

The Department of Government Efficiency, which is not actually a federal department, has come under scrutiny for the access it has been given to Americans' private data housed in other federal departments.

The order instructs DHS Secretary Kristi Noem within 90 days to provide the attorney general "information on all foreign nationals who have indicated on any immigration form that they have registered or voted in a Federal, State, or local election, and shall also take all appropriate action to submit to relevant State or local election officials such information."

While noncitizens are not allowed to vote in federal elections, certain municipalities in California, Maryland and Vermont, as well as the District of Columbia, allow noncitizens to participate in local elections. If someone who is not a U.S. citizen votes, it could lead to a felony charge and subject that person to deportation.

Congressional Republicans and the president have taken aim at noncitizen voting, even though it's extremely rare. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, conducted an analysis of election conduct from 2003 to 2023 and found 29 instances of noncitizens voting.

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

Social Security nominee vows service will improve despite mass firings, office closures

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 25, 2025 4:54 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Social Security Administration pledged Tuesday that if confirmed he'd ensure Americans can access customer service however they choose, though Democrats questioned how that would be possible if thousands of employees are fired and offices throughout the country are closed.

Social Security Commissioner nominee Frank Bisignano testified during a nearly three-hour hearing in the Senate Finance Committee that he wants to ensure beneficiaries have the option to visit an office, use the website, or speak to a real person after calling the 1-800 number.

"On the phone, I'm committed to reducing wait times and providing beneficiaries with a better experience; waiting 20 minutes-plus to get an answer will be of yesteryear," Bisignano said. "I also believe we can significantly improve the length of the disability claim process."

Bisignano promised lawmakers he would reduce the 1% error rate in payments, which he said was "five decimal places too high." And he said repeatedly that personally identifiable information will be "protected."

Elevator music

Democrats and Republicans on the panel repeatedly raised concerns about how long constituents already wait for their phone calls to be answered when they need to make changes or have an issue with their Social Security benefits.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 11 of 70

Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., said that on Monday to prepare for the hearing, his staff called the Social Security Administration's customer service number, but were disconnected twice and then had to wait an hour while listening to "D-grade elevator music."

"It could have at least had Olivia Newton-John or some mediocre 70s music," Daines said while playing a recording of the hold music.

Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy asked Bisignano how he'd ensure potential changes at the Social Security Administration wouldn't exclude seniors who are unable to attend in-person meetings at a field office.

Bisignano said he views the phone as a "mandatory way for people to communicate," especially since the Social Security Administration received more than 80 million calls last year.

"If you look at the Social Security website, and you look at the statistics, taking 20-plus minutes to answer the phone is not really acceptable," Bisignano said. "And that's the reason why only 46% of the phone calls get answered, because people get discouraged and hang up."

Bisignano said he believes he can get wait times on the phone line down to under one minute.

"I think we can also help the people within the organization answer questions better by bringing artificial intelligence to them, to prompt them with the information they need," Bisignano said.

Bisignano, of New Jersey, works as chairman of the board and chief executive officer at Fiserv, Inc., which "enables money movement for thousands of financial institutions and millions of people and businesses," according to its website. The company is based in Wisconsin.

He previously worked as co-chief operating officer and chief executive officer of Mortgage Banking at JPMorgan Chase & Co.

DOGE pursues office closures

Democrats appeared unconvinced that proposed changes from the U.S. DOGE Service and Elon Musk would have a positive impact on the Social Security Administration.

"Earlier this month, at the direction of Elon Musk and DOGE, the administration announced plans to close 47 Social Security offices, including the one in Littleton, New Hampshire," Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan said. "Shortly thereafter, the Social Security Administration announced plans that would force more applicants and beneficiaries to go in-person to offices, while at the same time laying off staff who work in those remaining offices. If the Littleton office is closed, North Country seniors would be forced to travel nearly 100 miles to the next closest New Hampshire field office."

Colorado Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet criticized the Trump administration for announcing plans earlier this month to eliminate "access to a number of service options over the phone."

"Instead, they'll need to either use an online verification process or call to make an in-person appointment," Bennet said. "The agency itself estimates that this will add 75,000 to 85,000 in-person visitors a week to field offices."

"As my colleagues have already said, wait times for appointments can already take a month. And that in-person appointment is only going to get harder to make if the agency cuts 7,000 employees and ends up with the lowest head count in decades."

Minnesota Democratic Tina Smith said the Trump administration choosing to "drastically reduce phone service and force people to apply for benefits in person" while shuttering offices was unacceptable.

"So you can call this rank incompetence, or you can call it the don't-know-don't-care game plan that DOGE has taken across the board," Smith said. "But to me, it honestly looks like sabotage."

Bisignano testified that he, and no one else, would make the final decision about whether to close field offices.

"What I will commit to is that there will be no decision made without you knowing about it," he said. "I have no intent to close field offices, but I've studied nothing on the topic. So, it's a little hard to commit to something."

North Carolina Republican Sen. Thom Tillis urged Bisignano not to "pull any punches" on decisions about

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 12 of 70

closing field offices.

"What you're going to find out is, after you do the analytics, every member of Congress, except for me probably, will like your analytics, except to the extent that it affects one of their offices and their district or state," Tillis said.

'Fraudsters,' newborns and layoffs

Bisignano distanced himself from some of the comments Trump administration officials have made about Social Security, though he appeared reluctant to do so.

He didn't agree with Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, who said on a podcast that his mother-in-law wouldn't complain if she missed a Social Security payment and that "the easiest way to find the fraudster is to stop payments and listen because whoever screams is the one stealing."

"It would be hard to get to that conclusion," Bisignano said.

He said he didn't agree with trying to use Social Security as a political weapon, after Nevada Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto asked about news reports the acting Social Security commissioner tried to make changes to how Social Security numbers are issued to newborns in Maine.

"The current Social Security administrator briefly ended a contract that had allowed parents of newborn babies in Maine to sign their children up for a Social Security number at the hospital," Cortez Masto said. "Instead, he required them to do so in-person at an office."

"The current administrator, according to a New York Times article, said he had ordered the move after watching Gov. Janet Mills clash with Mr. Trump at the White House," she added. "He then quickly reversed that decision, but said he did it because he felt that the governor of Maine was not being real cordial to the president."

Bisignano appeared to reject the possibility of mass layoffs at the Social Security administration when asked about the issue by Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders.

"Do I think it's a great idea to lay off half of the employees when a system doesn't work? I think the answer is probably no," Bisignano said.

Vermont Democratic Sen. Peter Welch asked whether Bisignano would have taken the same approach to firing some federal workers that DOGE has, which Welch described as a "shoot first, aim later" system.

"No," Bisignano said.

During another part of the hearing, Bisignano said that he believes his job as commissioner would be to "ensure that every beneficiary receives their payments on time, that disability claims are processed in the manner they should be."

"So my first actions are going to be to get organized around delivering the services," he said. "And I've only been given one order, which is to run the agency in the right fashion."

Bisignano also rejected the possibility of privatizing Social Security.

"I've never thought about privatizing. It's not a word that anybody's ever talked to me about," Bisignano said. "And I don't see this institution as anything other than a government agency that gets run to the benefit of the American public."

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.

National security officials insist no top secret info in leaked group chat on war plans

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - MARCH 25, 2025 3:09 PM

WASHINGTON — National security officials grilled by Democratic senators Tuesday denied any wrongdoing by Trump administration Cabinet members who discussed plans to bomb Yemen on a Signal group chat shared with The Atlantic's editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 13 of 70

CIA Director John Ratcliffe and National Intelligence Director Tulsi Gabbard sidestepped questions about specific details shared in the text chain and insisted no classified information was relayed over the messaging app.

The officials testified for nearly two hours during the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's regularly scheduled hearing on worldwide threats.

Ratcliffe's and Gabbard's denials that operational details, including timing and strike targets, were disclosed in the chat contradict Goldberg's stunning report on the breach. His article was published less than 24 hours prior to their appearance before the panel.

Goldberg told of receiving an invitation, presumably inadvertent, from National Security Advisor Michael Waltz to join a group chat of top security officials. Goldberg remained in the chat, apparently unnoticed, for multiple days and witnessed discussion of planning details and subsequent celebrations of U.S. strikes on Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

'I don't want to get into this'

Gabbard initially refused to confirm she was part of the chat, under the initials "TG." "I don't want to get into this," she told Sen. Mark Warner, the panel's vice chair.

Turning to the CIA director, Warner asked "You were the 'John Ratcliffe' on that chat?"

"I was," Ratcliffe confirmed to the Virginia Democrat.

Ratcliffe defended the use of Signal, an encrypted commercial messaging app, as a regularly used channel by government officials to "communicate and coordinate for work purposes provided, Senator, that any decisions that are made are also recorded through formal channels."

"My communications, to be clear, in the Signal message group were entirely permissible and lawful and did not include classified information," Ratcliffe said.

Gabbard also testified to the panel that no classified information was discussed in the group chat.

Sen. Angus King, independent of Maine, told Gabbard he was "puzzled" by her assertion.

"According to open source reporting, at 11:44 on the morning of March 15, (Defense) Secretary Hegseth put into this group text a detailed operation plan, including targets, the weapons we were going to be using, attack sequences and timing," King said. "Wouldn't that be classified?"

"Senator, I can attest to the fact that there were no classified or intelligence equities that were included in that chat group at any time," Gabbard said, telling King to ask the Pentagon for further information on classification.

"If that's the case, please release that whole text stream so that the public can have a view of what actually transpired on this discussion," King said.

While Goldberg did publish verbatim portions and screenshots of the chat — including emoji symbols the officials used to celebrate the strikes — the national magazine editor, citing troop safety concerns, did not quote from Hegseth's messages regarding targets, weapons to be used and sequencing of strikes.

Adversary nations

Sen. Jon Ossoff of Georgia brought up the scenario that a wider leak of the chat would have been of interest to adversary countries, particularly revealing the "time period during which enemy air defenses could target U.S. air crews flying in enemy airspace."

"Director Ratcliffe, this was a huge mistake, correct?" Ossoff asked.

"No," Ratcliffe replied.

A Pentagon-wide advisory warned officials on March 18 against using Signal because of possible spying, according to an NPR investigative report published Tuesday.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt defended the Signal group chat Tuesday morning in a post on the social media platform X, attacking Goldberg as "well-known for his sensationalist spin."

"Here are the facts about his latest story: 1. No 'war plans' were discussed. 2. No classified material was sent to the thread. 3. The White House Counsel's Office has provided guidance on a number of dif-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 14 of 70

ferent platforms for President Trump's top officials to communicate as safely and efficiently as possible," Leavitt wrote.

She added, "the White House is looking into how Goldberg's number was inadvertently added to the thread."

Attack on media

Just after noon Eastern Tuesday, the White House press office issued a statement characterizing media reporting on the breach as a "coordinated effort to distract from the successful actions taken by President Trump and his administration to make America's enemies pay."

When pressed by a reporter Monday at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickman in Hawaii, Hegseth attacked Goldberg and said, "Nobody was texting war plans, and that's all I have to say about that."

Warner and other Democratic lawmakers have called for the resignations of Hegseth and Waltz.

Tuesday's Senate Intelligence panel hearing was streamed in its entirety on C-SPAN.

Dozens were killed in the March 15 strikes, according to reporting by The Associated Press that cited Houthi-run health officials.

Former President Joe Biden, joined by British forces, also targeted Houthi strongholds in Yemen beginning in January 2024.

The rebel group has been attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea since the beginning of Israel's war on Hamas following the Oct. 7, 2023 attack.

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

Trump's school choice push adds to momentum in statehouses

Federal moves might provide additional money for universal vouchers and scholarships

BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA - MARCH 25, 2025 8:15 AM

More than a dozen states in the past two years have launched or expanded programs that allow families to use taxpayer dollars to send their students to private schools. Now, President Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress want to supercharge those efforts.

Trump in January issued an executive order directing several federal agencies to allow states, tribes and military families to tap into federal money for so-called school choice opportunities. Those can come in the form of education savings accounts, voucher programs, tax credits or scholarships. Trump's order also aims to expand access to public charter schools, which are free from some of the rules that apply to traditional public schools.

Meanwhile in Congress, 24 Republican senators have signed on to legislation that would provide \$10 billion in annual tax credits to individuals and corporations who make charitable contributions to organizations that provide private-school scholarships. A Nebraska Republican introduced a companion measure in the House.

Already this year, Idaho, Tennessee and Wyoming have approved school choice programs, and bills are advancing in Kansas, New Hampshire, Ohio, South Carolina and Texas. A bill in Mississippi died before advancing. Most of the measures still in play would open programs to all families regardless of income, though some states would cap the total amount of money available.

Several South Dakota proposals were rejected this year, including efforts to create an education savings account program. Meanwhile, South Dakota already has a tax credit program for insurance company contributions to private school scholarships, which lawmakers have expanded several times.

Supporters of school choice say it gives parents control of their kids' education — and an escape hatch if they are dissatisfied with their local public school. Many conservatives, religious institutions and private schools are in favor of school choice, along with some people of color who live in districts with underperforming public schools.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 15 of 70

"Every child is different. They learn in different environments. There are just so many factors, that I believe that parents should be the ones that make the decision on where their child is going to do the best and have the most success," said Indiana Republican state Sen. Linda Rogers. A former educator, Rogers has sponsored a bill in her state that would provide additional money to charter schools, which are considered to be a form of school choice.

Opponents, including teachers unions, public school professionals and many rural lawmakers of both parties, say such measures undermine traditional public schools by shifting money away from them.

"When we start to take from public schools, we're hurting our kids, our lower-income kids. They will not prosper from this legislation," Tennessee Democratic state Rep. Ronnie Glynn said during the floor debate on a far-reaching voucher bill in his state.

Joshua Cowen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, said vouchers are a budget-buster for states.

"Vouchers don't shift costs — they add costs," Cowen said in a phone interview. "Most voucher recipients were already in private schools, meaning states are paying for education they previously didn't have to fund."

The switch to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, which gave parents a front-row seat to watch what their children were — or were not — learning in their classes, contributed to the recent school choice momentum. So did parent frustration over prolonged public school closures.

"Parents got a good look into sort of what was happening in schools," said Bella DiMarco, a senior K-12 education policy analyst at FutureEd, an independent think tank at Georgetown University. "There was a lot of talk during the pandemic around school choice ... of what public schools aren't doing for their kids."

The first modern school voucher program, created in Milwaukee in 1990, was a bipartisan effort to help lower-income families afford private schools. In recent years, more states have moved from school choice programs focused on certain groups, such as low-income students or students with disabilities, to universal programs open to students of all backgrounds.

"Historically, the programs were always sort of targeted to students in need," DiMarco said. "But in the last couple of years, the new push has been for these universal programs."

Currently, more than 30 states and Washington, D.C., have at least one school choice program. More than a dozen states now offer universal or near-universal access, allowing K-12 students to participate in school choice regardless of income.

EdChoice, a nonprofit that advocates for school choice, estimates that 1.2 million students are attending private schools this school year with the help of public tax credits, scholarships or vouchers.

Different strategies

States that enacted school choice programs this year have pursued different strategies.

The program Idaho enacted last month, for example, will provide an annual tax credit of \$5,000 per child (\$7,500 for students with disabilities) to help cover private education expenses.

Tennessee's new program will provide 20,000 scholarships of roughly \$7,000 each. During its first year, half of the Tennessee scholarships will be reserved for households earning less than \$173,000 for a family of four, but that restriction will be removed in subsequent years.

About 65% of the Tennessee vouchers are expected to be awarded to students who already attend private schools, according to a legislative analysis.

Critics say the cost of the program will grow quickly, creating a hole in the state's budget. Tennessee Republican Gov. Bill Lee, who pushed hard for the proposal, suggested that Trump's executive order might provide additional resources. Lee told reporters he hasn't yet analyzed the order, "but I think there's opportunity there."

"The president wants to support states like ours who are advocating for school choice," Lee said in a news conference after lawmakers approved the measure. Lee was at the White House on Thursday when Trump signed an order calling for the U.S. Department of Education to be dismantled.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 16 of 70

Texas lawmakers also are actively debating a voucher program, a longtime priority for Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, who worked to defeat resistant rural Republicans in last year's state legislative elections and who also attended the White House event. The Senate passed a bill that would provide \$10,000 per student (\$11,500 for students with disabilities) annually through education savings accounts. A similar House proposal is under review.

Kansas is considering a universal refundable tax credit — \$8,000 per child for accredited private school tuition and \$4,000 for non-accredited private schools. The program starts with a \$125 million cap, increasing annually if participation hits certain thresholds.

Ballot box defeats

School choice opponents question the wisdom of sending taxpayer dollars to schools that may lack certified teachers, follow nonstandardized curricula or discriminate in admissions. Many private schools have testing standards, maintain religious requirements or exclude LGBTQ+ students or those with certain disabilities, for example.

In some Republican-led states that have expanded school choice, Democrats have filed bills to increase oversight and place restrictions on these programs. A bill in Tennessee would require background checks for teachers at private schools that receive voucher money. And an Iowa bill would require that property tax statements include information on how much money education savings accounts subtracted from local public schools.

As voucher programs have grown, they have attracted greater scrutiny.

ProPublica, an investigative journalism outlet, last year found that Arizona's universal voucher program has mostly benefited wealthier families. Some Arizona parents have tried to use voucher money to pay for dune buggies and expensive Lego sets, according to press reports.

Critics also note that despite recent legislative successes, school ballot initiatives fared poorly at the ballot box last fall.

Voters in Colorado rejected a measure that sought to enshrine school choice rights in the state constitution.

In Nebraska, voters partially repealed a state-funded private school scholarship program.

And in Kentucky, voters overwhelmingly rejected a constitutional amendment that would have allowed the use of public money to support private schools, with 65% of voters — and a majority in every county — opposed.

"There's a handful of these billionaires that have been pushing vouchers for 30 years," said Cowen, the Michigan State University professor. "The school choice movement is not necessarily driven by public demand, but rather by wealthy donors and political maneuvering."

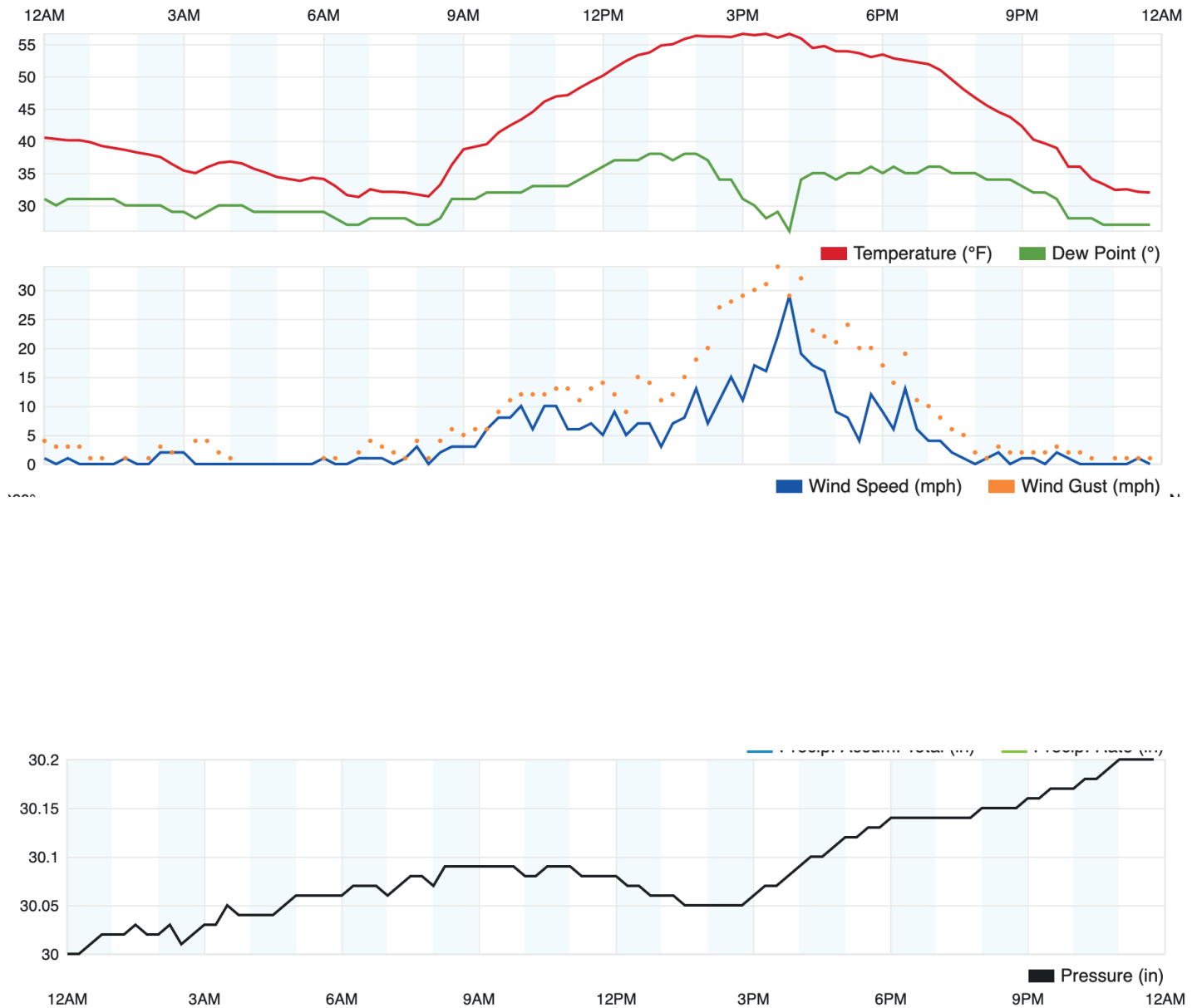
Stateline reporter Robbie Sequeira can be reached at rsequeira@stateline.org. South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.

