

Groton Daily Independent

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Wednesday, February 4

Senior Menu: Ham, roasted potatoes, fruit, pineapple, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Mac and cheese, peas.

Groton Chamber meeting, noon, City Hall

Emmanuel Lutheran: Confirmation, 4 p.m.; Sarah Circle, 5 p.m.; League, 6:30 p.m.

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

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

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

Pickleball at Elementary Gym, 5:30 p.m.

Sixth grade BBB practice, 6 p.m., gym

3rd/4th grade volleyball practice, 6 p.m., Arena

This hit me...

You never really know the true impact you have on those around you. You never know how much someone needed that smile you gave them. You never know how much your kindness turned someone's entire life around. You never know how much someone needed that long hug or deep talk. So don't wait to be kind. Don't wait for someone else to be kind first. Don't wait for better circumstances or for someone to change. Just be kind, because you never know how much someone needs it.



Thursday, Feb. 5

Senior Menu: Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, carrots, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal

School Lunch: Corn dogs, baked beans.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Basketball Doubleheader at Deuel: (JV girls at 4 p.m.; JV boys at 5 p.m., Varsity girls at 6 p.m., varsity boys to follow.

2nd Grade BB practice, 5 p.m., elementary gym.

Boys Wrestling at Deuel, 5 p.m.

4th grade BB practice, 6 p.m., gym.

High School Softball practice, 6 p.m., gym

Friday, Feb. 6

Senior Menu: Baked fish, baked potato, antigua blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.

3rd grade BBB practice, 3:30 p.m., elementary gym.

Varsity girls wrestling at Yankton, 4 p.m.

Varsity boys wrestling at Lyman Quad, 5 p.m.

JH BBB hosts Waubay/Summit (7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.)

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1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

Partial Shutdown Ends

The House voted 217-214 yesterday to pass a \$1.2T government spending package, ending a partial shutdown that began Saturday. President Donald Trump signed the bill into law.

The agreement funds several major agencies through September and the Department of Homeland Security through Feb. 13. Democrats will now seek to negotiate reforms to Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection—two agencies involved in the deaths of US citizens in Minnesota last month. Democrats are pushing for a uniform code of conduct and requirements that agents wear body cameras, remain unmasked on duty, and obtain warrants to conduct a raid, among other changes. House Speaker Mike Johnson (R, LA-4) has reportedly rejected most of these bids.

The shutdown impacted fewer agencies than a broader shutdown last year—the longest in US history.

Disney Passes the Wand

The Walt Disney Co. has named longtime parks executive Josh D'Amaro as its next chief executive officer, concluding a multiyear search to succeed Bob Iger. Iger will remain a senior adviser and board member until retiring at the end of the year.

D'Amaro, 54, joined Disney in 1998 after beginning his career in finance at Gillette. He has led Disneyland Resort and Walt Disney World Resort and now chairs Disney Experiences, which oversees the company's global theme parks, cruise line, resorts, and licensing, including a partnership with Epic Games. The unit generated \$36.2B in revenue in fiscal 2025. He directed a 10-year, \$60B expansion of parks and cruises and advanced plans for a new resort in Abu Dhabi, Disney's first in the Middle East.

D'Amaro will be Disney's ninth CEO in its more than 100-year history, overseeing about 231,000 employees. Dana Walden, who was also a contender, will assume the new role of president and chief creative officer.

Westminster Winner Crowned

Penny the Doberman Pinscher was crowned best in show yesterday at the 2026 Westminster Kennel Club dog competition—the second-longest continuously held sporting event in the US (behind the Kentucky Derby) and now in its 150th year.

More than 3,000 pooches competed at Madison Square Garden for best of breed before advancing to group judging. Seven finalists ultimately vied for best in show: Penny the Doberman Pinscher (working group); Zaida the Afghan Hound (hound group); Cota the Chesapeake Bay Retriever (sporting group), who won the runner-up prize; Wager the Smooth Fox Terrier (terrier group); Cookie the Maltese (toy group); JJ the Lhasa Apso (nonsporting group); and Graham the Old English Sheepdog (herding group).

The prestigious competition began in 1877, when a group of dog enthusiasts who met at Manhattan's Westminster Hotel organized a showcase for hunting dogs.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Olympic Winter Games begin today with curling, alpine skiing, and luge; opening ceremony set for Friday. Skier Lindsey Vonn plans to compete in Winter Games despite ruptured ACL.