Robbie Sequeira is a staff writer covering housing and social services for Stateline.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 17 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 18 of 70

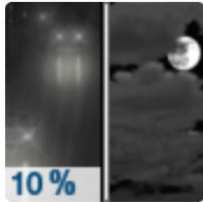
Today



High: 56 °F

Mostly Cloudy
then Chance
Rain

Tonight



Low: 33 °F

Slight Chance
Rain then
Mostly Cloudy

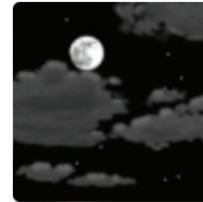
Thursday



High: 64 °F

Mostly Sunny

Thursday
Night



Low: 42 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 65 °F

Mostly Cloudy
then Mostly
Cloudy and
Breezy

Upcoming Forecast

Wednesday



Highs: 50-70°F
Lows: 25-35°F

15-25% chance of light rain over
portions of northeastern SD into
west central MN in afternoon

Thursday



Highs: 57-70°F
Lows: 30-36°F

Aberdeen, SD

Pleasant temperatures expected over the next several days, with the warmest temperatures over south central SD. Cooler air does return this weekend, back in the 40s. Just a slight chance (15-25%) for a few light rain showers over portions of northeastern SD into west central MN Wednesday afternoon.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 19 of 70

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 57 °F at 3:02 PM

Low Temp: 31 °F at 6:37 AM

Wind: 37 mph at 3:33 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 33 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 74 in 1905

Record Low: -13 in 1964

Average High: 47

Average Low: 24

Average Precip in March.: 0.70

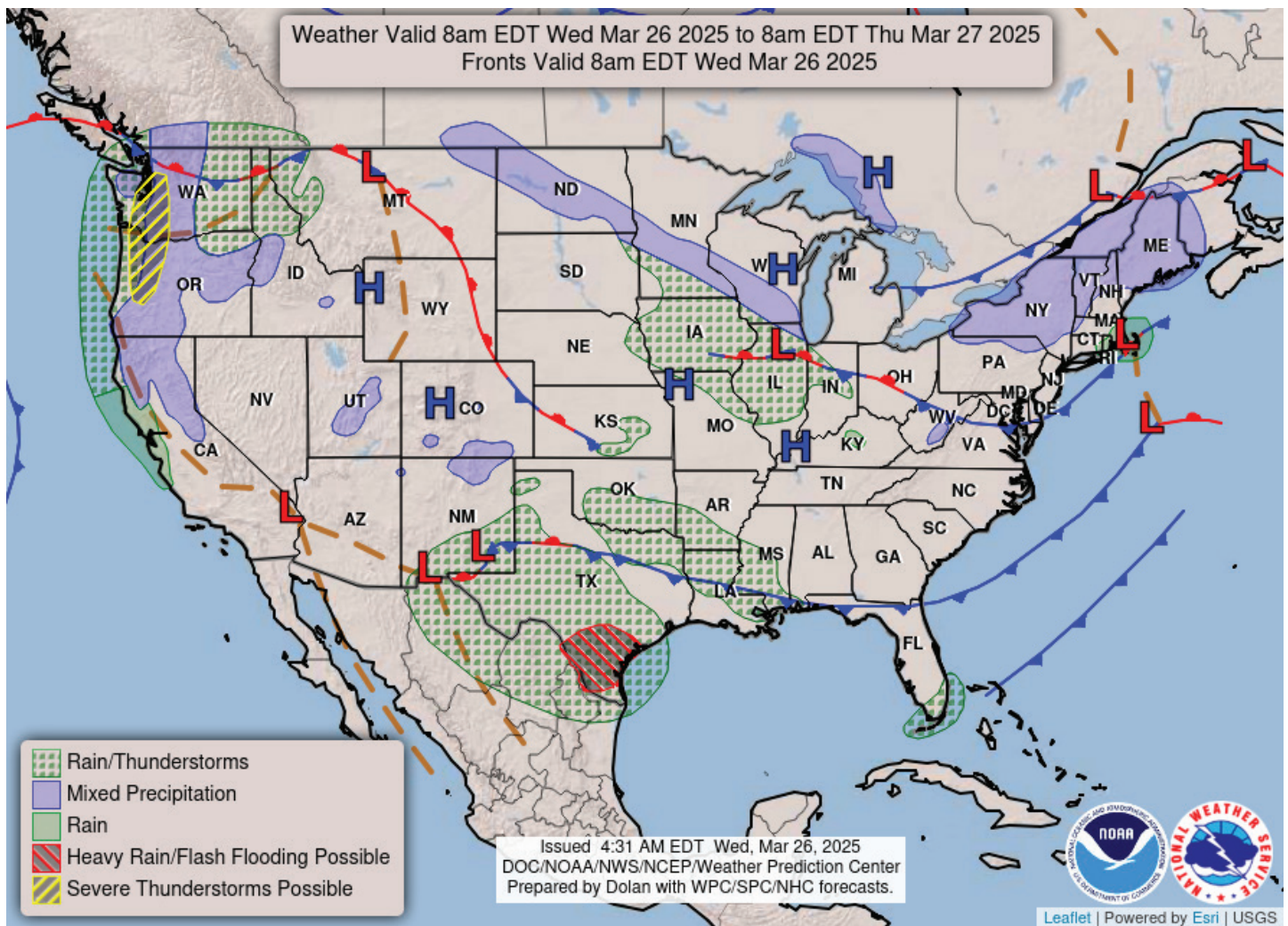
Precip to date in March.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.87

Precip Year to Date: 0.45

Sunset Tonight: 7:54:27 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:19:26 am



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 20 of 70

Today in Weather History

March 26th, 1977: During the early morning severe weather event, hail up to 1.75 inches in diameter fell 1 mile NE of Watertown in Codington County. Hail up to 1.50 inches in diameter fell in Milbank, Grant County.

March 26th, 1995: Heavy snow fell over most of central South Dakota and the northern Black Hills. Heavier accumulations included 14 inches at Murdo, 13 inches at Lead, and 12 inches at Eureka and Leola. A few traffic accidents were reported, although many other vehicles slid into ditches. There was some damage to power lines and poles. Some livestock losses were feared, as the snow fell during the calving season, although this could not be assessed in the short term.

March 26th, 2008: An area of low pressure moving across the Northern Plains brought heavy snow from 6 to 15 inches in a band across much of central and northeast South Dakota from the evening to the early morning hours. Schools were delayed or canceled, and road travel was difficult, if not impossible. Some snowfall amounts included: 6 inches at Stephan, Willow Lake, Harrold, Miller, and near Hoven; 7 inches at Hayti, east of Hayes, and Eagle Butte; 8 inches at Highmore and Doland; 9 inches at Orient, Bryant, and near Onida; 10 inches at Gettysburg and Faulkton; 11 inches at Seneca and Redfield. Locations with a foot or more of snowfall included 12 inches 23 miles north of Highmore, 13 inches near Agar, and 15 inches 24 miles north of Highmore.

1913 - The Ohio River Basin flood reached a peak. Ten inch rains over a wide area of the Ohio River Basin inundated cities in Ohio, drowning 467 persons, and causing 147 million dollars damage. The Miami River at Dayton reached a level eight feet higher than ever before. The flood, caused by warm weather and heavy rains, was the second mostly deadly of record for the nation. (David Ludlum)

1954 - The temperature at Allaket, AK, plunged to 69 degrees below zero. (The Weather Channel)

1971 - Parts of northern and central Georgia experienced their worst snow and ice storm since 1935. Two day power outages ruined two million eggs at poultry hatches. Two persons were killed when a tree landed on their car. (25th-26th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A cold front crossing the Plateau Region produced high winds in Utah causing some property damage. Winds gusted to 51 mph at Salt Lake City. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Twenty cities in the southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. Afternoon highs of 73 degrees at Flagstaff AZ, 90 degrees at Sacramento CA, 95 degrees at Santa Maria CA, 95 degrees at Los Angeles CA, 99 degrees at Tucson AZ, and 100 degrees at Phoenix AZ set records for March. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - The Easter Bunny brought record warm temperatures to the central U.S. while such records were still welcome. A dozen cities reported record warm readings, including Dodge City KS with an afternoon high of 88 degrees. Strong southerly winds gusted to 51 mph at Dodge City, and reached 55 mph at Salina KS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Fair weather prevailed across the nation for the second day in a row. Freezing temperatures were reported in the Middle Atlantic Coast Region in the wake of an early spring snowstorm. Afternoon highs were again in the 70s and 80s in the southeastern U.S., and for the ninth day in a row, temperatures in the southwestern U.S. reached the 90s. (The National Weather Summary)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 21 of 70



FROM TRIALS TO TRIUMPH

What do you do when you have a difficult time pleasing someone?

George Crum was the chef at a famous country club in Saratoga Springs, New York. One evening there was a guest who ordered fried potatoes to go with his meal. When his order of fries was served, he asked the waiter to return it to the kitchen saying they were too thick. This happened several times. Crum became frustrated. But he did not give up.

Challenged, he took his sharpest knife, sliced some potatoes wafer-thin, deep-fried them in boiling oil, and sprinkled salt on them. Then he had the waiter take them to the guest. The guest sampled them, smiled and decided to pass them around the table to his friends. Everyone enjoyed them and ordered more. The "potato chip" was born that evening and has become one of our favorite snacks.

There are times in all of our lives when people irritate us or bother us. It seems like nothing we do will ever please them or meet the standards they have set for us. No matter what we do or how hard we try, it is not going to be good enough. So, we are tempted to give up or quit. Paul said, "God causes all things to work together for our good." This includes the most painful problems and difficult demands of life. In all things we must trust Him, be willing to do our best, and leave the results to Him. He, not others, knows what is best for our lives.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for giving us problems to solve and challenges to meet, so we can grow strong. Help us to be patient, to be polite, and to persevere. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. Romans 8:28

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 22 of 70

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.25.25

1 5 17 39 62 8

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 31 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.24.25

14 34 35 40 44 4

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$27,200,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 46 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.25.25

9 16 27 30 35 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 1 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.22.25

9 10 13 17 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$76,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 1 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.24.25

2 54 59 65 68 3

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 30 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.24.25

6 23 35 36 47 12

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$484,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 30 Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 24 of 70

Upcoming Groton Events

03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
03/29/2025 Men's Singles Bowling Tournament at the Jungle 10am, 1pm & 4pm
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
04/12/2025 Groton Firemens Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
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
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/11-13/25 2025 VFW 12U Class B State Baseball Tournament
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
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
08/14/2025 Family Fun Fest, Downtown Main Street 5:30-7:30pm (2nd Thursday)
08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove
09/05/2025 Homecoming Parade 1pm
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove
10/10/2025 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/11/2025 Pumpkin Fest 10am-3pm City Park
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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 25 of 70

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Republicans eye actions against the courts and judges as Trump rails against rulings

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Angry over the crush of court rulings against the Trump administration, Republicans in Congress are trying to slap back at the federal judiciary with proposals to limit the reach of its rulings, cut funding and even impeach judges, tightening the GOP's grip on government.

House GOP leaders say all options are under consideration as they rush to rein in judges who are halting President Donald Trump's actions at a rapid pace. In many cases, the courts are questioning whether the firings of federal workers, freezing of federal funds and shuttering of long-running federal offices are unlawful actions by the executive branch and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency.

In perhaps the most high-profile case, Judge James E. Boasberg ordered planeloads of deported immigrants to be turned around, raising the ire of Trump, who called for his impeachment, and billionaire Musk, who is funneling campaign cash to House Republicans backing impeachment efforts. The president calls the judges "lunatics."

House Speaker Mike Johnson said Tuesday that "desperate times call for desperate measures" without mentioning impeachment.

"We do have authority over the federal courts, as you know," the Republican speaker said. "We can eliminate an entire district court. We have power of funding over the courts, and all these other things."

Not yet 100 days into the new administration, the unusual attack on the federal judiciary is the start of what is expected to be a protracted battle between the co-equal branches of government, unmatched in modern memory. As the White House tests the judiciary, trying to bend it to Trump's demands, the Congress, controlled by the president's own Republican Party, appears ready to back him up.

It all comes as the Supreme Court last summer granted the executive broad immunity from prosecution, setting the stage for the challenges to come. But Chief Justice John Roberts warned more recently that "impeachment is not an appropriate response to disagreement concerning a judicial decision."

Democrats are warning against what they view as an assault on the judicial branch, which so far has been the only check against Trump and DOGE's far-reaching federal actions. Threats against the federal judges, already on the rise, remain of high concern.

"It is outrageous to even think of defunding the courts," said Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, reacting to the House speaker's claims. "The courts are the bulwark against Trump, and the Republicans can't stand it."

House GOP leaders met Tuesday with Rep. Jim Jordan, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, which will hold a hearing on the issue next week. The House is also expected to vote on a bill from Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., that would limit the geographic reach of certain federal rulings, to prevent temporary restraining orders from being enacted nationwide.

Jordan said he also spoke Saturday with Trump during college wrestling championships in Philadelphia.

"All options are on the table," Jordan said late Monday. "We want to get the facts. Gather the facts."

Since Trump took office, and with Musk, on a mission to dramatically reduce the size and scope of the federal government, the administration's tech-inspired move-fast-and-break-things ethos has run up against the constraints of federal law.

An onslaught of court cases has been filed by employee groups, democracy organizations and advocacy groups trying to keep federal programs — from the U.S. Agency for International Development to the Education Department — from being dismantled.

Judges have issued various types of restraints on Trump's actions. Trump's first administration alone accounted for 66 percent of all the injunctions issued on presidential actions between 2001 and 2023, according to data from a Harvard Law Review piece circulated by Republicans.

The legislation from Issa had no support from Democrats when it was approved by the Judiciary Com-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 26 of 70

mittee last month. A similar bill was introduced Monday by GOP Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, of Maryland, the top Democrat on the Judiciary panel, said Trump is being hit with injunctions because he is "engaged in terrible, irresponsible and lawless violations of people's rights."

"We are winning in court," Raskin said in a video address. "We've got to make sure we defend the integrity of the judiciary."

When it comes to actually impeaching the judges, however, top Republicans have stopped short of backing what would be a severe action.

Impeachments are rare in Congress, particularly of judges, but several rank-and-file House Republicans have proposed legislation to launch impeachment proceedings against various federal judges who have ruled in ways unfavorable to the Trump administration.

Musk has rewarded House Republicans who signed onto impeachment legislation with political donations, according to a person familiar with information first reported by the New York Times. The person was granted anonymity to discuss the matter.

Republicans are particularly focused on Boasberg, the chief judge of the district court in Washington, D.C., who Jordan said is in a "somewhat unique in that, you know, his decision was crazy."

The judge is weighing whether the Trump administration defied his order after the planes of migrants landed in El Salvador, turned over to that country's notorious mega-prison system. The Trump administration had invoked the Alien Enemies Act, a war-time authority used during World War II against Japanese Americans, for the deportations the judge said lacked due process.

Any impeachment effort would also require backing from the Senate, where GOP leaders also panned the effort.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., echoed the advice of Roberts in allowing normal legal procedures to play out.

"At the end of the day, there is a process, and there's an appeals process, and you know, I suspect that's ultimately how this will get handled," Thune said.

President Trump pardons former Hunter Biden business partner Devon Archer

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday pardoned a former business partner of Hunter Biden who was convicted of participating in a conspiracy to defraud a Native American tribe.

Devon Archer later became a key figure in the congressional inquiry into the Biden family businesses, telling lawmakers behind closed doors that the younger Biden sold the "illusion of access" to his father.

Before signing the pardon, Trump said Archer was treated "very unfairly." White House staff secretary Will Scharf said the "tone and tenor" of the prosecution changed after Archer began to cooperate with congressional investigators in the Biden family inquiry.

Archer was convicted in 2018 in a scheme to defraud the tribe that involved the sale of bonds. His conviction was overturned later that year before the court of appeals in New York reinstated it in 2020. He was sentenced in 2022 to a year in prison.

Archer has denied any wrongdoing and called himself a "victim of financial fraud." In a Fox News appearance on Monday, Archer said of the potential pardon: "I didn't think I'd need this because I never did anything."

Archer testified before the Republican-led House Oversight Committee in 2023 as GOP lawmakers tried to make the case for impeachment proceedings against President Biden. Archer told the committee that President Biden was never directly involved in their financial dealings, though Hunter would often put his father on speakerphone to impress clients and business associates.

Archer's testimony portrayed the president's son as capitalizing on his father's name, but not necessarily promising or delivering any influence that would rise to a questionable level or approach wrongdoing. At one point, Archer was asked point blank: "Are you aware of any wrongdoing by Vice President Biden?"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 27 of 70

He responded, "No, I'm not aware of any."

Hunter Biden was convicted last year in two separate cases of federal gun and tax charges. President Biden pardoned his son shortly before he left office, reversing his past promises not to use the extraordinary powers of the presidency for the benefit of his family.

Federal money to prevent Black Hills forest fires left 'in limbo'

South Dakota News Watch undefined

Sioux Falls, SD (South Dakota News Watch)

PIEDMONT, S.D. - A \$5 million program to help private landowners in the Black Hills manage their forest lands and prevent wildfires is on hold as part of President Donald Trump's widespread freeze of federal loan and grant programs.

The forest funding for South Dakota was allocated in 2024 after getting approved by former President Joe Biden and the U.S. Congress as part of the Inflation Reduction Act.

The South Dakota funding is one small part of a much larger \$350 million federal program aimed at helping landowners, state and local agencies and tribal governments manage private forests, reduce fire risk and mitigate impacts of climate change across the country. Funding for the entire program appears to be on hold.

The \$5 million allocated to South Dakota is for a cost-sharing program with Black Hills landowners for "climate mitigation and/or forest resilience practices," according to the U.S. Forest Service. In all, 37 states were approved to receive about \$140 million for private landowners.

The five-year grant funding is largely aimed at thinning overgrown forests on private land, which helps prevent forest fires from starting and spreading.

About 60% of forest land in the U.S. is privately owned, according to the forest service, making the landowner forest management program a key part of overall wildfire mitigation efforts across the country. The funding freeze comes at a time when the Trump administration has fired or laid off thousands of workers, including in the forest service and wildland fire agencies.

Pennington County businessman Dean Henderson, who owns woodlands near his ranch and construction company offices north of Rapid City, saw the benefits of forest management up close in October 2021.

Henderson, who owns Blue Ladder Construction, watched that fall as a fire that broke out between Haines Avenue and Deadwood Avenue torched woodlands around his business and began to threaten buildings.

Several years prior to the fire, Henderson had obtained grant funding to manage his land. As the fire raged, it was clear to see which areas had been thinned of trees in the past, he said.

"In areas where we had thinned, it helped out immensely," Henderson said. "In areas where it was thick and overgrown, it was total devastation, totally cleared out by a very hot fire."

Henderson's buildings were saved, and he remains a supporter of government grant funding to aid private landowners with forest management. "It made it so I could afford to do that because otherwise it wasn't cost effective," he said.

Bob Burns of Piedmont is a landowner who also serves as co-chair of the South Dakota Family Forests Association, a nonprofit group committed to forest management and resiliency in the Black Hills.

The family forests group was selected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to administer the South Dakota forest management funding, which is provided as 80% reimbursement to landowners who mainly hire contractors to thin their forest lands.

The Black Hills has been hit by several small wildfires and a few major blazes in recent years. The Jasper fire south of Custer burned 83,000 acres of timberland in 2000, and the Custer State Park fire in December 2017 torched about 53,000 acres of forest.

Thinning of forests also promotes growth of healthy trees and reduces the likelihood of insect infestations, including from the mountain pine beetle, which destroyed or damaged pine trees on about 450,000 acres of the northern and central Black Hills during an epidemic lasting from the late-1990s to the mid-2010s.

Proper forest management allows for improved flow of moisture from rain or snow and leads to increased

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 28 of 70

growth of mature trees that are suitable for logging, which can aid the struggling logging industry in the Black Hills, Burns said.

Until recently, Burns said his group was operating under the assumption that since the grant program was fully approved by Congress and the former president, it could begin soliciting grant applications from qualified Black Hills landowners.

After receiving about two dozen applications, however, he learned the federal money was on hold. No official notice of the funding freeze was given, but Burns said that after some investigation on his own, he figured out that, for now at least, the money is not available.

"We're in limbo right now," Burns told News Watch. "We're not going to sign people up to do this work unless we know that these funds are going to be flowing to us to reimburse them."

In one of his first executive orders after taking office, Trump froze all funding within the Inflation Reduction Act. He also paused most federal loan and grant programs in late January as his administration undergoes a review to ensure spending aligns with the president's executive orders and goals and to root out potential fraud or wasteful spending.

Burns said the forest resiliency programs are highly controlled and that grant funding is closely monitored.

"There's nothing approaching fraud or waste in this, and every dollar will be used to do something good for the Black Hills," he said. "It seems odd to me that this came from an act passed and signed by the president and Congress, so how someone can come and stop it dead in its tracks, I don't understand that."

Burns said he has contacted representatives in the office of U.S. Sen. John Thune but has not received any updates on if or when the forest funding will be released. A spokesman for Thune told News Watch in an email that the senator's office has communicated with Burns but was unable to provide an update on funding.

"Our office has been in touch with Bob Burns and various other stakeholders in South Dakota assisting them as agencies have been transitioning and getting set up," the spokesman wrote.

The South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources said landowner forest management efforts help maintain and sustain healthy forests in the state.

"We (DANR) work with private landowners to draft forest management plans that identify objectives for their forests and provide management options and tools to accomplish those plans," the department said in an email to News Watch. "Proper forest management, whether on federal lands or private property, is important to reduce the risk of large disturbances such as wildfires or insect outbreaks while accomplishing other ecological services."

Forested lands in the Black Hills are naturally regenerating, meaning that seeds living in the soil do not require planting of new trees.

Fire has historically served as nature's way of thinning the forest and leading to growth of new, stronger trees, but in the modern world, with intermingling of homes and businesses in the national forest, "we can't have wildfires thinning the forests, we just can't," Burns said.

While controlled burning can help, the most effective method of reducing fire fuels is through forest management that includes regular thinning of trees that are small or too close together.

The program will benefit the forests that need management and also create jobs and revenues for professional loggers and foresters, Burns said.

"This money really benefits everyone," he said.

About 800,000 acres of forest in the Black Hills are suitable for logging, and about 290,000 of those acres are privately owned, Burns said.

To participate in the grant program, landowners must have more than 10 acres and be members of the family forests association, which means they must pay for a state-approved forest stewardship plan that guides how the land should be managed.

Grant participants must obtain three separate bids from foresters and submit the low bid for approval. Once approved, the landowner then qualifies for an 80% reimbursement of the contract costs, paying the final 20% from their own pocket. The cost of thinning trees by a professional forester can range from

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 29 of 70

less than \$1,000 an acre up to more than \$3,000 an acre, so managing tracts of land averaging about 40 acres in size can get expensive, Burns said.

To date, the family forests association has about 160 members who own about 46,000 acres, Burns said. Unless the funding is unfrozen soon, forest thinning efforts could be stalled until fall because forest management efforts stop during summer.

Burns and his wife, Mary LaHood, are both active not only in managing their own tree farm located west of Interstate 90 near Piedmont but also in promoting forest management among other landowners.

For their longstanding leadership and land management efforts, the couple in 2021 was named National Outstanding Tree Farmers of the Year by the American Forest Foundation. As a team, now married more than 40 years and managing their forest together that entire time, they're committed to maintaining the quality and beauty of the Black Hills region that they and their adult children call home.

"People don't realize it, but when they drive through the Black Hills, they're driving past thousands of acres of private lands that are beautiful and well preserved," Burns said. "I understand that everyone wants to make sure that tax dollars are being spent wisely, but this is such a wonderful way to increase forest resiliency and protect the Black Hills."

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At least 24 dead as wildfires ravage southern South Korea and force 27,000 to evacuate

By KIM TONG-HYUNG and HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Wind-driven wildfires that were among South Korea's worst ever were ravaging the country's southern regions, killing 24 people, destroying more than 200 structures and forcing 27,000 residents to evacuate, officials said Wednesday.

The death toll included a pilot who died after a helicopter crashed during efforts to contain wildfires in the southeastern town of Uiseong, one of the hardest-hit areas. The aircraft had no other crew members. The National Fire Agency said at least 26 other people sustained varying degrees of injuries.

An ancient Buddhist temple, houses, factories and vehicles were destroyed in the wildfires that have burned 43,330 acres (17,535 hectares), the government's emergency response center said.

In a televised address, South Korea's acting President Han Duck-soo said the wildfires that began last Friday were the worst so far.

"Damages are snowballing," Han said. "There are concerns that we'll have wildfire damages that we've never experienced, so we have to concentrate all our capabilities to put out the wildfires in the rest of this week."

Han said crews were struggling to extinguish the wildfires because strong winds swept the areas overnight. Han said about 4,650 firefighters, soldiers and other personnel were working Wednesday with the help of about 130 helicopters. He said that "a small amount" of 5-10 millimeters (0.1-0.3 inches) of rain was expected Thursday.

As of Wednesday evening, firefighters were fighting at least four active wildfires, including in the southeastern coastal town of Yeongdeok, which alerted residents of the nearest village to evacuate to an indoor gymnasium.

Strong winds and smoke-filled skies forced authorities in the southeastern city of Andong to order

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 30 of 70

evacuations in two villages, including Puncheon, which is home to the Hahoe folk village — a UNESCO World Heritage Site founded around the 14th-15th century. Hikers were advised to leave the scenic Jirisan Mountain, one of the country's largest national parks, as another fire spread closer.

Observers say the ongoing wildfires are the third biggest in South Korea in terms of land burned. The largest fires were in Andong, the neighboring counties of Uiseong and Sancheong, and the city of Ulsan.

On Tuesday, officials said firefighters had extinguished most of the flames from the largest wildfires in those areas, but wind and dry conditions allowed them to spread again.

The blaze in Uiseong destroyed nearly half of more than 30 structures at Gounsa, a temple which was said to be originally built in the 7th century. Among the burned structures were two state-designated "treasures" — a pavilion-shaped building erected on a stream in 1668, and a Joseon Dynasty structure built in 1904 to mark the longevity of a king.

The another state-designated "treasure," a stone Buddha statue reportedly manufactured in the 8th century, was moved to a safe place, according to government and Buddhist officials.

The Justice Ministry said it protectively removed 500 inmates from a detention center in Cheongsong, another southern town, but no damages were reported to the facility.

The Korea Forest Service said it had raised its wildfire warning to the highest level nationwide, requiring local governments to assign more workers to emergency response, tighten entry restrictions for forests and parks, and recommend that military units withhold live-fire exercises.

The 18 dead include four firefighters and government workers who died in Sancheong on Saturday after being trapped by fast-moving flames driven by strong winds, according to officials.

Government officials suspect human error caused several of the fires, possibly due to the use of fire while clearing overgrown grass in family tombs or sparks from welding work.

Wildfires in North and South Carolina fueled by drought, wind and fallen trees from Hurricane Helene

By The Associated Press undefined

Dry conditions, wind and trees downed by Hurricane Helene fueled wildfires in North Carolina and South Carolina, where evacuation orders were in effect Tuesday.

Many people in the area are still getting over the hurricane that hit in September, according to North Carolina Forest Service spokesperson Bo Dossett.

"A lot of the damage and the blowdown, the downed trees from Hurricane Helene are contributing to the difficulties that our firefighters are facing trying to contain this fire and so that has just been kind of one ongoing crisis from September all through into the spring for a lot of these residents," Dossett said. "This is one more thing that they're having to deal with on top of what they experienced back in the fall."

The National Weather Service issued a red flag warning for parts of the South Carolina Upstate, western North Carolina and northeast Georgia through Tuesday night, as conditions were expected to be favorable for the rapid spread of wildfire with lingering dry air and winds picking up to 10 to 20 mph (16 to 32 kph) and gusting 25 to 35 mph (40 to 56 kph).

Mandatory evacuations were in effect for 146 properties in rural Polk County on Tuesday, about 80 miles (129 kilometers) west of Charlotte, North Carolina, according to county spokesperson Kellie Cannon. Three fires there have burned at least 9.6 square miles (25 square kilometers) in that county and in neighboring Henderson County as of Tuesday, and the two larger fires are uncontained, according to the forest service. Officials released maps Tuesday that show evacuation zones in the two counties.

The Black Cove Fire is one of the larger blazes. Officials said a downed power line sparked that fire, but the causes of the other two fires are under investigation.

Henderson County has issued voluntary evacuation orders and opened an emergency shelter. Volunteer fire departments were on standby, Henderson County spokesperson Mike Morgan told WLOS-TV.

"Especially near some of the homes where if the fire did jump, we can be there to help protect those homes," Morgan said. "We're here to monitor the situation very closely."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 31 of 70

Two fires were burning in the mountains of South Carolina. The fires in Table Rock State Park and nearby Persimmon Ridge have burned a combined 2.3 square miles (5.9 square kilometers), the South Carolina Forestry Commission said. Officials said both fires were ignited by human activity and neither were contained as of Monday night.

No injuries were reported, and no structures were imminently threatened as of Monday night, but voluntary evacuations were issued for about 100 homes over the weekend. On Tuesday morning, the forestry commission updated an earlier announcement to say no evacuations were planned near the Persimmon Ridge Fire, but residents were urged to be prepared to leave their homes if an evacuation is suggested in the future.

"The weather over the next few days remains concerning, as relative humidities are expected to remain very low, and the forecasted wind speeds will still be conducive to spreading the fire," the forestry commission said.

Dry weather and millions of trees knocked down by Hurricane Helene last year are creating a long and active fire season in the Carolinas, according to North Carolina State University forestry and environmental resources professor Robert Scheller. Scheller predicted this busy fire season if the region saw dry weather after the hurricane.

"Helene just dropped tons of fuel on the ground," Scheller said. "Then these flash droughts allow that fuel to dry out very fast."

Despite recent rain, most of the Carolinas are abnormally dry or experiencing a moderate drought, according to federal monitors.

South Korea's truth commission says government responsible for fraud and abuse in foreign adoptions

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's truth commission concluded the government bears responsibility for facilitating a foreign adoption program rife with fraud and abuse, driven by efforts to reduce welfare costs and enabled by private agencies that often manipulated children's backgrounds and origins.

The landmark report released Wednesday followed a nearly three-year investigation into complaints from 367 adoptees in Europe, the United States, and Australia, representing the most comprehensive examination yet of South Korea's foreign adoptions, which peaked under a succession of military governments in the 1970s and '80s.

The government-appointed Truth and Reconciliation Commission said it confirmed human rights violations in 56 of the complaints and aims to review the remaining cases before its mandate expires in late May.

However, some adoptees and even a commission investigator criticized the cautiously written report, acknowledging that investigative limitations prevented the commission from more strongly establishing the government's complicity.

That investigator, Sang Hoon Lee, also lamented that the panel on Tuesday deferred assessments of 42 other adoptees' cases, citing a lack of documentation to sufficiently prove their adoptions were problematic. Lee and the commission chairperson, Sun Young Park, did not specify which types of documents were central to the discussions.

However, Lee implied that some members of the commission's decision-making committee were reluctant to recognize cases in which adoptees had yet to prove beyond doubt that the biological details in their adoption papers had been falsified — either by meeting their birth parents or confirming information about them.

Most Korean adoptees were registered by agencies as abandoned orphans, although they frequently had relatives who could be easily identified or found, a practice that often makes their roots difficult or impossible to trace. Government data obtained by The Associated Press shows less than a fifth of 15,000 adoptees who have asked South Korea for help with family searches since 2012 have managed to reunite with relatives.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 32 of 70

Lee said the committee's stance reflects a lack of understanding of the systemic problems in adoptions and risks excluding many remaining cases.

"Personally, I find yesterday's decision very regrettable and consider it a half-baked decision," Lee said.

Promoting adoptions to reduce mouths to feed

After reviewing government and adoption records and interviewing adoptees, birth families, public officials and adoption workers, the commission assessed that South Korean officials saw foreign adoptions as a cheaper alternative to building a social welfare system for needy children.

Through policies and laws that promoted adoption, South Korea's military governments permitted private adoption agencies to exercise extensive guardianship rights over children in their custody and swiftly transfer custody to foreign adopters, resulting in "large-scale overseas placements of children in need of protection," the commission said.

Authorities provided no meaningful oversight as adoption agencies engaged in dubious or illicit practices while competing to send more children abroad. These practices included bypassing proper consent from biological parents, falsely documenting children with known parents as abandoned orphans, and switching children's identities, according to the commission's report. It cited that the government failed to ensure that agencies properly screened adoptive parents or prevent them from excessively charging foreign adopters, who were often asked to make additional donations beyond the standard fees.

The commission's findings broadly aligned with previous reporting by The AP. The AP investigations, which were also documented by Frontline (PBS), detailed how South Korea's government, Western countries and adoption agencies worked in tandem to supply some 200,000 Korean children to parents overseas, despite years of evidence that many were being procured through questionable or outright unscrupulous means.

The military governments implemented special laws aimed at promoting foreign adoptions, removing judicial oversight and granting vast powers to private agencies, which bypassed proper child relinquishment practices while shipping thousands of children to the West every year. Western nations ignored these problems and sometimes pressured South Korea to keep the kids coming as they focused on satisfying their huge domestic demands for babies.

"The commission determined that the state violated the human rights of adoptees protected under the constitution and international agreements, by neglecting its duty to ensure basic human rights, including inadequate legislation, poor management and oversight, and failures in implementing proper administrative procedures while sending large numbers of children abroad," the commission said in a statement. It said the government "actively utilized" foreign adoptions, which "required no budget allocation," rather than strengthening a social safety net for needy children.

When asked why the commission's report focused on the government's negligence and monitoring failures, rather than highlighting its more direct responsibility for creating a system that put children at risk, Lee acknowledged a need for a deeper investigation into the government's role, citing limitations in the commission's reach.

A more extensive review of the systemic problems would require a closer look at adoptions to the United States, which by far was the largest recipient of Korean children, Lee said. U.S. adoptees accounted for a smaller number of complaints received by the commission, most of which were filed by adoptees in Europe.

"Rather than producing a final conclusion, we focused on pointing out the problems the best we could," Lee said.

Commission calls for government apology

The commission recommended the government issue an official apology over the problems it identified and develop plans to address the grievances of adoptees who discovered that the biological origins in their adoption papers were falsified. It also urged the government to investigate citizenship gaps among adoptees sent to the United States and to implement measures to assist those without citizenship, who may number in the thousands.

South Korea's government has never acknowledged direct responsibility for issues surrounding past adoptions. The Ministry of Health and Welfare, the government department that handles adoption issues, and adoption agencies didn't immediately comment on the commission's report.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 33 of 70

During the news conference, Yooree Kim, who was sent at age 11 by an adoption agency to a couple in France without her biological parents' consent, pleaded for the commission to strengthen its recommendations.

She said the government should encourage broader DNA testing for biological families to increase the chances of reunions with adoptees and officially declare an end to foreign adoptions. She said adoptees who fell victim to illicit practices should be entitled to "compensation from the Korean government and adoption agencies, without going through lawsuits."

South Korea's practices in the past seven decades formed what's believed to be the world's largest diaspora of adoptees. Recent reforms, including a 2011 law that required foreign adoptions go through family courts, have led to a significant decline, with only 79 cases of South Korean children placed abroad in 2023.

US Vice President JD Vance to join his wife in Greenland on Friday

By JOSH BOAK and DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President JD Vance said that he's joining his wife on a Friday trip to Greenland, suggesting in an online video that global security is at stake.

"We're going to check out how things are going there," Vance said in a video shared Tuesday. "Speaking for President Trump, we want to reinvigorate the security of the people of Greenland because we think it's important to protecting the security of the entire world."

President Donald Trump irked much of Europe by suggesting that the United States should in some form control the self-governing, mineral-rich territory of American ally Denmark. As the nautical gateway to the Arctic and North Atlantic approaches to North America, Greenland has broader strategic value as both China and Russia also seek access to its waterways and the nearby natural resources.

The vice president's decision to visit a U.S. military base in Greenland has removed the risk of violating potential diplomatic taboos by sending a delegation to another country without an official invite. Yet Vance has also criticized longstanding European allies for relying on military support from the United States, openly antagonizing partners in ways that have generated concerns about America's reliability.

Ahead of the vice president's announcement that he would join his wife, discontent from the governments of Greenland and Denmark had been growing sharper, with the Greenland government posting on Facebook Monday night that it had "not extended any invitations for any visits, neither private nor official."

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen told Danish national broadcasts Tuesday that it was "unacceptable pressure."

The office of second lady Usha Vance said Sunday that she would depart Thursday for Greenland and return Saturday. Vance and one of her three children had planned to visit historic sites and learn about Greenland's culture, but her husband's participation has reoriented the trip around national security.

The vice president said he didn't want to let his wife "have all that fun by herself" and said he plans to visit a Space Force outpost in the northwest coast of Greenland. Vance said that other countries have threatened Greenland as well as the United States and Canada.

Trump's national security adviser, Mike Waltz, was initially listed among the group of U.S. officials also heading to Greenland — but his name was omitted when it was announced that the vice president was now attending.

The White House didn't say Tuesday if Waltz's travel plans had been altered after it was revealed that he had errantly added a journalist to a secure messaging app conversation about a military strike in Yemen.

Vance said leaders in Denmark and North America had "ignored" Greenland for "far too long."

The visit to Pituffik Space Base will take place instead of Usha Vance's previously announced trip to the Avannaata Qimussersu dogsled race in Sisimiut.

But Dwayne Ryan Menezes, founder and managing director of the Polar Research & Policy Initiative, said that the Trump administration's "intimidation" of Greenland could backfire.

Menezes said if Trump was "smart enough" to understand Greenland's strategic importance that he

should also be "smart enough to know there is no greater way to weaken America's hand and hurt its long-term interests than turning its back on its allies, the principal asymmetrical advantage it enjoys over its adversaries."

Despite officials in Greenland and Denmark becoming more vocal in expressing objections, Vance is allowed to visit the space base, said Marc Jacobsen, a professor at the Royal Danish Defense College, because of a 1951 agreement between Denmark and the U.S. regarding the defense of Greenland.

"What is controversial here is all about the timing," he said. "Greenland and Denmark have stated very clearly that they don't want the US to visit right now, when Greenland doesn't have a government in place."

During his first term, Trump floated the idea of purchasing the world's largest island, even as Denmark, a NATO ally, insisted it wasn't for sale. The people of Greenland also have firmly rejected Trump's plans.

Trump's return to the White House has included a desire with territorial expansion, with the U.S. president seeking to add Canada as a 51st state and resume control of the Panama Canal. He has also indicated that U.S. interests could take over the land in the war-torn Gaza Strip from Israel and convert it into a luxury outpost.

In their own words: Trump officials shrugging off Signal leak once decried Clinton's server

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The attempts by President Donald Trump and top leaders of his administration to downplay a security breach that revealed military strike plans in a Signal group chat including a journalist stand in stark contrast to their reaction to Hillary Clinton's use of a home server as secretary of state.

This time, they've largely focused their ire not on sweeping potential security lapses, or punishments as a result, but on the journalist who was errantly added to the group text and reported on it: editor-in-chief for The Atlantic, Jeffrey Goldberg. Some of the text's participants who spoke out against Clinton haven't commented publicly at all about the Signal leak.

One of the chief concerns about Clinton's email server was that it was insecure, and that sensitive information could fall into the wrong hands. But former FBI Director James Comey said in recommending that no charges be brought against Clinton that there was no evidence that her email account had been hacked by hostile actors.

Trump insisted Tuesday that no classified information was divulged in the group chat, though Goldberg wrote that messaging revealed "precise information about weapons packages, targets, and timing" of strikes in Yemen. The White House's National Security Council has said it is investigating.

For her part, Clinton's reaction to Goldberg's reporting was one of astonishment: "You have got to be kidding me," Clinton said in an X post that spotlighted The Atlantic article and included an eyes emoji.

Here's a look at what some of the officials in the group chat, and some of those steadfastly standing by them, are saying now versus then.

Trump

Now: "The main thing was nothing happened. The attack was totally successful," Trump said during a meeting with a group of his ambassadors at the White House on Tuesday.

He also called his national security adviser, Michael Waltz, "a very good man" and insisted "he will continue to do a very good job," while adding, "I think it's very unfair how they attacked Michael" and labeling Goldberg a "total sleazebag."

Later, in an interview with Newsmax, Trump said a Waltz aide had Goldberg's number and "this guy ended up on the call." He also added that he felt good about what occurred. "I can only go by what I've been told ... but I feel very comfortable, actually."

Then: "Hillary is the one who sent and received classified information on an insecure server, putting the safety of the American people under threat," Trump said in an October 2016 speech in Warren, Michigan.

"The rigged system refused to prosecute her for conduct that put all of us, everybody in this room, everybody in this country at risk. Hillary Clinton went to great lengths to create a private email server and

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 35 of 70

to bypass government security in order to keep her emails from being read by the public and by federal officials," he said in a November 2016 speech in Virginia Beach, Virginia.

And, during a Florida rally in July 2016, he even urged Russian hackers to help find a batch of emails said to have vanished from Clinton's private server. "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing."

Waltz

Now: "I think there's a lot in the lessons for a lot of journalists in this city who have made big names for themselves making up lies about this president," Waltz said during Tuesday's White House meeting with Trump and the ambassadors.

He also said of Goldberg, "This journalist, Mr. President, wants the world talking about more hoaxes."

In a subsequent interview on Fox News Channel's "The Ingraham Angle," Waltz said, "I take full responsibility. I built the group." He also contradicted Trump by saying that no staffer was responsible.

Waltz further acknowledged, "embarrassing, yes" and said, "We made a mistake. We're moving forward."

Then: "How is it Hillary Clinton can delete 33,000 government emails on a private server, yet President Trump gets indicted for having documents he could declassify?" Waltz posted in June 2023, referencing charges against Trump for mishandling classified documents. The case was scrapped after Trump won a second term.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth

Now: "Nobody was texting war plans," Hegseth told journalists traveling with him in Hawaii on Monday. He said of Goldberg, "You're talking about a deceitful and highly discredited so-called journalist who's made a profession of peddling hoaxes."

Then: "Any security professional, military, government or otherwise, would be fired on the spot for this type of conduct and criminally prosecuted for being so reckless with this kind of information," Hegseth, then a regular contributor for Fox News Channel, said of Clinton's emails on the network in 2016.