New York City and Nashville among six US cities to host 2028 LA Olympics soccer.

CBS pulls Peter Attia "60 Minutes" segment after the newly announced contributor is named over 1,800 times in the new Jeffrey Epstein files.

Chuck Negron, a founding member and the lead singer of Three Dog Night, dies at age 83 following a heart failure diagnosis.

Science & Technology

World Health Organization researchers find nearly 40% of new cancer cases in 2022 were preventable; study examined 36 cancer types across 185 countries (More, w/charts)

Endangered Asian elephant born at Smithsonian's National Zoo for the first time in nearly 25 years after a 21-month pregnancy.

NASA delays Artemis II mission—the first crewed lunar flight in over 53 years—after fueling test reveals hydrogen leaks; agency now eying March launch.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close down (S&P 500 -0.8%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq -1.4%) as technology shares broadly fall.

Bitcoin falls over 6% in one day to below \$73K, its lowest price in nearly 16 months.

Walmart surpasses \$1T in market capitalization, becoming the first traditional retailer to reach the milestone as e-commerce drives growth.

PayPal ousts CEO Alex Chriss, taps current HP CEO Enrique Lores; shares close down 20.3% after weaker-than-expected 2026 profit forecast.

Novo Nordisk shares fall 14.6% upon warning of 5% to 13% sales decline from 2025 levels.

Politics & World Affairs

US fighter jet shoots down Iranian drone approaching USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier; US-flagged tanker evades armed Iranian boats attempting to board the ship.

Vietnamese military has been preparing for the possibility of US intervention in the country and a resulting domestic uprising, according to internal documents.

French prosecutors summon Elon Musk, raid X offices as part of investigation into child abuse images and deepfakes on Grok chatbot.

Spain announces plan to introduce social media ban on kids under age 16, joining Australia.

Second-Half Surge Lifts Tigers Past Roncalli, 83-50

The Groton Area boys basketball team shook off a sluggish first half and dominated the final two quarters to earn an 83-50 Northeast Conference win over cross-county rival Aberdeen Roncalli on Monday night.

The Cavaliers matched Groton's energy early, tying the game at 14 late in the first quarter. A nine-point Tiger run bridging the end of the first and start of the second quarter pushed Groton ahead 24-15, but Roncalli stayed within striking distance, pulling to within two points at 26-24.

Groton responded with a late second-quarter push to take a 41-34 lead into halftime, then completely flipped the script after the break.

"We just played a lot smarter in the second half," head coach Greg Kjellsen said. "In the first half we helped too much, left shooters open, and didn't rebound well. That led to kick-out threes and second chances. We fixed that."

The Tigers tightened defensively in the third quarter, allowing just 11 points while extending the lead to 64-45. A 10-point run early in the fourth quarter blew the game open, and Groton triggered the 30-point mercy rule with 1:52 remaining at 80-49 before finishing off the 83-50 win.



Keegen Tracy makes his move through the Roncalli defense to score two of his 16 points. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Karson Zak dunked the ball four times during the Aberdeen Roncalli basketball game. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

Groton allowed just 15 second-half points.

"We quit helping off the corners and trusted our size," Kjellsen said. "Once we stopped over-helping and boxed out, everything settled down."

Offensively, the Tigers attacked the rim relentlessly. Groton shot a blistering 72 percent on two-point attempts (28-of-39), with Karson Zac going a perfect 8-for-8, including four dunks. Groton finished 4-of-14 from three-point range and 15-of-17 at the free-throw line.

"We've talked all year about not settling for threes," Kjellsen said. "We got what we wanted tonight—high-percentage shots at the rim."

Four Tigers scored in double figures.

Ryder Johnson led the way with 21 points, eight rebounds, four assists, and a steal.

Keegan Tracy added 19 points, three assists, and two steals.

Karson Zac finished with 18 points, three rebounds, two assists, and two steals.

Gage Sippel recorded 16 points, eight rebounds, two assists, two steals, and two blocks.

Becker Bosma chipped in four points, six rebounds, and four assists, while Anthony Tracy scored three points. Jayden Schwan added two points, and Logan Warrington grabbed two rebounds with an assist.