That same year, Hegseth asked on Fox News, "How damaging is it to your ability to recruit or build allies with others when they are worried that our leaders may be exposing them because of their gross negligence or their recklessness in handling information?"

In another 2016 Fox News segment, Hegseth said, "If it was anyone other than Hillary Clinton, they would be in jail right now for what has been done. Because the assumption is, in the intelligence community, if you are using unclassified means, there is the potential for, and likelihood, that foreign governments are targeting those accounts and gathering intelligence from them."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio

Now: No public comment on the Signal group chat.

Then: "Nobody is above the law, not even Hillary Clinton – even though she thinks she is," Rubio told Fox News in January 2016.

The previous year in a Fox News interview, Rubio referred to the same emails when he said, "What they did is reckless — it's complete recklessness and incompetence."

Deputy chief of staff for policy Stephen Miller

Now: No public comment on the Signal leak.

Then: Miller posted in 2022: "One point that doesn't get made enough about Hillary's unsecured server illegally used to conduct state business (obviously created to hide the Clintons' corrupt pay-for-play): foreign adversaries could easily hack classified ops & intel in real time from other side of the globe."

CIA Director John Ratcliffe

Now: "My communications, to be clear, in a Signal message group were entirely permissible and lawful and did not include classified information," Ratcliffe said at a Tuesday congressional hearing.

Then: On Fox News in 2018, Ratcliffe suggested of officials who mishandle sensitive information: "It's always a good thing that we see that there is investigation and prosecution of folks if they're not handling that information appropriately."

Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 36 of 70

Now: "There's a difference between inadvertent release versus careless and sloppy, malicious leaks of classified information," Gabbard said at the same congressional hearing.

Then: Gabbard posted on X earlier this month, "Any unauthorized release of classified information is a violation of the law and will be treated as such."

Told to fix notorious prison, Israel just relocated alleged abuses, detainees say

By JULIA FRANKEL and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Under pressure from Israel's top court to improve conditions at a facility notorious for mistreating Palestinians seized in Gaza, the military transferred hundreds of detainees to newly opened camps.

But abuses at these camps were just as bad, according to Israeli human rights organizations that interviewed dozens of current and former detainees and are now asking the same court to force the military to fix the problem once and for all.

What the detainees' testimonies show, rights groups say, is that instead of correcting alleged abuses against Palestinians held without charge or trial — including beatings, excessive handcuffing, and poor diet and health care -- Israel's military just shifted where they take place.

"What we've seen is the erosion of the basic standards for humane detention," said Jessica Montell, the director of Hamoked, one of the rights groups petitioning the Israeli government.

Asked for a response, the military said it complies with international law and "completely rejects allegations regarding the systematic abuse of detainees."

The sprawling Ofer Camp and the smaller Anatot Camp, both built in the West Bank, were supposed to resolve problems rights groups documented at a detention center in the Negev desert called Sde Teiman. That site was intended to temporarily hold and treat militants captured during Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel. But it morphed into a long-term detention center infamous for brutalizing Palestinians rounded up in Gaza, often without being charged.

Detainees transferred to Ofer and Anatot say conditions there were no better, according to more than 30 who were interviewed by lawyers for Hamoked and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel. AP is the first international news organization to report on the affidavits from PHRI.

"They would punish you for anything" said Khaled Alserr, 32, a surgeon from Gaza who spent months at Ofer Camp and agreed to speak about his experiences. He was released after six months without charge.

Alserr said he lost count of the beatings he endured from soldiers after being rounded up in March of last year during a raid at Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis. "You'd be punished for making eye contact, for asking for medicine, for looking up towards the sky," said Alserr.

Other detainees' accounts to the rights groups remain anonymous. Their accounts could not be independently confirmed, but their testimonies — given separately — were similar.

The Supreme Court has given the military until the end of March to respond to the alleged abuses at Ofer. Leaving Sde Teiman

Since the war began, Israel has seized thousands in Gaza that it suspects of links to Hamas. Thousands have also been released, often after months of detention.

Hundreds of detainees were freed during the ceasefire that began in January. But with ground operations recently restarted in Gaza, arrests continue. The military won't say how many detainees it holds.

After Israel's Supreme Court ordered better treatment at Sde Teiman, the military said in June it was transferring hundreds of detainees, including 500 sent to Ofer.

Ofer was built on an empty lot next to a civilian prison of the same name. Satellite photos from January show a paved, walled compound, with 24 mobile homes that serve as cells.

Anatot, built on a military base in a Jewish settlement, has two barracks, each with room for about 50 people, according to Hamoked.

Under wartime Israeli law, the military can hold Palestinians from Gaza for 45 days without access to

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 37 of 70

the outside world. In practice, many go far longer.

Whenever detainees met with Hamoked lawyers, they were “dragged violently” into a cell — sometimes barefoot and often blindfolded, and their hands and feet remained shackled throughout the meetings, the rights group said in a letter to the military’s advocate general.

“I don’t know where I am,” one detainee told a lawyer.

Newly freed Israeli hostages have spoken out about their own harsh conditions in Gaza. Eli Sharabi, who emerged gaunt after 15 months of captivity, told Israel’s Channel 12 news that his captors said hostages’ conditions were influenced by Israel’s treatment of Palestinian prisoners.

Detainees allege regular beatings

Alserr said he was kept with 21 others from Gaza in a 40-square-meter cell with eight bunk beds. Some slept on the floor on camping mattresses soldiers had punctured so they couldn’t inflate, he said. Scabies and lice were rampant. He said he was only allowed outside his cell once a week.

Detainees from Ofer and Anatot said they were regularly beaten with fists and batons. Some said they were kept in handcuffs for months, including while they slept and ate — and unshackled only when allowed to shower once a week.

Three prisoners held in Anatot told the lawyers that they were blindfolded constantly. One Anatot detainee said that soldiers woke them every hour during the night and made them stand for a half-hour.

In response to questions from AP, the military said it was unaware of claims that soldiers woke detainees up. It said detainees have regular shower access and are allowed daily yard time. It said occasional overcrowding meant some detainees were forced to sleep on “mattresses on the floor.”

The military said it closed Anatot in early February because it was no longer needed for “short-term incarceration” when other facilities were full. Sde Teiman, which has been upgraded, is still in use.

Nutrition and health care

Alserr said the worst thing about Ofer was medical care. He said guards refused to give him antacids for a chronic ulcer. After 40 days, he felt a rupture. In the truck heading to the hospital, soldiers tied a bag around his head.

“They beat me all the way to the hospital,” he said. “At the hospital they refused to remove the bag, even when they were treating me.”

The military said all detainees receive checkups and proper medical care. It said “prolonged restraint during detention” was only used in exceptional cases and taking into account the condition of each detainee.

Many detainees complained of hunger. They said they received three meals a day of a few slices of white bread with a cucumber or tomato, and sometimes some chocolate or custard.

That amounts to about 1,000 calories a day, or half what is necessary, said Lihi Joffe, an Israeli pediatric dietician who read some of the Ofer testimonies and called the diet “not humane.”

After rights groups complained in November, Joffe said she saw new menus at Ofer with greater variety, including potatoes and falafel — an improvement, she said, but still not enough.

The military said a nutritionist approves detainees’ meals, and that they always have access to water.

Punished for seeing a lawyer

Two months into his detention, Alserr had a 5-minute videoconference with a judge, who said he would stay in prison for the foreseeable future.

Such hearings are “systematically” brief, according to Nadia Daqqa, a Hamoked attorney. No lawyers are present and detainees are not allowed to talk, she said.

Several months later, Alserr was allowed to meet with a lawyer. But he said he was forced to kneel in the sun for hours beforehand.

Another detainee told the lawyer from Physicians for Human Rights that he underwent the same punishment. “All the time, he has been threatening to take his own life,” the lawyer wrote in notes affixed to the affidavit.

Since his release in September, Alserr has returned to work at the hospital in Gaza.

The memories are still painful, but caring for patients again helps, he said. “I’m starting to forget ... to

feel myself again as a human being.”

‘Like a sound from hell:’ Was an illegal sonic weapon used against peaceful protesters in Serbia?

By JOVANA GEC and DUSAN STOJANOVIC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Ivana Ilic Sunderic had never heard anything quite so alarming and disturbing at a protest as the sound that broke a commemorative silence during a huge anti-government rally in Serbia’s capital, Belgrade.

“It was quiet and peaceful and then we heard something we could not see ... like a sound rolling toward us, a whiz,” Ilic Sunderic said about the March 15 incident. “People started rushing for safety toward the pavement, feeling that something was moving toward us down the street.”

It was “a subdued sound lasting only 2-3 seconds but very unusual and very frightening, like a sound from hell,” she said.

Ilic Sunderic was not alone in describing the panic. Hundreds of others have offered similar accounts, triggering accusations that the police, military or security services under the tight control of authoritarian Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic used an acoustic crowd control weapon to target peaceful protesters.

The weapons, which are illegal in Serbia, emit sound waves which can trigger sharp ear pain, disorientation, eardrum ruptures or even irreversible hearing damage.

The incident piled more pressure on Vucic, who has been rattled by nearly five months of anti-corruption protests over the collapse in November of a concrete canopy at a railway station in the northern town of Novi Sad that killed 16 people.

Serbia’s officials have issued often contradictory denials that an acoustic weapon was directed at the demonstrators. Calls have been mounting for answers as to what caused the sudden commotion, if not a sonic device.

An Associated Press video shows thousands of protesters holding up their lit mobile phones in silence when they suddenly start running away in panic. A swooshing sound can then be heard.

“I have been going to protests for 30 years but I’ve never heard anything like this,” Ilic Sunderic said.

Lies and fabrications

A defiant Vucic has rejected what he called “lies and fabrications” that the security services targeted the demonstrators with a sonic device. He said that such accusations are part of an alleged Western-orchestrated ploy to topple him.

“If there was a single piece of evidence that a sound cannon was used against demonstrators, then I would no longer be president,” he said.

Serbia’s police, army and the state security agency, BIA, initially all denied possessing the U.S.-made Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD), which is illegal in Serbia and some other countries. When presented with photos of the device mounted on an off-road vehicle and deployed at the rally of hundreds of thousands of protesters, officials admitted possessing a sonic weapon, but insisted it was not used against the protesters.

The photos showed nothing more than “loudspeakers” that also are available on eBay, Interior Minister Ivica Dacic said. The rectangular devices, purchased from a U.S. supplier in 2021, serve to emit warnings to the crowds in case of major trouble, he said.

“Serbian police have never, including March 15, used any illegal or unallowed device that is not envisaged by the law, including the device known as a sound cannon,” Dacic said. “Police only use sound devices for warnings.”

Sonic weapons use sound waves to incapacitate, disorient or harm individuals by harnessing acoustic energy, causing both physical and psychological effects, such as dizziness, disorientation or severe headaches.

Although often described as non-lethal, their use in military, law enforcement and covert operations has raised serious ethical concerns.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 39 of 70

More recently, sonic devices have been used against Somali pirates as well as migrants in Greece and reportedly in Serbia.

Images from the Belgrade protest show what appears to be an LRAD 450XL.

The California-based manufacturer, Genasys, said on X that "the video and audio evidence we have seen and heard thus far does not support the use of an LRAD during the March 15th incident in Belgrade, Serbia."

Hundreds complained of consequences

Many who were in the crowd later complained of headaches, confusion, ear pressure or nausea.

Sasa Cvrkovic, a 23-year-old political science student from Belgrade, described the sound as a "jet that flew past like some kind of wind." He said that it created panic and a brief stampede: "One young man next to me broke his leg."

Cvrkovic said he felt nauseous all through the day after the demonstration. Ilic Sunderic said she felt pressure in her head and ears.

Reports also have emerged of pressure on doctors at Serbia's emergency clinics to withhold records of hundreds of people who sought medical help and advice after the rally.

Experts doubt the official version

Thomas Withington, an expert in electronic warfare, radar and military communications at the Royal United Services Institute think tank, said he reviewed some of the videos from the Belgrade stampede.

"Extraordinary film of people gathering, protesting in the streets peacefully, the demonstration," he said in an interview. "And suddenly, an almost kind of biblical passing of a huge number of people in a very panicked rush, very sudden and very panicked movement, and the likes of which I must confess I've never seen before."

He said it was clear that something caused several hundred people to suddenly panic and move in a very specific way, rushing for cover to the pavement and abandoning the middle of the street.

"So certainly, the behavior that you see on the film does appear to be consistent with people reacting en masse to something that is making them feel deeply unsettled or deeply uncomfortable," he said.

Predrag Petrovic, a research manager at the Belgrade Center for Security Policy, a think tank, said, "We can claim with huge probability that some unconventional weapon, some version of a sonic cannon, was used."

"I have a lot of experience in participating and monitoring street protests and I have never seen a stampede happen in a second and along an almost straight line," Petrovic said.

In an online petition signed by over half a million people, the Serbian opposition Move-Change movement asked the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe for an independent investigation.

Several Serbian rights groups announced Tuesday they have taken the issue to the European Court of Human Rights, saying that they collected more than 4,000 testimonies from people who complained of various physical and psychological problems after the incident on March 15. The court in Strasbourg has given Serbia until the end of the month to respond, the groups said in a joint statement.

Vucic's pro-Russia government, however, invited the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and Russia's Federal Security Service, the FSB, to investigate. There has been no immediate answer from the American and Russian security agencies.

Kilauea volcano's sporadic eruption resumes in Hawaii as lava pours out of a summit vent

HONOLULU (AP) — Lava began bubbling out of Hawaii's most active volcano once again on Tuesday as Kilauea's sporadic eruption resumed.

The eruption restarted at midday when molten rock began pouring out of a vent in Kilauea's summit caldera, the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory said in a statement. The lava was contained within the caldera inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and wasn't affecting any residential areas.

The volcano on the Big Island of Hawaii has been erupting on-and-off since Dec. 23. It's shot tall foun-

tains of lava high into the air and spilled molten rock across the caldera floor each time it's come back to life. The spectacle is a popular attraction for tourists.

The current episode is the 15th of the current eruption. The shortest of the previous episodes lasted 13 hours while the longest went on for eight days. Pauses in between episodes have ranged between 24 hours to 12 days.

Kilauea is one of six active volcanoes in Hawaii, including one that is submerged underwater. The largest is Mauna Loa, which is also on the Big Island and which erupted in 2022.

Trump downplays national security team texting military operation plan on Signal as a minor 'glitch'

By DAVID KLEPPER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday downplayed the texting of sensitive plans for a military strike against Yemen's Houthis this month to a group chat that included a journalist, saying it was "the only glitch in two months" of his administration as Democratic lawmakers heaped criticism on the administration for handling highly sensitive information carelessly.

Trump told NBC News that the lapse "turned out not to be a serious one," and expressed his continued support for national security adviser Mike Waltz.

Waltz, according to an article posted online Monday by The Atlantic, appeared to have mistakenly added the magazine's editor-in-chief, Jeffrey Goldberg, to a chat that included 18 senior administration officials discussing planning for the strike.

"Michael Waltz has learned a lesson, and he's a good man," Trump said. He also appeared to point blame on an unnamed Waltz aide for Goldberg being added to the chain. "It was one of Michael's people on the phone. A staffer had his number on there."

But the use of messaging app Signal to discuss a sensitive operation has opened the administration to blistering criticism from Democratic lawmakers who expressed outrage at the White House's and senior administration officials' insistence that no classified information was shared. Senior administration officials have struggled to explain why the publicly available app was used to discuss such a delicate matter.

Waltz makes his first public comments

Waltz said Tuesday he was not sure how Goldberg ended up on the chat.

"This one in particular, I've never met, don't know, never communicated with," Waltz said.

Later Tuesday, Waltz said in an appearance on Fox News Channel's "The Ingraham Angle" that he built the message chain and that White House technical experts were trying to figure out how Goldberg's contact "may have been sucked in."

"We made a mistake. We're moving forward," said Waltz, who added that he took "full responsibility" for the episode.

Trump, for his part, continued to attack The Atlantic and Goldberg and sent mixed messages on whether the administration would change how it goes about sharing sensitive information going forward.

"We won't be using it very much" in the future, Trump said of Signal. "That's one of the prices you pay when you're not sitting in the Situation Room with no phones on, which is always the best, frankly."

Trump added, "If it was up to me everybody would be sitting in a room together. The room would have solid lead walls and a lead ceiling and lead floor."

One official reported to be on the Signal chain, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, acknowledged during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Tuesday that she was traveling overseas during the exchange. She wouldn't say whether she was using her personal or government-issued phone because the matter is under review by the White House National Security Council.

One Democrat calls the mistake 'an embarrassment'

Both Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe, who also was a participant in the Signal exchange and also testified at Tuesday's intelligence hearing, faced blistering criticism from lawmakers.

"Director Ratcliffe, this was a huge mistake, correct?" Sen. Jon Ossoff, a Georgia Democrat, asked.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 41 of 70

After a brief pause, Ratcliffe shook his head. "No," he said.

Ratcliffe attempted to interject as Ossoff asked a follow-up question, leading the two men to speak over each other.

"This is an embarrassment," Ossoff said, silencing Ratcliffe. "This is utterly unprofessional. There's been no apology. There has been no recognition of the gravity of this error."

In the run-up to his 2016 election victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton, Trump urged criminal prosecution of the former secretary of state for communicating about classified information with her aides on a private email server she set up. The matter was investigated, but the FBI ultimately recommended against charges. None were brought.

Clinton was among Democrats this week to criticize Trump administration officials' use of Signal.

"You have got to be kidding me," Clinton said in an X post that spotlighted The Atlantic article and included an eyes emoji.

Trump also faced charges for mishandling classified information at his Mar-a-Lago resort following his first White House term. Those charges were later dismissed.

Administration says Democrats shouldn't be outraged

But on Tuesday, top administration officials were insistent the Democratic outrage was misplaced.

Ratcliffe and Gabbard told lawmakers that no classified information was included in the texts about U.S. attack plans in the message chain.

But The Atlantic reported that the messages included precise information about weapons packages, targets and timing, but did not publish those details.

Pressed on whether such information should be classified, Gabbard hedged. "I defer to the secretary of defense, the National Security Council, on that question," she said.

Ratcliffe in one exchange with lawmakers said Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth held the authority on determining whether the information in the message chain was classified.

Hegseth has dodged questions about whether the information he put in a Signal chat was classified. On Tuesday while in Hawaii, he repeated almost word for word his short statement from the day before that "nobody's texting war plans, and that's all I have to say about that."

Democrats pushed back, saying the leaked military plans show a sloppy disregard for security, but Ratcliffe insisted no rules were violated.

"My communications to be clear in the Signal message group were entirely permissible and lawful and did not include classified information," Ratcliffe told lawmakers in the hearing that was supposed to be focused on global security threats.

Facing heated questions from Democratic Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, Gabbard said there's a difference between "inadvertent" releases of information and intentional leaks. "There was no classified material that was shared," Gabbard said.

Warner, though, said the lapse in security could have cost lives.

"If this information had gotten out, American lives could have been lost. If the Houthis had this information they could reposition their defensive systems," Warner said.

Waltz in his appearance on Fox said that while all the information in the exchange was unclassified he'd prefer it remain out of the public eye. "I certainly want our deliberations to stay confidential," he said.

Calls for an investigation

In response to questions from Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, Gabbard and Ratcliffe said they would participate in an audit looking into administration officials' use of Signal. Wyden said it must be investigated.

"I'm of the view that there ought to be resignations," Wyden said.

FBI Director Kash Patel, appearing with Ratcliffe and Gabbard at the hearing, said he was only recently briefed on the Signal chat matter and doesn't have an update on whether the FBI has opened an investigation into it. Warner asked for an update by the end of the day.

The White House in a statement Tuesday called the uproar a "coordinated effort to distract from the

successful actions taken by President Trump and his administration to make America's enemies pay and keep Americans safe."

Examining the security of Signal

Signal is an app that can be used for direct messaging and group chats as well as phone and video calls. It uses end-to-end encryption for its messaging and calling services that prevents any third party from viewing conversation content or listening in on calls.

In other words, messages and calls sent on Signal are scrambled; only the sender and recipient at each end will have the key to decipher them.

Signal's encryption protocol is open source, meaning that it's freely available for anyone to inspect, use or modify. The encryption protocol is also used by another popular chat service, social media company Meta's WhatsApp platform.

Government officials have used Signal for organizational correspondence, such as scheduling sensitive meetings.

Sen. Angus King, a Maine Independent, said he was flummoxed by Ratcliffe and Gabbard's assertion that no classified information was included in the chat.

"It's hard for me to believe that targets and timing and weapons would not have been classified," he said.

Oscar-winning Palestinian director says Israeli soldiers beat him after attack by settlers

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

HEBRON, West Bank (AP) — Only a few weeks ago, Hamdan Ballal stood on a stage in Los Angeles accepting an Oscar for the film "No Other Land," a documentary depicting his West Bank village's struggle against Israel's occupation.

On Tuesday, Ballal — his face bruised and clothes still spotted with blood — recounted to The Associated Press how he was heavily beaten by an Israeli settler and soldiers the night before. The settler, he said, kicked his head "like a football" during a settler attack on his village.

The soldiers then detained him and two other Palestinians. Ballal said he was kept blindfolded for more than 20 hours, sitting on the floor under a blasting air conditioner. The soldiers kicked, punched or hit him with a stick whenever they came on their guard shifts, he said. Ballal doesn't speak Hebrew, but he said he heard them saying his name and the word "Oscar."

"I realized they were attacking me specifically," he said in an interview at a West Bank hospital after his release Tuesday. "When they say 'Oscar', you understand. When they say your name, you understand."