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Groton finished with 32 rebounds, 20 assists, eight steals, and just eight turnovers.

Roncalli was led by Creighton Fisher, who knocked down five three-pointers and scored 16 points. Jessie Hernandez hit three triples and finished with 12 points, while Austin Fisher added 10. Bryson Olson scored six, Ezra Feikert had three, Quinten Shelton added two, and Brock Bowman chipped in one free throw. The Cavaliers hit 10 three-pointers but went just 4-of-10 from the free-throw line.

JV and C Game Results

Groton completed the sweep with a dominant 50-19 junior varsity victory. The Tigers led 20-3 after one quarter, 36-6 at halftime, and 42-11 after three.

Asher Johnson paced Groton with 15 points, while Anthony Tracy added 11. Ethan Kroll scored eight, Ryder Schelle had five, Jordan Schwan scored four, Jace Johnson had three, Riley Schellenberger added three, and J.J. Muller finished with two points. Roncalli's Aiden Hernandez led all scorers with 14 points, including four three-pointers.

The Tigers also edged Roncalli 31-28 in the C game. Groton led 8-4 after one quarter, 19-6 at halftime, and 27-12 after three before the Cavaliers stormed back with 13 straight points. Roncalli had a chance to tie late, but Groton's defense held firm.

Trey Tietz led the Tigers with 13 points. Major Dolan and Zach Flihs each scored six, Briggs Conn had three, Trayce Schelle added two, and Ryder Schwan scored one. Roncalli was led by Andrew Bain and Brock Bowman with six points apiece, while Isaac Saylor added five.

Groton improves to 10-4 on the season and will travel to Deuel on Thursday for a varsity doubleheader. Roncalli falls to 4-8.

The varsity broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Dan Richardt at Groton Ford, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy and The MeatHouse in Andover. Rich Bosma did the commentary, Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera and Paul Kosel did the stats and technology. The junior varsity game was sponsored by Jerry and Becky Johnson. The C Game by Brian Dolan.

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House Cleaning Offered!

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I'm in Groton but am willing to drive to nearby towns!

The advertisement features a colorful background with a blue sky, white clouds, and a green landscape. At the top, there's a teddy bear, a baby bottle, and a stack of colorful blocks. To the right, there's a yellow bucket filled with cleaning supplies like a spray bottle, a brush, and gloves. Below the main text, there are three banners: a red one with a heart icon, a teal one with a broom icon, and an orange one with a torn paper effect. At the bottom, there's a small yellow house and a red car driving on a road.

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NEC Boys Basketball Standings


| | (C) | (S) |
|-------------------|-----|------|
| Clark/Willow Lake | 5-0 | 13-2 |
| Groton Area | 7-1 | 10-4 |
| Hamlin | 4-1 | 10-2 |
| Britton-Hecla | 5-2 | 10-5 |
| Webster Area | 4-3 | 6-6 |
| Sisseton | 2-3 | 7-6 |
| Roncalli | 3-4 | 4-8 |
| Milbank | 2-4 | 8-5 |
| Deuel | 1-3 | 5-8 |
| Redfield | 0-6 | 2-11 |
| Tiospa Zina | 0-6 | 3-10 |











NEC Girls Basketball Standings

| | (C) | (S) |
|-------------------|-----|------|
| Clark/Willow Lake | 5-0 | 11-1 |
| Hamlin | 5-0 | 11-1 |
| Roncalli | 5-1 | 11-2 |
| Deuel | 2-2 | 4-8 |
| Milbank | 4-3 | 10-2 |
| Groton Area | 5-2 | 10-5 |
| Webster | 3-5 | 4-9 |
| Sisseton | 2-2 | 5-7 |
| Britton-Hecla | 1-6 | 4-10 |
| Tiospa Zina | 1-6 | 4-9 |
| Redfield | 0-6 | 3-10 |

| # | Name | W | L | PCT | PTS |
|---|---|----|----|------|--------|
| 1 |  Groton Area | 10 | 4 | .714 | 43.429 |
| 2 |  Britton-Hecla | 10 | 5 | .667 | 41.333 |
| 3 |  Sisseton | 7 | 6 | .538 | 40.769 |
| 4 |  Milbank | 8 | 5 | .615 | 40.692 |
| 5 |  Webster Area | 6 | 6 | .500 | 40.250 |
| 6 |  Aberdeen Roncalli | 4 | 8 | .333 | 39.917 |
| 7 |  Redfield | 2 | 11 | .154 | 35.846 |