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to the claims that Ballal was beaten by soldiers. The settler whom Ballal identified as his attacker, Shem Tov Luski — who has threatened Ballal in the past — denied he or the soldiers beat him and told the AP that he and other Palestinians in the village had thrown stones at his car. He said he didn't know Ballal was an Oscar winner.

The Israeli military said Monday it had detained three Palestinians suspected of hurling rocks as well as one Israeli civilian, who was soon released. Ballal denied throwing stones.

'I'm dying!'

The attack took place Monday night in the southern West Bank village of Susiya. It's part of the Masafer Yatta region featured in "No Other Land," which depicts the Palestinian residents' attempts to fend off settler attacks and the military's plans to demolish their homes.

At around sunset, as residents were ending their daylong Ramadan fast, roughly two dozen Jewish settlers along with police entered the village, throwing stones at houses and breaking property, witnesses say. Around 30 soldiers arrived soon after. Jewish Israelis in an activist group supporting the villagers showed video of themselves also being attacked, with settlers hitting their car with sticks and stones.

Ballal said he filmed some of the damage caused by the settlers. Then he went to his own home and locked it, with his wife and three young children inside.

"I told myself if they will attack me, if they kill me, I will protect my family," he said.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 43 of 70

Ballal said Luski approached with two soldiers. He said Luski hit him on the head, knocked him to the ground and kept kicking and punching him in the head. At the same time, one soldier hit him on the legs with his gun butt, while the other pointed his weapon at him, he said.

Lamia Ballal, the director's wife, said she was huddling inside with their children and heard him screaming, "I'm dying!"

Luski told the AP that he and other settlers had come to the village to help a fellow settler who said he was being attacked by Palestinian stone-throwers. He said dozens of masked Palestinians attacked his car with stones, including Ballal. "He broke my window, threw a stone at my chest," he said.

He said when soldiers arrived, he led them to Ballal's house to identify him as one of the attackers but denied that he hit him or that settlers attacked any property in the village. Luski said he had footage of the night's events but when asked to show it to the AP, he responded with a string of expletives.

On Tuesday, a small bloodstain could be seen outside Ballal's home, and the family car's windows were shattered. Neighbors pointed to a nearby water tank with a hole in the side that they said had been punched by the settlers.

Detention

Lea Tsemel, the attorney representing Ballal and the two other Palestinians detained with him, said they were taken to an army base, where they only received minimal care for their injuries from the attack. She said they had no access to them for several hours after their arrest.

Ballal said he had no idea where he was being held, could see nothing and was "freezing" from the hours spent blindfolded under the air conditioner.

The three were transferred to an Israeli police station at the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba and were released Tuesday afternoon.

"All my body is pain," he told the AP immediately after his release as he walked, limping, toward a hospital in the nearby Palestinian city of Hebron.

Doctors at the hospital said Ballal had bruises and scratches all over his body, abrasions under his eye and a cut on his chin but no internal injuries. The two other detained Palestinians also had minor injuries.

Confrontations with settlers

In a widely circulated video from August, Luski and several other masked settlers are seen arguing with Ballal. Luski shouts profanity at him and tries to provoke him into a fight.

"This is my land, I was given it by God," Luski says. "Next time it won't be nice." He taunts Ballal with the prospect of being sent to Sde Teiman, a notorious military prison holding Palestinians detained from Gaza, where five soldiers have been charged with raping a detainee with a knife.

"Rape for a higher cause," he says in Hebrew, then blows Ballal a kiss.

The film "No Other Land," a joint Israeli-Palestinian production, chronicles the situation in Masafer Yatta, which the Israeli military designated as a live-fire training zone in the 1980s and ordered the expulsion of the residents, mostly Arab Bedouin. Around 1,000 residents have largely remained in place, but soldiers regularly come in to demolish homes, tents, water tanks and olive orchards.

Settlers have also set up outposts around the area and at times destroy Palestinian property. Palestinians and rights groups say Israeli forces usually turn a blind eye or intervene on behalf of the settlers.

The film has drawn ire in Israel and abroad, as when Miami Beach proposed ending the lease of a movie theater that screened it.

Basel Adra, another of the film's co-directors and a prominent Palestinian activist in the area, said there's been a massive upswing in attacks by settlers and Israeli forces since the Oscar win.

"We're living in dark days here, in Gaza, and all of the West Bank," he said. "Nobody's stopping this."

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 Mideast war, along with the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem. The Palestinians want all three for their future state.

Israel has built well over 100 settlements, home to over 500,000 settlers who have Israeli citizenship. Most of the international community considers the settlements illegal.

The 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank live under seemingly open-ended Israeli military rule, with the Western-backed Palestinian Authority administering population centers.

The war in Gaza has sparked a surge of violence in the West Bank, with the Israeli military carrying out widescale military operations that have killed hundreds of Palestinians and displaced tens of thousands. There has been a rise in settler violence as well as Palestinian attacks on Israelis.

Gunman who killed 23 in racist attack at Texas Walmart is offered plea deal to avoid death penalty

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

The gunman who killed 23 people in a racist attack targeting Hispanic shoppers at a Walmart near the U.S.-Mexico border in 2019 would avoid the death penalty under a plea offer announced Tuesday, abruptly ending years of efforts by prosecutors to see that he face execution by lethal injection.

El Paso County District Attorney James Montoya said during a news conference that his decision in the prosecution of Patrick Crusius, who drove across the state for one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history and posted a racist screed just before opening fire, was driven by a majority of victims' relatives who wanted the case behind them.

"This is about allowing the families of the 23 victims who lost their lives on that horrific day — and the 22 wounded — to finally have resolution in our court system," Montoya said in a statement.

"Now, no one in this community will ever have to hear the perpetrator's name ever again," he added. "No more hearings. No more appeals. He will die in prison."

But Montoya also acknowledged at the news conference that not all families agreed with the reversal by his office, which under previous leadership had committed to taking the case to trial and seeking the death penalty.

Adria Gonzalez, a survivor who helped panicked shoppers toward exits, said she feels that not pursuing the death penalty is "a slap in the face for all the victims."

Under the offer, Montoya said, Crusius would plead guilty to capital murder and receive life in prison with no possibility of parole. The plea hearing and sentencing is set for April 21, Montoya said, and families will be able to give victim impact statements.

Mark Stevens, an attorney for Crusius, did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment.

Crusius, 26, was already sentenced to 90 consecutive life sentences at the federal level after pleading guilty in 2023 to hate crime charges. Under the Biden administration, federal prosecutors also took the death penalty off the table.

Montoya said he supports the death penalty and believes Crusius deserves it. But he said he met with the families of the victims and while some were willing to wait as long as it took for a death sentence, there was an overriding desire to conclude the process.

"I'm just glad it's over," said Elise Hoffmann-Taus, whose father, Alexander Hoffmann was among those killed. "This is the outcome I wanted."

Montoya, a Democrat who took office in January after defeating a Republican incumbent appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott, is the fourth district attorney to oversee the case.

His predecessor, Bill Hicks, said following the announcement that while he had been ready to take the case to trial and pursue the death penalty, he could not fault Montoya's reasoning behind the plea offer.

"It is not the reasoning I would have followed," Hicks said. "I know that it was very hard for him, and I respect that it was a very difficult decision."

Crusius, who is white, was 21 years old and had dropped out of community college when police say he drove more than 700 miles (1,100 kilometers) from his home near Dallas to El Paso.

Moments after posting online his racist rant, which warned of a Hispanic "invasion" of the state, he opened fire with an AK-style rifle inside and outside the store.

Crusius was arrested shortly after the shooting and confessed to officers who stopped him at an intersection, police have said.

Prior to the attack, Crusius appears to have been consumed by the immigration debate, posting online

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 45 of 70

in support of building the border wall and other messages praising the hard-line border policies of President Donald Trump, who was in his first term at the time. He went further in the screed right before the shootings, saying Hispanics were going to take over the government and economy.

In the federal case, prosecutors did not formally explain their decision not to seek the death penalty, but they did acknowledge that Crusius suffered from schizoaffective disorder, which can be marked by hallucinations, delusions and mood swings.

Abbott, a Republican, said Tuesday after the announcement that he thought Crusius deserved to die: "Any shooting like that is what capital punishment is for."

The people who were killed ranged in age from a 15-year-old high school athlete to several grandparents. They included immigrants, a retired city bus driver, teachers, tradesmen including a former iron worker, and several Mexican nationals who had crossed the U.S. border on routine shopping trips.

In 2023, Crusius agreed to pay more than \$5 million to his victims. Court records showed that his attorneys and the Justice Department reached an agreement over the restitution amount, which was then approved by a U.S. district judge. There was no indication that he had significant assets.

Dean Reckard, whose mother, Margie Reckard, was also killed in the shooting, said Crusius deserves death but it's time to put the matter to rest.

"Our loved ones will always be loved and remembered as decent people who were just living their lives and doing their best," he said. "We need to do the same. It's what they would have wanted."

America's allies alarmed by a leaked group chat about attack plans

By JILL LAWLESS, EMMA BURROWS and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — As wake-up calls go, the alarms don't get much louder.

Allies of the United States see the group chat between top U.S. officials about a planned attack in Yemen that accidentally included a journalist as a jaw-dropping security breach which casts doubt on intelligence-sharing with Washington and the security of joint military operations.

"Scary" and "reckless" was the verdict of one European diplomat about the discussion on the Signal messaging app about strikes on Houthi rebels. Neil Melvin, a security expert at defense think tank the Royal United Services Institute, called it "pretty shocking."

"It's some of the most high-ranking U.S. officials seeming to display a complete disregard for the normal security protocols," he said.

Beyond the security concerns raised by the leaked chat, U.S. officials addressed the country's trans-Atlantic allies with disdain as Vice President JD Vance complained about "bailing out" Europe and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth slammed "pathetic" European "freeloading."

The criticism is another blow to a long-standing relationship already strained by President Donald Trump's blunt "America First" approach and disregard for friendly nations.

Melvin said that for America's allies, "the alarm clock's been ringing for a long time."

In public, however, European officials insisted all was well in the trans-Atlantic relationship.

"We have a very close relationship with the U.S. on matters of security, defense and intelligence," said British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's spokesman, Dave Pares. "They are our closest ally when it comes to these matters, have been for many years and will be for many years to come."

France's Foreign Ministry said "the United States is our ally, and France intends to continue its cooperation with Washington, as well as with all its allies and European partners, in order to address current challenges — particularly in the area of European security."

A growing divide

Since taking office, the Trump administration has halted government funding for programs that support democratic principles around the world and presented a less welcoming face to visitors.

U.S. embassies in at least 17 countries have posted warnings for would-be travelers that engaging in behavior deemed harmful by the government could get them deported. Several European countries have issued warnings about visiting the United States after international tourists were caught up in Trump's

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 46 of 70

border crackdown.

Trump has appalled allies with his repeatedly stated aim of taking over Greenland — an autonomous Danish territory that Vance and second lady Usha Vance are due to visit this week — and his desire to make Canada the 51st state.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney said his country has to “take greater ownership” of its own defense in the face of threats: “We have to look out for ourselves.”

Nathalie Loiseau, a member of the European parliament, told the BBC that she was “flabbergasted” by the breach.

“If I was (Russian President) Vladimir Putin, I would feel jobless. Russia has nothing more to do. ... You don’t even need to spy on the U.S. administration. They leak by themselves,” she said.

U.S. reliability questioned

The European diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive matters, suggested the security breach could make allies question the reliability of the U.S. as a partner.

The diplomat expressed hope that the Signal lapse was due to a lack of experience in government rather than a deliberate disregard for security.

Asked if he had concerns about sharing intelligence with the U.S. after the Signal incident, Carney said “it’s a serious, serious issue and all lessons must be taken.” He said it would be important to see “how people react to those mistakes and how they tighten them up.”

Britain could be particularly exposed by U.S. security breaches. Its intelligence network is entwined with the U.S. in the Five Eyes alliance, and the countries’ militaries work more closely than those of almost any other nations.

Britain’s Royal Air Force provided air-to-air refueling for U.S. planes during the strike on the Houthis, but U.K. Armed Forces Minister Luke Pollard insisted British personnel had not been put at risk by the breach.

“We’ve got high confidence that the measures that we have got with our allies, including the United States, remain intact,” he told lawmakers.

Ed Davey, the leader of Britain’s opposition Liberal Democrats, said the lapse showed the Trump administration can’t be trusted to protect its own intelligence and “it could only be a matter of time until our own intelligence shared with them is also leaked.”

“This could put British lives at risk,” he said.

Alex Clarkson, a lecturer in European and international studies at King’s College London, said “the professionals and old hands” who “contained the damage” during Trump’s first term are largely gone.

“So what we’re having now is ... a manifestation of tendencies that were held in check that we already saw in the first round,” he said.

American frustration

The U.S. has underpinned European security since World War II, and Trump is not the first president to bristle at the burden.

“From the Obama administration (onward), there’s been quite some frustrations in the U.S. security apparatus about the failure of the Europeans ... to step up,” Melvin said.

Trump has gone much further than his predecessors in upending the decades-old security arrangements. He has long contended the U.S. needs to completely rethink its relationship with the rest of the world, saying other countries have been “taking advantage” of the nation’s military might by not paying enough for their own defense.

Trump has praised autocrats including Putin and sent chills through NATO during last year’s election campaign with his comment that Russia should “do whatever the hell it wants” to members that don’t meet military spending targets.

“There’s a real sense of divorce, that America is not just disinterested in the trans-Atlantic alliance but views Europe fundamentally as an adversary,” said Max Bergmann, a former State Department official who now works at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“It’s very clear at this point, abundantly clear, that it will be next to impossible to count on the United

States for the cause of defending democracy in the world," said Kevin Casas-Zamora, secretary-general of the pro-democracy group International IDEA.

NATO leaders point out that Trump's criticism and the war in Ukraine have led to a majority of member states meeting the target of spending at least 2% of their gross domestic product on defense.

Trump's reelection and rapprochement with Putin has hastened European military plans, with nations scrambling to ramp up weapons production and create their own security structures – including a U.K.- and France-led "coalition of the willing" to help guarantee a future ceasefire in Ukraine.

Clarkson said Europe has more strength than many give it credit for, and severing the trans-Atlantic bond would hurt the U.S., too.

"One shouldn't underestimate European military industrial capacity," he said. "There are all kinds of things that can go wrong ... but there is an element here also that the Americans are awakening a sleeping giant."

Trump administration says it will pull back billions in COVID funding from local health departments

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Federal health officials said Tuesday they are pulling back \$11.4 billion in COVID-19-related funds for state and local public health departments and other health organizations throughout the nation.

"The COVID-19 pandemic is over, and HHS will no longer waste billions of taxpayer dollars responding to a non-existent pandemic that Americans moved on from years ago," the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said in a statement.

The statement said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention expects to recover the money beginning 30 days after termination notices, which began being sent out on Monday.

Officials said the money was largely used for COVID-19 testing, vaccination and global projects as well as community health workers responding to COVID and a program established in 2021 to address COVID health disparities among high-risk and underserved patients, including those in minority populations. The move was first reported by NBC News.

Lori Freeman, CEO of the National Association of County & City Health Officials, said much of the funding was set to end soon anyway. "It's ending in the next six months," she said. "There's no reason — why rescind it now? It's just cruel and unusual behavior."

In a related move, more than two dozen COVID-related research grants funded by the National Institutes of Health have been canceled. Earlier this month, the Trump administration shut down ordering from covidtest.gov, the site where Americans could have COVID-19 tests delivered to their mailboxes for no charge.

Although the COVID federal public health emergency has ended, the virus is still killing Americans: 458 people per week on average have died from COVID over the past four weeks, according to CDC data.

HHS wouldn't provide many details about how the federal government expects to recover the money from what it called "impacted recipients." But HHS spokesman Andrew Nixon said in an email: "The \$11.4 billion is undisbursed funds remaining."

Freeman said her understanding is that state health departments already had the COVID money.

"The funding was authorized by Congress, was appropriated by Congress, and it was out the door, basically, into the hands of the grantees" — states, she said, which decide how to distribute it locally.

Some of the COVID money is used to address other public health issues, Freeman added. For example, wastewater surveillance that began during COVID became important for detecting other diseases, too.

"It was being used in significant ways to track flu and patterns of new disease and emerging diseases — and even more recently with the measles outbreak," Freeman said.

Under both the first Trump administration and the Biden administration, billions of dollars was allocated for COVID response through legislation, including a COVID relief bill and the American Rescue Plan Act.

At this point, it's unclear exactly how health departments will be affected by the pullback of funds. But some were starting to look at what it might mean for them. In Washington state, for example, health officials were notified that more than \$125 million in COVID-related funding has been immediately termi-

nated. They are “assessing the impact” of the actions, they said.

In Los Angeles County, health officials said they could lose more than \$80 million in core funding for vaccinations and other services. “Much of this funding supports disease surveillance, public health lab services, outbreak investigations, infection control activities at healthcare facilities and data transparency,” a department official wrote in an email.

Trump signs order seeking to overhaul US elections, including requiring proof of citizenship

By ALI SWENSON and CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed a sweeping executive action to overhaul elections in the U.S., including requiring documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote in federal elections and demanding that all ballots be received by Election Day.

The order says the U.S. has failed “to enforce basic and necessary election protections” and calls on states to work with federal agencies to share voter lists and prosecute election crimes. It threatens to pull federal funding from states where election officials don’t comply.

The move, which is likely to face swift challenges because states have broad authority to set their own election rules, is consistent with Trump’s long history of railing against election processes. He often claims elections are being rigged, even before the results are known, and has waged battles against certain voting methods since he lost the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden and falsely blamed it on widespread fraud.

Trump has focused particularly on mail voting, arguing without evidence that it’s insecure and invites fraud even as he has shifted his position on the issue given its popularity with voters, including Republicans. While fraud occurs, it’s rare, limited in scope and gets prosecuted.

The order’s documentary proof of citizenship requirement signals that the president is not waiting for congressional Republicans to pass their long-anticipated Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, or SAVE Act, which has aimed to do the same thing.

Republicans have defended that measure as necessary to restore public confidence in elections. Voting in federal elections by noncitizens is already illegal and can result in felony charges and deportation.

Voting rights groups have expressed concerns that the requirement could disenfranchise people. An estimated 9% of U.S. citizens of voting age, or 21.3 million people, do not have proof of citizenship readily available, according to a 2023 report by the Brennan Center for Justice and other groups.

There are also concerns that married women who have changed their names will encounter trouble when trying to register because their birth certificates list their maiden names. Such hiccups happened in recent town elections in New Hampshire, which has a new state law requiring proof of citizenship to register to vote.

Trump’s order directs federal agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, the Social Security Administration and the State Department to share with election officials federal data that could help them identify noncitizens on their rolls.

It also says the attorney general should “prioritize enforcement of federal election integrity laws” in states that don’t share information about suspected election crimes with the federal government.

The order aims to require votes to be “cast and received” by Election Day and says federal funding should be conditional on state compliance. Currently, 18 states and Puerto Rico accept mailed ballots received after Election Day as long they are postmarked on or before that date, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Trump’s order is likely to face legal challenges, given that the Constitution gives authority over elections to the states. While Congress has the power to regulate voting — and has done so to pass such laws as the Voting Rights Act — the Constitution makes clear that states have primary authority to set the “times, places and manner” for elections.

Colorado’s Democratic secretary of state, Jena Griswold, called the order an “unlawful” weaponization of the federal government and said Trump is “trying to make it harder for voters to fight back at the bal-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 49 of 70

lot box.”

Democratic Rep. Joe Morelle of New York, the ranking member of the House committee that oversees elections, said the executive order “is not just misguided — it is immoral and illegal.”

At least one Democratic attorney on Tuesday threatened legal action. Marc Elias, who has been the subject of Trump’s ire, said in a social media post: “This will not stand. We will sue.”

The executive branch does have some authority over elections, said Justin Levitt, a constitutional law expert and former White House senior policy adviser during the Biden administration. He said some federal agencies provide election support, including the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, which distributes federal grant money to states and runs a voluntary certification program for voting systems. The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency helps election officials protect their systems.

Former President Biden issued an executive order in 2021 directing federal agencies to take steps to boost voter registration, which drew complaints from Republicans who called it federal overreach. Trump has rescinded that order.

Trump’s order calls on the Election Assistance Commission to amend voting system guidelines to protect election integrity, including guidance that voting systems should not use a ballot that uses a barcode or QR code in the vote counting process. It said the commission should condition the funding it distributes to states on those new guidelines.

Virtually all in-person voters in Georgia, as well as voters in several other states, use voting machines with a large touchscreen to record their votes. The machines then print a paper ballot with a human-readable summary of the voter’s selections and a QR code, a type of barcode, that is read by a scanner to count the votes.

It is not entirely clear how the executive order would affect Georgia and the other jurisdictions that use these machines. Representatives for Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger did not immediately respond Tuesday evening to messages seeking comment. Raffensperger issued a statement thanking Trump for the executive order, calling it a “great first step for election integrity reform nationwide.”

Rep. Bryan Steil of Wisconsin, the chairman of the House committee that oversees elections, said the order is a “welcome action to secure our elections and prevent foreign influence.”

Mike Lindell, a Trump ally who spreads election conspiracies and who wants to ban voting systems in favor of hand-counting ballots, fundraised off the news on Tuesday, saying in an email it will fix our “sick elections.”

Trump’s executive order comes as the Republican National Committee launched a massive effort to probe voter registration list maintenance nationwide. The committee sent public records requests this week asking for documents related to voter roll list maintenance in 48 states and Washington, D.C., asserting that the public should know how states are removing ineligible people from voter rolls, including dead people and non-citizens.

Trump referenced election fraud as he signed the order Tuesday, saying, “this will end it, hopefully.” He added that more election actions would be taken in coming weeks.

Russell Wilson is heading to the New York Giants, AP source says

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Russell Wilson has agreed on a one-year contract with the New York Giants, a person with knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press.

The person, who spoke on condition of anonymity Tuesday because the signing hasn’t been finalized, said Wilson’s deal is worth up to \$21 million with \$10.5 million guaranteed.

The Giants signed veteran Jameis Winston to a two-year contract last week and have the third pick in next month’s NFL draft. They went 3-14 in 2024 and released 2019 first-round pick Daniel Jones during the season. Before signing Winston and Wilson, Tommy DeVito was the only quarterback on the team’s roster.

The Giants have missed the playoffs in 11 of the last 13 seasons since Eli Manning won his second Super Bowl following the 2011 season. General manager Joe Schoen and coach Brian Daboll are under pressure

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 50 of 70

to win right away while potentially developing a rookie quarterback.

Shedeur Sanders is a possibility for the Giants with the No. 3 overall pick. With Wilson and Winston ahead of him, Sanders could be eased into a starting role for 2026 if New York selects him.

The 36-year-old Wilson, a 10-time Pro Bowl selection, joins his fourth team in five years. He helped lead the Pittsburgh Steelers to the playoffs last year but the team lost five in a row to end the season after starting 6-1 with Wilson.

Wilson threw for 2,482 yards with 16 touchdown passes, five interceptions and a 96.5 passer rating for the Steelers.

He had 3,070 yards passing, 26 TDs, eight picks and a 98 passer rating for the Broncos in 2023 but was dumped after two disappointing seasons in Denver.

Wilson averaged 3,706 yards, 29 TDs and had a 101.8 passer rating in 10 seasons with Seattle, leading the Seahawks to one Super Bowl title and within one yard of another.

Wilson is 121-77-1 in 199 career starts in the regular season and 9-8 in the playoffs. He has 46,135 yards passing, 350 TDs, 111 interceptions and a 99.8 career passer rating. Wilson also has rushed for 5,462 yards and 31 TDs.

The Signal attack plan messages: What we do (and don't) know

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The revelation that President Donald Trump's most senior national security officials posted the specifics of a military attack to a chat group that included a journalist hours before the attack took place in Yemen has raised many questions.

Among them is whether federal laws were violated, whether classified information was exposed on the commercial messaging app, and whether anyone will face consequences for the leaks.

Here's what we know so far, and what we don't know.

KNOWN: Signal is a publicly available app that provides encrypted communications, but it can be hacked. It is not approved for carrying classified information. On March 14, one day before the strikes, the Defense Department cautioned personnel about the vulnerability of Signal, specifically that Russia was attempting to hack the app, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to speak to the press and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

One known vulnerability is that a malicious actor, if they have access to a person's phone, can link their own device to the user's Signal — and essentially monitor messages remotely in real time.

NOT KNOWN: How frequently the administration and the Defense Department use Signal for sensitive government communications, and whether those on the chat were using unauthorized personal devices to transmit or receive those messages. The department put out an instruction in 2023 restricting what information could be posted on unauthorized and unclassified systems.

At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Tuesday, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard would not say whether she was accessing the information on her personal phone or government-issued phone, citing an ongoing investigation by the National Security Council.

KNOWN: The government has a requirement under the Presidential Records Act to archive all of those planning discussions.

NOT KNOWN: Whether anyone in the group archived the messages as required by law to a government server.

KNOWN: The chat group included 18 members, including Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of The Atlantic. The group, called "Houthi PC Small Group," likely for Houthi "principals committee" — was comprised of Trump's senior-most advisers on national security, including Gabbard, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and CIA Director John Ratcliffe. The National Security Council said the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 51 of 70

text chain “appears to be authentic.”

NOT KNOWN: How Goldberg got added. Each agency principal named a staff member to be added to the chat, and Waltz named his staffer Alex Wong, as taking the lead in assembling the team that would monitor the attacks. It was not clear if Waltz himself, or a staffer managing Waltz’s Signal account, sent Goldberg the invitation.

KNOWN: Just hours before the attack on the Houthis in Yemen began, Hegseth shared details on the timing, targets, weapons and sequence of strikes that would take place.

NOT KNOWN: The classification level of this information. In the Senate hearing, both Gabbard and Ratcliffe referred questions to Hegseth on whether classified information was posted to the unclassified Signal chat. Hegseth so far has not answered questions on whether the information he shared on Signal during that messaging was classified.

KNOWN: Hegseth has adamantly denied that “war plans” were texted on Signal, something that current and former U.S. officials called “semantics.” War plans carry a specific meaning. They often refer to the numbered and highly classified planning documents — sometimes thousands of pages long — that would inform U.S. decisions in case of a major conflict, such as if the United States is called to defend Taiwan.

But the information Hegseth did post — specific attack details selecting human and weapons storage targets — was a subset of those plans and was likely informed by the same classified intelligence. Posting those details to an unclassified app risked tipping off adversaries of the pending attack and could have put U.S. service members at risk, multiple U.S. officials said.

Sharing that information on a commercial app like Signal in advance of a strike “would be a violation of everything that we’re about,” said former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, who served under President Barack Obama.

NOT KNOWN: If anyone outside the messaging group got access to the Signal texts.

Appeals court allows Trump administration to suspend approval of new refugees amid lawsuit

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration can stop approving new refugees for entry into the U.S. but has to allow in people who were conditionally accepted before the president suspended the nation’s refugee admissions system, an appeals court ruled Tuesday.

The order narrowed a ruling from a federal judge in Seattle who found the program should be restarted.

The three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the president has the power to restrict people from entering the country, pointing to a 2018 Supreme Court ruling upholding President Donald Trump’s ban on travel from several mostly Muslim countries during his first term.

Refugees who were conditionally approved by the government before Trump’s order halting the refugee program should still be allowed to resettle, the judges found.

The panel ruled on an emergency appeal of a ruling from U.S. District Judge Jamal Whitehead who found that the president’s authority to suspend refugee admissions is not limitless and that Trump cannot nullify the law passed by Congress establishing the program.

Whitehead pointed to reports of refugees stranded in dangerous places, families separated from relatives in the U.S. and people sold all their possessions for travel to the U.S. that was later canceled.

Melissa Keaney, an attorney with the International Refugee Assistance Project, applauded the portions of the order that the appeals court left intact.

“We welcome this continued relief for tens of thousands of refugees who will now have the opportunity to restart their lives in the United States,” she said.

Whitehead, who was nominated by Democratic President Joe Biden, also issued a second order Tuesday blocking the cancellation of refugee resettlement contracts.

Trump's order said the refugee program — a form of legal migration to the U.S. for people displaced by war, natural disaster or persecution — would be suspended because cities and communities had been taxed by "record levels of migration" and didn't have the ability to "absorb large numbers of migrants, and in particular, refugees." There are 600,000 people being processed to come to the U.S. as refugees around the world, according to the administration.

The Justice Department argued that the order was well within Trump's authority.

Despite long-standing support from both major political parties for accepting thoroughly vetted refugees, the program has become politicized in recent years. Trump also temporarily halted it during his first term, and then dramatically decreased the number of refugees who could enter the U.S. each year.

The plaintiffs said the president had not shown how the entry of these refugees would be detrimental to the U.S.

They include the International Refugee Assistance Project on behalf of Church World Service, the Jewish refugee resettlement agency HIAS, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, and individual refugees and family members. They said their ability to provide critical services to refugees, including those already in the U.S., has been severely inhibited by Trump's order.

Self-professed 'DOGE person' Frank Bisignano gets his confirmation hearing to lead Social Security

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Social Security Administration faced questions Tuesday at his confirmation hearing about efforts by the Department of Government Efficiency to close field offices and cut back on phone service at the beleaguered agency.

Frank Bisignano, a self-professed "DOGE person," was called to account for recent upheaval at the Social Security Administration, which provides benefits to roughly 72.5 million people, including retirees and children. The agency has taken center stage in the debate over the usefulness of DOGE cuts to taxpayer services and their effect on Social Security, the social welfare program long regarded as the third rail of national politics — touch it and you get shocked.

During the 2 1/2-hour hearing before the Senate Finance Committee, Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts illustrated a scenario of a person with limited internet access and mobility issues being turned away from an understaffed Social Security office hours away from home. She ended with a question for Bisignano: "Isn't that a benefit cut?"

Bisignano responded, "I have no intent to have anything like that happen under my watch."

Bisignano, a Wall Street veteran and one-time defender of corporate policies to protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination, has served as chairman of Fiserv, a payments and financial services tech firm since 2020. He told CNBC in February that he is "fundamentally a DOGE person" but "the objective isn't to touch benefits."

The hearing follows a series of announcements of mass federal worker layoffs, cuts to programs, office closures and a planned cut to nationwide Social Security phone services.

Asked during the hearing whether Social Security should be privatized, Bisignano responded: "I've never heard a word of it, and I've never thought about it."

Republicans were largely in favor of Bisignano's nomination. "If confirmed, you will be responsible for leading an agency with a critical mission, and numerous operational and customer service challenges," said Senate Finance Chairman Mike Crapo, R-Idaho. "Based on your background, I am confident you are up to the task."

The chaos at the Social Security Administration began shortly after acting commissioner Michelle King stepped down in February, a move that came after DOGE, run by Trump adviser Elon Musk, sought access to Social Security recipient information.

Later that month, the agency announced plans to cut 7,000 people from the agency payroll through layoffs, employee reassignments and an offer of voluntary separation agreements, as part of an intensi-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 53 of 70

fied effort to shrink the size of the federal workforce through DOGE.

Most recently, the agency's acting commissioner, DOGE supporter Leland Dudek, announced a plan to require in-person identity checks for millions of new and existing recipients while simultaneously closing government offices. That sparked a furor among lawmakers, advocacy groups and program recipients who are worried that the government is placing unnecessary barriers in front of an already vulnerable population.

Nancy Altman, president of Social Security Works, said Tuesday's hearing "showed that Frank Bisignano is not the cure to the DOGE-manufactured chaos at the Social Security Administration. In fact, he is part of it and, if confirmed, would make it even worse."

The upheaval has made its way to the courts. A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked DOGE from Social Security systems that hold personal data on millions of Americans, calling the group's work there a "fishing expedition." The order also requires the team to delete any personally identifiable data in its possession.

The Social Security program faces a looming bankruptcy date if it is not addressed by Congress. The May 2024 trustees' report states that Social Security's trust funds will be unable to pay full benefits beginning in 2035. Then, Social Security would only be able to pay 83% of benefits, absent changes.

Democratic Sen. Tina Smith of Minnesota declined at the hearing to ask Bisignano any questions.

"This is a travesty," she said. "This is a wholesale effort to dismantle Social Security from the inside out."

Republicans eye actions against the courts and judges as Trump rails against rulings

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Angry over the crush of court rulings against the Trump administration, Republicans in Congress are trying to slap back at the federal judiciary with proposals to limit the reach of its rulings, cut funding and even impeach judges, tightening the GOP's grip on government.

House GOP leaders say all options are under consideration as they rush to rein in judges who are halting President Donald Trump's actions at a rapid pace. In many cases, the courts are questioning whether the firings of federal workers, freezing of federal funds and shuttering of long-running federal offices are unlawful actions by the executive branch and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency.

In perhaps the most high-profile case, Judge James E. Boasberg ordered planeloads of deported immigrants to be turned around, raising the ire of Trump, who called for his impeachment, and billionaire Musk, who is funneling campaign cash to House Republicans backing impeachment efforts. The president calls the judges "lunatics."

House Speaker Mike Johnson said Tuesday that "desperate times call for desperate measures" without mentioning impeachment.

"We do have authority over the federal courts, as you know," the Republican speaker said. "We can eliminate an entire district court. We have power of funding over the courts, and all these other things."

Not yet 100 days into the new administration, the unusual attack on the federal judiciary is the start of what is expected to be a protracted battle between the co-equal branches of government, unmatched in modern memory. As the White House tests the judiciary, trying to bend it to Trump's demands, the Congress, controlled by the president's own Republican Party, appears ready to back him up.

It all comes as the Supreme Court last summer granted the executive broad immunity from prosecution, setting the stage for the challenges to come. But Chief Justice John Roberts warned more recently that "impeachment is not an appropriate response to disagreement concerning a judicial decision."

Democrats are warning against what they view as an assault on the judicial branch, which so far has been the only check against Trump and DOGE's far-reaching federal actions. Threats against the federal judges, already on the rise, remain of high concern.

"It is outrageous to even think of defunding the courts," said Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer, reacting to the House speaker's claims. "The courts are the bulwark against Trump, and the Republicans

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 54 of 70

can't stand it."

House GOP leaders met Tuesday with Rep. Jim Jordan, the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, which will hold a hearing on the issue next week. The House is also expected to vote on a bill from Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., that would limit the geographic reach of certain federal rulings, to prevent temporary restraining orders from being enacted nationwide.

Jordan said he also spoke Saturday with Trump during college wrestling championships in Philadelphia. "All options are on the table," Jordan said late Monday. "We want to get the facts. Gather the facts."

Since Trump took office, and with Musk, on a mission to dramatically reduce the size and scope of the federal government, the administration's tech-inspired move-fast-and-break-things ethos has run up against the constraints of federal law.

An onslaught of court cases has been filed by employee groups, democracy organizations and advocacy groups trying to keep federal programs — from the U.S. Agency for International Development to the Education Department — from being dismantled.

Judges have issued various types of restraints on Trump's actions. Trump's first administration alone accounted for 66 percent of all the injunctions issued on presidential actions between 2001 and 2023, according to data from a Harvard Law Review piece circulated by Republicans.

The legislation from Issa had no support from Democrats when it was approved by the Judiciary Committee last month. A similar bill was introduced Monday by GOP Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, of Maryland, the top Democrat on the Judiciary panel, said Trump is being hit with injunctions because he is "engaged in terrible, irresponsible and lawless violations of people's rights."

"We are winning in court," Raskin said in a video address. "We've got to make sure we defend the integrity of the judiciary."

When it comes to actually impeaching the judges, however, top Republicans have stopped short of backing what would be a severe action.

Impeachments are rare in Congress, particularly of judges, but several rank-and-file House Republicans have proposed legislation to launch impeachment proceedings against various federal judges who have ruled in ways unfavorable to the Trump administration.

Musk has rewarded House Republicans who signed onto impeachment legislation with political donations, according to a person familiar with information first reported by the New York Times. The person was granted anonymity to discuss the matter.

Republicans are particularly focused on Boasberg, the chief judge of the district court in Washington, D.C., who Jordan said is in a "somewhat unique in that, you know, his decision was crazy."

The judge is weighing whether the Trump administration defied his order after the planes of migrants landed in El Salvador, turned over to that country's notorious mega-prison system. The Trump administration had invoked the Alien Enemies Act, a war-time authority used during World War II against Japanese Americans, for the deportations the judge said lacked due process.

Any impeachment effort would also require backing from the Senate, where GOP leaders also panned the effort.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., echoed the advice of Roberts in allowing normal legal procedures to play out.

"At the end of the day, there is a process, and there's an appeals process, and you know, I suspect that's ultimately how this will get handled," Thune said.

Depardieu on trial, and so is France. A cultural reckoning in the #MeToo era

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Gérard Depardieu once seemed larger than France itself. With his hulking frame, crooked nose, and volcanic charisma, he reigned over cinema for half a century — a national icon as familiar as the baguette.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 55 of 70

But this week, the actor who starred in more than 230 films — and who inspired writer John Updike to lament, “I think that I shall never view a French film without Depardieu” — sat slumped on a special orthopedic stool in a Paris courtroom.

He faces two counts of sexual assault. If convicted, he could face up to five years in prison and a fine of 75,000 euros (\$81,000).

But more than Depardieu is on trial.

For many in France, this case marks the country’s ultimate litmus test — a question not just of guilt or innocence, but of readiness. Can a nation famed for its culture of seduction — and long criticized for shielding its male artists — finally hold one of them accountable?

The fall of a giant

Depardieu, 76, is accused of groping two women — a set dresser and an assistant — during the 2021 filming of “Les Volets Verts” (“The Green Shutters”). According to complaints and witness statements, he trapped one woman with his legs, grabbed her breasts and waist, and shouted: “I can’t even get it up because of this heat!” before crudely inviting her to touch his “big parasol.”

He denies all allegations. “Never, but never, have I abused a woman,” he wrote in *Le Figaro*. “I have only ever been guilty of being too loving, too generous, or having a temperament that is too strong.”

But this is the first time one of the more than 20 accusations against him has reached court.

Once a symbol of France’s creative power, Depardieu’s career now shadows the nation’s delayed reckoning with #MeToo. The courtroom has become the stage for something deeper: a country finally confronting the myths it has long told itself about art, power, and male genius.

A life of extremes

Born in 1948 to a working-class family in Châteauroux, Depardieu’s rise was the stuff of legend. A stuttering teen with no formal education, he drifted into acting and exploded onto the French stage with “Les Valseuses” (“Going Places”), a 1974 film so provocative it remains banned in some countries.

From there came a blur of hits: “Jean de Florette,” “Cyrano de Bergerac,” “Green Card,” “The Last Metro,” and “Danton.” He won a Golden Globe, an Oscar nomination, and the adoration of millions. He played Columbus, Jean Valjean, and even Obélix in the “Asterix” films. He was prolific, omnipresent — messy, magnetic, and untouchable.

But the excess was real off-screen too. He crashed his motorcycle while drunk, accepted a Russian passport from Vladimir Putin during a tax dispute, and once urinated in a plane aisle. He boasted of his appetites. France seemed to cheer them on.

That myth — of the lovable brute — is now unraveling.

The unfinished revolution

In Hollywood, #MeToo toppled titans. In France, the movement was met with a wary eye. When #BalanceTonPorc (“Expose Your Pig”) emerged in 2017, it rattled the country’s self-image — particularly in the arts, where seduction and transgression had long been celebrated.

Some warned that #MeToo was killing romance. In 2018, screen legend Catherine Deneuve and 99 other prominent French women published an open letter in *Le Monde*, scolding the movement for going, in their words, “too far.” They championed la liberté d’importuner — “the freedom to bother” — as a pillar of French life, defending the right of men to pursue women without fear of consequence. To many, it sounded less like a defense of flirtation than a permission slip for harassment, cloaked in perfume and nostalgia.

Even President Emmanuel Macron echoed the sentiment. In Dec. 2023 — shortly after a documentary aired footage of Depardieu making sexually suggestive comments about a young girl in North Korea — Macron defended the actor on national television, condemning the backlash as a “manhunt.” “Gérard Depardieu makes France proud,” he said.

The remark sparked national outrage — not just for its timing, but for what it revealed: the instinct to protect cultural giants, no matter the cost.

A few weeks later, Macron expressed his “regret” about the comments, saying it’s important “for women who are victims of abuse to speak out.”

A safe haven for the famous

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 56 of 70

France's reluctance to confront sexual misconduct among its stars has long set it apart.

Roman Polanski, convicted of statutory rape in the U.S. and accused by several other women, continues to work and live freely in France. In 2020, his César Award win prompted walkouts — but also a standing ovation. There was little institutional pushback.

In 2022, Johnny Depp was dropped from Disney's "Pirates of the Caribbean" franchise after domestic abuse allegations by ex-wife Amber Heard (he was largely vindicated).

Yet, in France, he was embraced.

In 2023, he played Louis XV in "Jeanne du Barry", the opening film at the French Cannes Film Festival. French fashion house Dior not only kept him on as the face of its Sauvage fragrance — it reportedly signed him to a multiyear, seven-figure deal in 2022.

A cultural earthquake

Depardieu's trial isn't the only case shaking French cinema. In recent months, a string of high-profile convictions have suggested that the shield of fame may finally be cracking.

In February, director Christophe Ruggia was convicted of sexually abusing actress Adele Haenel when she was a child.

Actor-director Nicolas Bedos was sentenced in 2024 for sexual assault.

The same year, actor-director Judith Godrèche testified before a parliamentary commission, accusing two renowned directors of exploiting her as a teenager. "This is not about desire," she told lawmakers. "It's about power. About silence. About a system that protects itself."

That same commission has since summoned major actors — including Jean Dujardin of "The Artist" fame. Some reportedly asked to testify behind closed doors.

The reckoning

Anouk Grinberg, who appeared in "Les Volets Verts," has publicly supported the two women accusing Depardieu. "What I saw on set was not seduction," she said. "It was shameful."

The case has become a national mirror — reflecting everything France has tolerated, denied, and excused.

On the Parisian sidewalks, opinions still diverge. "We're losing our culture of flirtation," said Alain Morel, 62, sipping an espresso at a café near the Arc de Triomphe. "Flirting isn't a crime — it's part of who we are."

But across the street, 28-year-old student Yasmine Bensalem shook her head. "We called it charm," she said. "But it was always about power."

A verdict beyond the courtroom

The trial continues. Depardieu, who has diabetes and heart disease, attends with medical accommodations. His lawyer seeks to cast doubt on witness testimony and the police investigation — accusing some to be willing to "make Depardieu fall."

But whether he is convicted or not, the deeper judgment is already underway.

For decades, France's artists were seen as untouchable — their genius a shield. That shield is cracking. The myth is dying. And in its place, a question rises:

Can France finally hold its most powerful men to account?

This is not just the trial of Depardieu. This is the trial of a country — and whether its unfinished revolution will finish at last.

GOP-led states push for control of school aid as Trump promises a smaller federal role in education

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Governors in several Republican-led states are pressing the Trump administration to cut strings attached to their federal education money, a goal conservatives have long dreamed of that now appears within reach as President Donald Trump moves to dismantle the Education Department.

Iowa put itself forward as a test case this month, asking the Education Department to consolidate its federal aid into a single grant — called a "block grant" — with few spending requirements. Oklahoma sub-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 57 of 70

mitted a similar request Tuesday, asking for more flexibility to steer federal money toward areas including private school and religious education options.

The idea has failed to gain support in Congress in the past, but Iowa and Oklahoma are suggesting the Trump administration has the power to act alone.

Other Republican leaders have embraced the idea. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis wrote an opinion piece last week pushing for block grants. Conservatives are calling it the natural next step in Trump's promise to shut down the Education Department and give more power to states.

"All states would like more flexibility and freedom," said Jim Blew, a former Education Department official from Trump's first term who has called for consolidating education aid. "This would be a full block grant, no strings attached."

As many as a dozen other GOP-led states are planning to submit their own requests, said Blew, who now co-leads the Defense of Freedom Institute for Policy Studies.

The Education Department channels billions of dollars a year to America's public schools, but it's divided into dozens of grants with different purposes. The biggest pot of money is Title I, which uses a formula to direct more money to schools with high concentrations of poverty. Other programs focus on areas from teacher training to rural schools.

Republicans see an opening for more flexibility

For years, Republicans have pushed block grants as a way to scale back federal involvement in education. They say it would save schools from onerous reporting requirements and allow them to steer federal money toward areas that need it most.

Opponents say block grants would allow states to redirect money away from the students who most need the federal aid, including low-income students and English learners, and toward Republican priorities.

"Congress created each of those individual grants for specific reasons to serve specific groups of students," said Ivy Smith Morgan of EdTrust, a think tank that advocates for educational equity. "Over time, block grants reduce the connective thread between a source of funding and a particular student group."

Education Secretary Linda McMahon has denounced "federal red tape" and said states should be empowered to take charge. When she was asked about block grants Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union," she noted that model has been suggested. But she indicated she did not support lumping together aid for students with disabilities and low-income students.

"No, that's separate money that would go, because they would clearly have that responsibility to make sure that money does get to those students," McMahon said.

In its proposal on March 7, Iowa's education agency asked the Education Department for permission to consolidate 10 sources of federal funding — including \$100 million from Title I for low-income students — into a single grant, according to a summary provided by the Iowa Department of Education.

Iowa's proposal pledges to uphold civil rights protections required by federal law, including support for English learners, homeless students and other groups. It would also continue to use state assessments to identify and address achievement gaps.

In an op-ed in The Hill, a political newspaper, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds said block grants would "give states the flexibility to stretch federal dollars further, rather than following the dictates of distant federal bureaucrats who don't have the same visibility into our state's needs."

Oklahoma's request asks to consolidate its federal aid into a single grant, saying each of the state's schools would be "categorized into types based on need" to establish spending priorities.

With more flexibility, Oklahoma would offer a "marketplace of solutions" for families that includes, "where permissible, private school choice programs, enabling parents to select schools that align with their religious values, provided those schools meet state accreditation standards," according to the memo from state Superintendent Ryan Walters.

The U.S. Education Department declined to comment on the state proposals.

Opponents argue block grants would limit accountability

Sending federal money to states in block grants would be illegal and "extremely dangerous," Rep. Bobby

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 58 of 70

Scott, D-Va., the top Democrat on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, told The Associated Press.

"Converting these funds will make it virtually impossible for the federal government to hold states accountable for providing all students with a high-quality education free from discrimination," he said.

During Trump's first term, former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos proposed a budget combining K-12 money into block grants, but it was rejected with bipartisan pushback. Project 2025, a conservative blueprint for Trump's second term, calls for Title I money for low-income students to be converted into a block grant and then phased out over 10 years.

Instead of going through Congress, Iowa's request asks the Education Department to waive some of the state's requirements.

The law that governs federal funding for public schools — the Every Student Succeeds Act — gives the education secretary authority to waive certain provisions upon request from a state. The power was used during President Barack Obama's administration to allow states to deviate from the No Child Left Behind law, and many states received waivers allowing them to suspend academic testing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A state teachers union in Iowa noted Tuesday that federal money is tied to certain goals to make sure schools get the money they need regardless of state politics.

"Block grants can lead to a lack of minimum standards, where funds can be shifted to other purposes or used to replace state funding, leaving students vulnerable to inequalities based on where they live and the availability of services," said Joshua Brown, president of the Iowa State Education Association.

If Iowa's request is approved, it's almost certain to face a legal challenge.

"This is politically unfeasible — Congress is not going to move here," said Morgan, of EdTrust.

Republican governors and lawmakers have been promoting the idea in other states, including Ohio and Kansas, where the Legislature has introduced a resolution urging the Trump administration to provide education aid as block grants.

Some conservative-led states said they have no plans to pursue the idea, including Idaho.

Blew argues the maneuver is legally sound, and he said there's new political will to make it happen as the Trump administration looks to empower the states.

"The most common way to do that is to turn the money into a block grant," Blew said, "and just give it to the states for them to deal with the money."

The US Postal Service has been struggling for years. Now Trump's talking about privatizing it

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

The U.S. Postal Service is facing an uncertain future after the resignation this week of Postmaster General Louis DeJoy and the suggestion by President Donald Trump and Elon Musk, who heads the Department of Government Efficiency, that the mail service could be privatized.

Unions representing postal workers have balked at the idea of privatization, staging protests across the country.

While they support modernization efforts, including those initiated by DeJoy, union leaders warned that allowing private corporations to run the U.S. mail will ultimately harm everyday citizens, especially the estimated 51 million people living in rural areas who depend on the Postal Service.

"It's a terrible idea for everyone that we serve," National Association of Letter Carriers President Brian L. Renfroe said during a panel discussion at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday.

What happens next may depend on who becomes the next postmaster general. The U.S. Postal Service Board of Governors, an independent establishment of the executive branch that oversees the Postal Service, has retained a global consulting firm to conduct a search for the 76th postmaster general and CEO.

USPS currently employs about 640,000 workers tasked with making deliveries from inner cities to rural areas and even far-flung islands.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 59 of 70

Trump and Musk look to make big changes to the USPS

In February, Trump said he may put the U.S. Postal Service under the control of the Commerce Department in what would be an executive branch takeover of the agency, which has operated as an independent entity since 1970.

"We want to have a post office that works well and doesn't lose massive amounts of money," Trump said during the swearing-in ceremony for Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick. "We're thinking about doing that. And it'll be a form of a merger, but it'll remain the Postal Service, and I think it'll operate a lot better."

While he didn't say anything about privatization at the event, the president has voiced support for the idea in the past. In December, he suggested privatizing the service given the competition it faces from Amazon, UPS, FedEx and others.

"It's an idea a lot of people have had for a long time. We're looking at it," the president said.

Musk, meanwhile, voiced support this month at a tech conference for privatizing the Postal Service, saying, "We should privatize anything that can reasonably be privatized," the New York Times reported.

Postal workers protest, warn Americans may lose a beloved service

Across the country, postal workers have been staging protests in recent days, many chanting "U.S. mail not for sale," and some holding signs that read: "The post office belongs to the people, not billionaires," a reference to Musk.

Renfroe said the goal of the protests is to make the American public aware that drastic changes are being considered for the Postal Service.

"Our message is: 'No.' Private business is interested in doing things that are profitable, as they should be," he said. "But that is the distinction between private business and what we are, a public service, where we serve everyone, everywhere, no matter where they live, for the same price every day."

How did the USPS end up in such a bad financial position?

Since a reorganization in 1970, the USPS has been largely self-funded. The bulk of its annual \$78.5 billion budget comes from customer fees, according to the Congressional Research Service. Congress provides a relatively small annual appropriation — about \$50 million in fiscal year 2023 — to subsidize free and reduced-cost mail services.

Amid challenges that include the decline in profitable first-class mail and the cost of retiree benefits, the Postal Service accumulated \$87 billion in losses from 2007 to 2020. However, the service reported a \$144 million profit last quarter, attributing it to DeJoy's 10-year plan to modernize operations and stem losses. The service had reported a net loss of \$2.1 billion for the same quarter last year.

"By steadily improving our product portfolio, we are increasing our competitive position in the shipping marketplace," DeJoy said in a written statement February accompanying the first quarter results for Fiscal Year 2025.

Union leaders said Wednesday that they hope the next postmaster general sticks with the modernization plan and considers harnessing the Postal Service to provide other services to the public, including basic banking, electric vehicle charging and even U.S. Census work.

"Our network of physical locations, retail locations ... our delivery network, puts us in a position to do so many different things," Renfroe said.

Consumer confidence is sliding as Americans' view of their financial futures slumps to a 12-year low

By MATT OTT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. consumer confidence continued its sharp 2025 decline as Americans' views about their financial futures slumped to a 12-year low, driven by rising anxiety over tariffs and inflation.

The Conference Board reported Tuesday that its consumer confidence index fell 7.2 points in March to 92.9, the fourth straight monthly decline and its lowest reading since January of 2021. The reading was short of analysts expectations for a reading of 94.5, according to a survey by FactSet.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 60 of 70

The business group found that the measure of Americans' short-term expectations for income, business and the job market fell 9.6 points to 65.2.

That's the lowest reading in 12 years and well below the threshold of 80, which the Conference Board says can signal a potential recession in the near future. The proportion of U.S. consumers anticipating a recession remains at a nine-month high, the board reported.

"Consumers' optimism about future income — which had held up quite strongly in the past few months — largely vanished, suggesting worries about the economy and labor market have started to spread into consumers' assessments of their personal situations," said Stephanie Guichard, senior economist at The Conference Board.

The administration of President Donald Trump has largely played down the souring mood among Americans, saying it doesn't necessarily reflect what's happening in the actual economy. This argument is similar to what officials in former President Joe Biden's administration said as high inflation suppressed consumer confidence without undermining growth.

"I just don't think that there's been a very strong correlation between the confidence data and actual consumer spending in recent years," Stephen Miran, the chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, told CNBC on Tuesday. "You go out in the street, people are going about their lives, you know, they're getting their paychecks, they're spending their paychecks, the economy is marching on ahead."

Yet some of the nation's biggest retailers, who have noted a shift in consumer behavior, are telling a different story.

Walmart has thrived with Americans trying to offset higher prices by seeking bargains. Late last month, however, the nation's largest retailer slashed its profit forecast for this year. Its sales outlook was also conservative and the company does not include the potential impact of tariffs in its expectations for 2025.

Target's sales and profit slipped during the crucial holiday quarter, and the company predicted that there would be "meaningful pressure" on its profits to start the year in part because of tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China.

Macy's, Best Buy, Abercrombie & Fitch, Dollar General and others also have grown cautious about their expectations for 2025, with many citing "economic uncertainty."

The board's survey showed that purchasing plans for both homes and cars declined. However, in somewhat of a surprise given respondents' anxiety about the future, intentions to buy big-ticket items like appliances increased. The board said that could reflect a desire to buy before the tariffs kick in, leading to price increases.

While inflation has retreated from the highs during the post-pandemic rebound, it has remained above the Federal Reserve's 2% target. Those still-elevated prices, combined with the announced tariffs on many imported goods, have Americans feeling sour about spending as concerns about the economy mount.

Consumers had appeared increasingly confident heading into the year-end holidays and spent generously. One month later, however, in January, U.S. retail sales fell sharply, though cold weather shared some of the blame.

Earlier this month, the government reported that Americans stepped up their spending in February after the sharp early year pullback, but only tepidly.

The board reported Tuesday that consumers' view of current conditions decreased 3.6 points to 134.5. The consumer confidence index measures both Americans' assessment of current economic conditions and their outlook for the next six months.

Consumer spending accounts for about two-thirds of U.S. economic activity and is closely watched by economists for signs about how the American consumer is feeling.

Early voting and spending surge in Wisconsin Supreme Court race that has drawn national attention

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Turnout during the first week of early voting ahead of Wisconsin's pivotal state Supreme Court race is far exceeding levels from another high-stakes election just two years ago, the latest sign of the intense interest in a contest that has obliterated spending records and drawn attention from President Donald Trump and his billionaire adviser, Elon Musk.

As of Tuesday, with just a week to go until the final day of voting, nearly 48% more early ballots have been cast compared with the same point two years ago, according to data from the Wisconsin Elections Commission. More than 345,000 voters had returned ballots, either by mail or in person, compared with about 233,000 at this point two years ago during another race for a Supreme Court seat.

The election will determine whether the court will remain under 4-3 liberal control or flip to a conservative majority. One of the current liberal justices is retiring.

This year's race has morphed into a proxy battle over the nation's politics, with Trump and Musk getting behind Brad Schimel, the Republican-backed candidate in a race that is officially nonpartisan.

"All Voters who believe in Common Sense should GET OUT TO VOTE EARLY for Brad Schimel," Trump wrote in a Truth Social post late last week.

Total spending on the race has reached more than \$81 million, including more than \$17 million by groups funded by Musk, according to a tally Tuesday by the Brennan Center for Justice. That's the most on record for any U.S. judicial race, breaking the \$56 million spent on Wisconsin's Supreme Court contest in 2023, when majority control also was on the line.

Musk himself has given the Wisconsin Republican Party \$3 million this year, which it can then forward to Schimel's campaign or spend on the race itself.

All that spending and attention has helped fuel early voting, said Kevin Kennedy, Wisconsin's former top elections official who now works as a consultant. He spoke while taking a break from working at a Madison poll site where people could vote early.

"There's just a lot of money being invested," Kennedy said. "Everything seems to be focused on, 'Let's get out the vote.'"

After previously being critical of early voting, Trump and the Republican Party are urging their supporters to cast their ballots before the final day of voting on April 1. Early voting ends Sunday. The strategy, which they deployed with great success in last year's presidential race, appears to be contributing to large turnout increases in more conservative counties across Wisconsin.

Schimel's opponent, Democratic-backed Dane County Circuit Judge Susan Crawford, has raised more than \$25 million for the race to date, including \$5.5 million from the state Democratic Party since early February. Her supporters include billionaire Democratic megadonor George Soros and Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker.

Schimel, a Waukesha County judge, had raised more than \$12 million, which includes more than \$6 million from the Wisconsin Republican Party since early February.

But outside groups have more than made up the difference in what the candidates have raised.

The roughly \$32 million spent by the candidates as of Monday was far exceeded by the roughly \$49 million spent so far by outside groups, according to the Brennan Center calculation. Schimel and his allies, which include groups backed by Musk, have spent about \$46 million, while Crawford and her supporters have spent about \$36 million.

Voters in Wisconsin do not register by political party, so it's impossible to know how many of the ballots already submitted came from Republicans or Democrats. But the data shows that the largest increases are coming from both Democratic- and Republican-heavy counties.

Milwaukee County, the state's largest county and the one that is home to the most Democrats, led all counties in ballots returned with 54,750. That is more than 46% ahead of this point two years ago. Liberal Dane County, the state's second largest county and home to the state capital of Madison and the University of Wisconsin, has also seen a 46% increase.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 62 of 70

But Republican parts of the state also have seen big jumps.

Voting was up in the three suburban Milwaukee counties of Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington, which are commonly referred to as the WOW counties. Ballot returns were up more than 62% in Waukesha and 51% in Ozaukee. In Washington, the most heavily Republican of the three counties, early voting was more than double two years ago.

In Brown County, the state's fourth most populous one, which is reliably Republican, early turnout was up more than 34%.

While the early voting is high for a spring election, it's far from what battleground Wisconsin saw at this point before the presidential race. A week before the Nov. 5 election, nearly 1 million voters had cast their ballots, almost four times as many as in this race to date.

The race comes as the Wisconsin Supreme Court is expected to rule on abortion rights, congressional redistricting, union power and voting rules.

On Monday night, Democratic U.S. House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries told supporters that electing Crawford was important so she and other liberal justices can order a redraw of congressional boundary lines. Even though Wisconsin is a swing state, Republican-drawn lines have allowed the party to hold six of its eight congressional seats.

"As soon as possible, we need to be able to revisit that and have fair lines," Jeffries said in a live discussion on the social media platform X. "The only way for that to be even a significant possibility is if you have an enlightened Supreme Court."

Schimmel has accused Crawford of promising to Democrats that she will redraw the lines. Crawford has denied that.

World Athletics to require chromosome testing of athletes in women's track and field

NANJING, China (AP) — World Athletics president Sebastian Coe said Tuesday that the track and field's governing body has approved the introduction of cheek swabs and dry blood-spot tests for female athletes in order to maintain "the integrity of competition."

The planned changes include reinstating a version of chromosome testing that was discontinued in the 1990s, requiring athletes who compete in the female category to submit to a cheek swab or dry blood-spot test for the presence of a gene that indicates whether the athlete has a "Y" chromosome present in males.

Coe told a news conference that athletes will have to take the test just once during their career.

"It's important to do it because it maintains everything that we've been talking about, and particularly recently, about not just talking about the integrity of female women's sport, but actually guaranteeing it," Coe said after a two-day meeting of the World Athletics Council in Nanjing. "We feel this is a really important way of providing confidence and maintaining that absolute focus on the integrity of competition."

It's unclear whether the tests will be in place before the world championships in September. Coe said that the new regulations will be drafted and that a testing provider will be confirmed over the next few weeks.

Coe, the two-time Olympic champion who was unsuccessful last week in his bid to become IOC president, has been vocal about "protecting the female category" in track and field. He has said the International Olympic Committee needs to take a leadership role in the transgender debate instead of letting each individual sport decide their own regulations.

World Athletics, which in 2023 banned transgender athletes who had transitioned male to female and gone through male puberty, announced in February proposed recommendations that would apply strict transgender rules to athletes who were born female but had what the organization describes as naturally occurring testosterone levels in the typical male range.

Those recommendations came only days after U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order barring transgender athletes from competing in girls sports in the U.S. and pressured the Olympics to do the same. Los Angeles will host the 2028 Summer Games.

Legal challenges

Asked whether World Athletics felt the policy would withstand legal challenges, Coe said he was confident after an exhaustive review.

"I would never have set off down this path in 2016-2017 to protect the female category in sport" without being "prepared to take the challenge head on," Coe said.

He added: "We've been to the Court of Arbitration on our DSD (differences in sex development) regulations. They have been upheld, and they have again been upheld after appeal. So we will doggedly protect the female category, and we'll do whatever is necessary to do it."

5 high-level CDC officials are leaving in the latest turmoil for the public health agency

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was rocked by five high-level departures on Tuesday in the latest turmoil for the nation's top public health agency.

The departures were announced at a meeting of agency senior leaders. The Atlanta-based CDC has two dozen centers and offices. The heads of five of them are stepping down, and that follows three other departures in recent weeks. This means close to a third of the agency's top management is leaving or left recently.

The departures — described as retirements — were not announced publicly. The Associated Press confirmed the news with two CDC officials who were not authorized to discuss it and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The announcements come a day after the White House announced it is nominating Susan Monarez to be CDC director. But it's not clear how much, if any, influence that had on the leaders' decision to leave. The Trump administration earlier this month withdrew its nomination of former Florida congressman Dr. David Weldon just before a Senate hearing.

CDC employees — including the organization's leaders — have been bracing themselves for moves by the Trump administration to lay off staff and possibly dramatically reorganize the agency. White House officials are reviewing a work force reduction proposal for CDC and other federal health agencies that was submitted earlier this month. Its contents have not been disclosed.

"The challenges for these individuals to do their jobs on a daily basis must be enormous," said Jason Schwartz, a Yale University health policy researcher who studies government health agencies. "The future of CDC is under threat, by any measure. It's understandable why individuals may decide to move on rather than see the agency diminished in its works, and its resources, and its ability to do its job."

But losing a number of experienced leaders is clearly an additional blow to an already besieged agency, Schwartz added.

The latest departures include:

- Leslie Ann Dauphin, who oversees the Public Health Infrastructure Center and its more than 500 employees. That center coordinates CDC funding, strategy, and technical assistance to state, local and territorial health departments.

- Dr. Karen Remley, who heads the National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. At the beginning of the year, the center had more than 220 full-time employees.

- Sam Posner, who heads the Office of Science. More than 100 CDC employees work on research and science policy, and publish the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

- Debra Lubar, who runs the 65-person Office of Policy, Performance and Evaluation.

- Leandris Liburd, head of the Office of Health Equity, with about 40 employees. Liburd took the role in 2020, as part of an effort to address the COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate death toll on Black, Hispanic and Native Americans.

Adding to that: Kevin Griffis, head of CDC's office of communications, left last week. Robin Bailey, the agency's chief operating officer, left late last month. So did Dr. Nirav Shah, a former CDC principal deputy director who last year was the agency's primary voice about an evolving bird flu epidemic in animals that

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 64 of 70

has also sickened at least 70 people in the U.S.

The CDC, with a core budget of more than \$9 billion, is charged with protecting Americans from disease outbreaks and other public health threats. At the beginning of this year, it had more than 13,000 employees, and nearly 13,000 other contract workers.

At least 550 probationary employees were laid off in February, although those layoffs were challenged in lawsuits and two federal judges ordered that the employees be reinstated. According to some of the laid off employees, that hasn't happened yet, although the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has – following court orders – extended their administrative leave pay.

"It would be foolhardy to predict what the CDC will look like" in a few months, let alone a couple of years, Schwartz said. But it's understandable why senior leaders "might not want to sign up for that," he added.

Trump has begun another trade war. Here's a timeline of how we got here

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Long-threatened tariffs from U.S. President Donald Trump have plunged the country into a global trade war — all while on-again, off-again new levies continue to escalate uncertainty.

Trump is no stranger to tariffs. He launched a trade war during his first term, taking particular aim at China by putting taxes on most of its goods. Beijing responded with its own retaliatory tariffs on U.S. products ranging from fruit to automotive imports. Trump also used the threat of more tariffs to force Canada and Mexico to renegotiate a North American trade pact, called the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement, in 2020.

When President Joe Biden took office, he preserved most of the tariffs Trump previously enacted against China, in addition to imposing some new restrictions — but his administration claimed to take a more targeted approach.

Fast-forward to today and economists stress there could be greater consequences on businesses and economies worldwide under Trump's more sweeping tariffs this time around — and that higher prices will likely leave consumers footing the bill. There's also been a sense of whiplash from Trump's back-and-forth tariff threats and responding retaliation, including some recently-postponed taxes on goods from America's largest trading partners.

Here's a timeline of how we got here:

January 20

Trump is sworn into office. In his inaugural address, he again promises to "tariff and tax foreign countries to enrich our citizens." And he reiterates plans to create an agency called the External Revenue Service, which has yet to be established.

On his first day in office, Trump also says he expects to put 25% tariffs on Canada and Mexico starting on Feb. 1, while declining to immediately flesh out plans for taxing Chinese imports.

January 26

Trump threatens 25% tariffs on all Colombia imports and other retaliatory measures after President Gustavo Petro's rejects two U.S. military aircraft carrying migrants to the country, accusing Trump of not treating immigrants with dignity during deportation.

In response, Petro also announces a retaliatory 25% increase in Colombian tariffs on U.S. goods. But Colombia later reversed its decision and accepted the flights carrying migrants. The two countries soon signaled a halt in the trade dispute.

February 1

Trump signs an executive order to impose tariffs on imports from Mexico, Canada and China — 10% on all imports from China and 25% on imports from Mexico and Canada starting Feb. 4. Trump invoked this power by declaring a national emergency — ostensibly over undocumented immigration and drug trafficking. The levies on Canada and Mexico threaten to blow up Trump's own USMCA trade deal, which allowed many products to cross North American borders duty free.

The action prompts swift outrage from all three countries, with promises of retaliatory measures.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 65 of 70

February 3

Trump agrees to a 30-day pause on his tariff threats against Mexico and Canada, with both trading partners taking steps to appease Trump's concerns about border security and drug trafficking.

February 4

Trump's new 10% tariffs on all Chinese imports to the U.S. still go into effect. China retaliates the same day by announcing a flurry of countermeasures, including sweeping new duties on a variety of American goods and an anti-monopoly investigation into Google.

China's 15% tariffs on coal and liquefied natural gas products, and a 10% levy on crude oil, agricultural machinery and large-engine cars imported from the U.S., take effect Feb. 10.

February 10

Trump announces plans to hike steel and aluminum tariffs. He removes the exemptions from his 2018 tariffs on steel, meaning that all steel imports will be taxed at a minimum of 25%, and also raises his 2018 aluminum tariffs to 25% from 10% set to go into effect March 12.

February 13

Trump announces a plan for "reciprocal" tariffs — promising to increase U.S. tariffs to match the tax rates that other countries charge on imports "for purposes of fairness." Economists warn that the reciprocal tariffs, set to overturn decades of trade policy, could create chaos for global businesses.

Beyond China, Canada and Mexico, he indicates that additional countries, such as India, won't be spared from higher tariffs. And in the following weeks, Trump suggests that European countries could face a 25% levy as part of these efforts.

February 25

Trump signed an executive order instructing the Commerce Department to consider whether a tariff on imported copper is needed to protect national security. He cites the material's use in U.S. defense, infrastructure and emerging technologies.

March 1

Trump signs an additional executive order instructing the Commerce Department to consider whether tariffs on lumber and timber are also needed to protect national security, arguing that the construction industry and military depend on a strong supply of wooden products in the U.S.

March 4

Trump's 25% tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico go into effect, though he limits the levy to 10% on Canadian energy. He also doubles the tariff on all Chinese imports to 20%.

All three countries promise retaliatory measures. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announces tariffs on more than \$100 billion of American goods over the course of 21 days. And Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum says her country would respond with its own retaliatory tariffs on U.S. goods without specifying the targeted products immediately, signaling hopes to de-escalate.

China, meanwhile, imposes tariffs of up to 15% on a wide array of key U.S. farm exports. It also expands the number of U.S. companies subject to export controls and other restrictions by about two dozen.

March 5

Trump grants a one-month exemption on his new tariffs impacting goods from Mexico and Canada for U.S. automakers. The pause arrives after the president spoke with leaders of the "Big 3" automakers — Ford, General Motors and Stellantis.

March 6

In a wider extension, Trump postpones 25% tariffs on many imports from Mexico and some imports from Canada for a month. But he still plans to impose "reciprocal" tariffs starting on April 2.

Trump credited Sheinbaum with making progress on border security and drug smuggling as a reason for again pausing tariffs — and the Mexican president said in a post on X that she and Trump "had an excellent and respectful call in which we agreed that our work and collaboration have yielded unprecedented results."

Trump's actions also thawed relations with Canada somewhat, although outrage and uncertainty over the trade war remains. Still, after its initial retaliatory tariffs of \$30 billion Canadian (US\$21 billion) on U.S. goods, the government said it had suspended its second wave of retaliatory tariffs worth \$125 billion

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 66 of 70

Canadian (US\$87 billion).

March 10

China retaliates against Trump's tariffs by imposing additional 15% taxes on key American farm products, including chicken, pork, soybeans and beef. The escalating trade tensions push stocks lower on Monday as investors worry about the pain Trump's trade wars risk inflicting on the American economy.

The Chinese tariffs were a response to Trump's decision to double the levy on Chinese imports to 20% on March 4. China's Commerce Ministry had earlier said that goods already in transit would be exempt from the retaliatory tariffs until April 12.

March 12

Trump increases tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports to 25%, removing exemptions from his 2018 tariffs on the metals in addition to increasing the tariffs on aluminum from 10%.

The European Union takes retaliatory trade action promising new duties on U.S. industrial and farm products. The measures will cover goods from the United States worth some 26 billion euros (\$28 billion), and not just steel and aluminum products, but also textiles, home appliances and agricultural goods. Motorcycles, bourbon, peanut butter and jeans will be hit, as they were during Trump's first term. The 27-member bloc later says it will delay this retaliatory action until mid-April.

March 13

Trump threatens a 200% tariff on European wine, Champagne and spirits if the European Union goes forward with a planned 50% tariff on American whiskey.

The European import tax, which was unveiled in response to steel and aluminum tariffs by the U.S. administration, is expected to go into effect April 1, just ahead of separate reciprocal tariffs that Trump plans to place on the EU.

March 24

Trump says he will place a 25% tariff on all imports from any country that buys oil or gas from Venezuela, in addition to imposing new tariffs on the South American country itself, starting April 2.

The tariffs would most likely add to the taxes facing China, which in 2023 bought 68% of the oil exported by Venezuela, per the U.S. Energy Information Administration. But a number of countries also receive oil from Venezuela — including the United States itself.

There's no easy answers for slowing down rising level of pitching injuries at all levels of baseball

By STEVE MEGARGEE AP Sports Writer

GOODYEAR, Ariz. (AP) — Figuring out a cause for the skyrocketing number of arm injuries among pitchers is easy.

Finding a solution could prove much more challenging.

Major League Baseball issued a 62-page report in December that showed how the focus on throwing with increased velocity and using maximum effort on every pitch was a likely reason for the increase in injuries. The study provided numerical data backing a thesis already supported by conventional wisdom.

"It makes sense," Cleveland Guardians right-hander Tanner Bibee said. "You do anything at a max capacity, you're going to be at more risk for injury. If you try to squat your absolute max, you're going to get hurt more often than if you're squatting a plate and a bar. It's just kind of the nature of anything you do in life."

The study showed that major league pitcher injured list placements increased from 212 in 2005 to 485 in 2024. Days on the IL rose from 13,666 to 32,257.

Tommy John surgeries for major and minor league players increased from 104 in 2010 to a peak of 314 in 2020, though they slipped to 281 last year.

The study recommended "considering rule changes at the professional level that shift the incentives for clubs and pitchers to prioritize health and longevity." Instituting those types of rule changes could prove challenging when pitchers of all ages understand how much MLB organizations are emphasizing velocity.

"I don't know if rules are the right way to go about it," said Chicago Cubs left-hander Matthew Boyd,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 67 of 70

who underwent Tommy John surgery in 2023. "You can't tell someone to throw softer. But I was a guy in college that threw high 80s. I would randomly throw a hard number, but I didn't know how to do it consistently right. But I got outs. But I knew that some wise people ahead of me told me outs are going to get you to the big leagues, velocity's going to get you drafted. So therein lies the problem."

Perhaps most concerning were the statistics involving younger pitchers.

Prospects who threw 95 mph or higher at the Perfect Game National Showcase for top high school players increased from three in 2018 to 36 in 2024. Thirty-five players selected in the top 10 rounds of last year's amateur draft had Tommy John surgery, up from four in 2005.

The evidence of increasing injuries isn't limited to this study. An Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine study showed there were five times as many injuries among Pac-12 baseball players in 2021 as in 2016, though that applied to all players and not just pitchers.

Problems are starting early in the pipeline

Those numbers help explain why one school of thought suggests any changes need to start at the youth level. That idea has the support of Eric Cressey, who trains more than 100 pro baseball players through his Cressey Sports Performance facilities in Florida and Massachusetts.

Cressey also is the New York Yankees' director of player health and performance, but he was speaking only on his own behalf and wasn't representing the Yankees on this issue.

"I've long maintained that everything begins with fixing what's happening at the younger levels, and there will eventually be a trickle-up to the big leagues," Cressey said.

Cressey noted the problems at the youth level by citing the videos he sees of young pitchers with "arms and legs flying everywhere" as they enter throwing programs when their bodies aren't prepared to handle it. He believes that young pitchers throwing max-effort showcases in the offseason and disregarding basic warmup guidance has contributed to significant injuries.

"Thirteen-year-olds should never be blowing out ligaments," Cressey said. "That should just not be happening. And every time it happens, it's because someone made a terrible, terrible decision on that child's behalf, whether it's a coach or a parent. Just like you or I wouldn't let our kids have candy for dinner or run with scissors or something like that, some of the things that I see in the youth space are nothing short of embarrassing."

Cressey recommends imposing a scouting dead period for the months of October, November and December.

"It's absurd for us to ask a still immature 17-year-old to go out and throw 95 miles an hour in November when major league players are resting during that time period," he said.

Of course, not all MLB pitchers rest during that time.

Pro pitchers don't rest like they used to

San Francisco Giants pitching coach J.P. Martinez says he doesn't have a problem with major leaguers throwing throughout the year, though he acknowledges high-effort throwing year-round could make them more susceptible to injury.

"There's quite a lot of guys that don't shut down throwing at all nowadays," Martinez said. "I think that gets vilified a little bit when a lot of the time they're just keeping the arm moving and keeping the range of motion and workload at a certain level, so when they do ramp up, it's less of a transition. You're not going from zero to 60. You might be going from 30 to 60."

The level of workload pitchers attempt in the offseason is notable because data shows that more injuries happen at the start of the season or in the preseason than at any other time of the year. The MLB study released in December showed that over 40% of the injured list placements due to elbow injuries from 2010-24 came in either March or April.

"That is generally because I don't think guys are ramping up correctly," Martinez said.

The challenge with going old school

Guardians pitching coach Carl Willis said he'd like to see an industry-wide emphasis on "turning the clock a little bit to a more old-school and traditional type of way" that relies on locating pitches and changing speeds and shapes. Willis believes that approach could allow pitchers to realize they don't have to go full-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 68 of 70

throttle every time they release the ball.

"To prevent some of these injuries, that's kind of the direction we have to go," Willis said. "You can't take away the power and the profiles that these guys can create, but you can take a little bit of the pressure off."

That pressure can start at the youth levels, which explains why MLB has established Pitch Smart initiatives that set recommended workload limits for pitchers. The idea is to limit the likelihood they would pitch with fatigue since that increases injury risk.

The trick is making sure those recommendations get followed, particularly at a time when pitching prospects across the world believe velocity is what's going to make an impression on scouts.

"What's challenging right now is it's hard to close Pandora's box," Cressey said. "A lot of these kids who are 25 and blowing out in the big leagues, they were kids who were doing a lot of things incorrectly in their teenage years, and now they're just bigger, stronger and are in higher-pressure situations."

USC looks to keep March Madness title hopes alive without generational talent JuJu Watkins in lineup

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — If Southern California wants to win its first national championship in 41 years, the Trojans will have to find a way to get it done without star guard JuJu Watkins.

They notched their 30th win for the first time since 1986 by walloping ninth-seeded Mississippi State 96-59 in the second round of the NCAA Tournament on Monday night. But they lost Watkins to a season-ending right knee injury in the first quarter.

She was streaking down the court on a fast break with two Bulldogs defenders nearby when her knee bent awkwardly as she planted her right foot. She immediately crumpled to the court. Watkins had to be carried off, unable to put any weight on her leg. She will have surgery and then rehabilitate, USC said, without specifying her injury.

The sight of Watkins writhing in pain on the court, holding her injured knee while her teammates stood around her and coach Lindsay Gottlieb rushed to the 19-year-old's side shocked the crowd of 7,808 at Galen Center.

"JuJu is a generational talent," Mississippi State guard Jerkaila Jordan said. "She's changed the game in so many ways at such a young age. Seeing her go down was really tough. I said my prayers for her."

Losing Watkins just five minutes in on a non-contact play turned the home fans angry and they booed the Bulldogs the rest of the game. At halftime, they jeered the MSU cheerleaders' routine.

"You had to be here to feel it," Gottlieb said. "I don't know if people saw that through the TV, but it was a palpable thing."

The top-seeded Trojans, meanwhile, were all business. Buoyed by the raucous crowd, they hit buzzer-beating shots at the end of the first, second and third quarters and ran their lead to 46 points in the fourth.

"I wouldn't say this is our defining moment," said Kiki Iriafen, who scored a season-high 36 points. "It's what we expect of ourselves. We expect to win in this tournament regardless if it's going our way, we have people, we don't have people. That's the standard here."

Next up is the Sweet 16 in Spokane, Washington, where the Trojans (30-3) play fifth-seeded Kansas State (28-7) on Friday.

USC has yet to know what it's like playing without one of the biggest stars in college basketball. Watkins started all 34 games as a freshman, leading the Trojans to the Elite Eight while boosting attendance with strong support from her nearby community of Watts.

"I hope she can at some point see just the significance that she has here that goes so far beyond just her talent and abilities," Gottlieb said. "That's what's really generational about it, the way she's galvanized everyone, and the way that her team had her back and also really is a team."

This year was supposed to be about winning it all.

It still could be, but the picture looks a lot different without Watkins.

Iriafen, a Stanford graduate transfer, showed what she can do without her running mate, shooting 16-

of-22 to go with nine rebounds.

"Kiki is one of the best players in the country. She was electric," Bulldogs coach Sam Purcell said. "We had our center on her, our guard on her, we doubled her, we went 2-3, we went man-to-man, we trapped her. We never stopped her."

USC had five players in double figures against the Bulldogs, including three freshmen. One of them, Ka-leigh Heckel, along with sophomore Malia Samuels, ran the offense in Watkins' absence. They combined for nine assists, five steals and two turnovers. Heckel also scored 13 points and had six assists.

Another freshman, Avery Howell, tied her career high with 18 points and had four 3-pointers and six assists. A third freshman, Kennedy Smith, had 10 points and five steals.

"We have a pretty big role this year," Howell said. "We're prepared for most moments because of the time we're given in games and how hard we work in practice."

The Trojans won their first two tournament games by a combined 83 points.

"We will make sure that we're pouring into this team, to JuJu and keeping us together because as you saw we are capable of a lot of greatness," Gottlieb said. "That's what will continue to be the message to our team."

USC star JuJu Watkins suffers season-ending knee injury in March Madness win over Mississippi State

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — JuJu Watkins was carried off the floor with a season-ending knee injury in the first quarter of top-seeded Southern California's game against Mississippi State in the NCAA Tournament on Monday night.

Watkins, one of the biggest stars in women's basketball, was streaking to the basket chased by two defenders when her knee bent awkwardly as she planted her right leg, the non-contact injury causing her to crumple to the floor. She grabbed her knee and writhed in pain as her teammates surrounded her.

"I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't rattled seeing JuJu lying on the floor and crying," coach Lindsay Gottlieb said.

Later on, a team spokesperson said Watkins will undergo surgery and then begin rehabilitation.

The crowd in Galen Center went silent as Gottlieb and two other USC staffers attended to the 19-year-old Watkins, a 6-foot-2 sophomore who averages 24.6 points. She was carried off by multiple people with the Trojans leading 13-2.

The Trojans won 96-59 to reach the Sweet 16.

"My prayers and thoughts are with JuJu," MSU coach Sam Purcell said. "Obviously, we're competitors and you never want to see that, especially what she means for women's basketball."

Watkins has enjoyed good health in her brief college career. She started all 34 of USC's games as a freshman, when she was second in scoring nationally with 27.1 points a game. Her 920 points set a national record for freshman scoring.

USC reached the Elite Eight last year, losing to Paige Bueckers and UConn. The teams could meet again in a regional final in Spokane, Washington, this year.

After Watkins was hurt, the crowd loudly booed Mississippi State every time it had the ball. The school's cheerleaders were booed during their halftime routine and the crowd got on the team again as it warmed up for the second half.

"They're gonna stand behind their home team. They're gonna go hard for JuJu," said MSU guard Jerkaila Jordan, who scored 17 points. "I couldn't do nothing but respect them."

Watkins had three free throws, one rebound and two assists in five minutes.

In the second quarter, USC guard Malia Samuels went down hard on the baseline. She held her head in her hands as the crowd booed and Gottlieb again came rushing out to check on the sophomore, who ran the offense in Watkins' absence.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, March 26, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 274 ~ 70 of 70

"I was relieved to hear her say, 'I'm good,'" Gottlieb said.

The Trojans appeared undaunted by the injury to their star. They rushed the floor in celebration after senior Rayah Marshall banked in a 3-pointer to beat the halftime buzzer and extend the lead to 50-27.

"They gave us a lot of energy, especially when things weren't going our way at the beginning," said Kiki Iriafe, who scored a season-high 36 points.

Watkins hurt her left hand after the ball jammed her fingers in USC's first-round blowout win over UNC Greensboro. She later came up limping on her left leg and winced.

"It's the end of the season, body is a little banged up," she said afterward. "On to the next. Nobody cares. I'm all good."

Today in History: March 26

Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse in Baltimore

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, March 26, the 85th day of 2025. There are 280 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On March 26, 2024, Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge collapsed after being struck by a container ship, killing six maintenance workers on the bridge. (Maryland officials have announced plans to replace the bridge by late 2028.)

Also on this date:

In 1812, an earthquake devastated Caracas, Venezuela, causing as many as 30,000 deaths. (The U.S. Congress later approved \$50,000 in food aid to be sent to Venezuela — the first example of American disaster assistance abroad.)

In 1917, the Seattle Metropolitans became the first American ice hockey team to win the Stanley Cup, defeating the Montreal Canadiens 9-1 to win the championship series, three games to one.

In 1979, a peace treaty was signed by Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and witnessed by President Jimmy Carter at the White House.

In 1992, a judge in Indianapolis sentenced former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson to six years in prison on rape charges. (Tyson would ultimately serve less than three years of the sentence.)

In 1997, the bodies of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate religious cult who took their own lives were found inside a rented mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, California.

In 2013, Italy's top criminal court overturned the acquittal of American Amanda Knox in the grisly murder of British roommate Meredith Kercher and ordered Knox to stand trial again. (Although convicted in absentia, Knox was exonerated by the Italian Supreme Court in 2015.)

In 2018, a toxicology report obtained by The Associated Press revealed that the late pop superstar Prince had levels of fentanyl in his body that multiple experts described as "exceedingly high."

In 2021, Dominion Voting Systems filed a \$1.6 billion defamation lawsuit against Fox News, saying the cable news giant falsely claimed that the voting company rigged the 2020 election. (Fox would eventually agree to pay Dominion \$787.5 million in one of the largest defamation settlements in U.S. history.)

Today's Birthdays: Basketball Hall of Famer Wayne Embry is 88. Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is 85. Author Erica Jong is 83. Journalist Bob Woodward is 82. Singer Diana Ross is 81. Rock singer Steven Tyler (Aerosmith) is 77. Actor-comedian Vicki Lawrence is 76. Actor-comedian Martin Short is 75. Country singer Ronnie McDowell is 75. Country singer Charly McClain is 69. TV personality Leeza Gibbons is 68. Football Hall of Famer Marcus Allen is 65. Actor Jennifer Grey is 65. Basketball Hall of Famer John Stockton is 63. Actor Michael Imperioli is 59. Country singer Kenny Chesney is 57. Actor Leslie Mann is 53. Google co-founder Larry Page is 52. Rapper Juvenile is 50. Actor Keira Knightley is 40. Actor-comedian Ramy Youssef is 34.