| # | Name | W | L | PCT | PTS | Season | Seed | Pts |
|---|---|----|----|------|--------|--------|------|-----|
| 1 |  Aberdeen Roncalli | 11 | 2 | .846 | 44.615 | | | |
| 2 |  Milbank | 10 | 2 | .833 | 43.417 | | | |
| 3 |  Groton Area | 10 | 5 | .667 | 43.333 | | | |
| 4 |  Sisseton | 5 | 7 | .417 | 39.583 | | | |
| 5 |  Webster Area | 4 | 9 | .308 | 39.385 | | | |
| 6 |  Redfield | 3 | 10 | .231 | 37.846 | | | |
| 7 |  Britton-Hecla | 4 | 10 | .286 | 37.214 | | | |

| # | Name | W | L | PCT |
|----|---|----|---|-------|
| 1 |  West Central | 16 | 0 | 1.000 |
| 2 |  Sioux Falls Christian | 11 | 1 | .917 |
| 3 |  Hamlin | 10 | 2 | .833 |
| 4 |  Clark/Willow Lake | 13 | 2 | .867 |
| 5 |  Mahpiya Luta | 13 | 2 | .867 |
| 6 |  Groton Area | 10 | 4 | .714 |
| 7 |  Sioux Valley | 10 | 4 | .714 |
| 8 |  Stanley County | 12 | 2 | .857 |
| 8 |  Wagner | 12 | 2 | .857 |
| 10 |  Pine Ridge | 9 | 6 | .600 |
| 10 |  Vermillion | 10 | 4 | .714 |
| 10 | Winner | 10 | 4 | .714 |
| 13 | Flandreau | 9 | 5 | .643 |
| 14 | St. Thomas More | 9 | 4 | .692 |
| 15 | Lennox | 8 | 5 | .615 |
| 16 | Cheyenne-Eagle Butte | 9 | 3 | .750 |

| # | Name | W | L | PCT | PTS |
|----|--|----|---|-------|--------|
| 1 |  Hamlin | 11 | 1 | .917 | 46.083 |
| 2 |  Mahpiya Luta | 15 | 0 | 1.000 | 46.000 |
| 3 |  Clark/Willow Lake | 11 | 1 | .917 | 45.583 |
| 4 |  Sioux Valley | 12 | 2 | .857 | 45.214 |
| 5 |  Lennox | 13 | 2 | .867 | 45.133 |
| 6 |  Wagner | 11 | 2 | .846 | 45.077 |
| 7 |  West Central | 10 | 4 | .714 | 44.714 |
| 8 |  Aberdeen Roncalli | 11 | 2 | .846 | 44.615 |
| 9 |  Sioux Falls Christian | 11 | 3 | .786 | 44.429 |
| 10 |  Moberidge-Pollock | 9 | 3 | .750 | 44.250 |
| 11 | Rapid City Christian | 14 | 3 | .824 | 44.000 |
| 12 | Lakota Tech | 11 | 4 | .733 | 43.467 |
| 13 | Milbank | 10 | 2 | .833 | 43.417 |
| 14 | Groton Area | 10 | 5 | .667 | 43.333 |
| 15 | St. Thomas More | 12 | 3 | .800 | 43.200 |
| 16 | Miller | 12 | 4 | .750 | 42.938 |

Council advances sewer surcharge, approves baseball program change

by Elizabeth Varin

Groton City Council members tackled a mix of long-term infrastructure planning and local quality-of-life items during their meeting Tuesday night, hearing updates on a major wastewater system improvement project, approving changes to a youth baseball program and advancing a new sewer surcharge tied to future expansion.

During the meeting, the council received an update on a wastewater system improvement project currently in the planning phases. The soil inspection has been completed, with nothing unexpected reported, said April Buller, project manager with IMEG Corp. A survey of the area has also been mostly completed, and IMEG is working through the schematic design.

The more than \$6.5 million improvement project has been in discussion since mid-2024, with funds coming from a state Department of Natural Resources 30-year loan and consolidated grant. However, the city has been told it must raise sewer rates, leading to a later item in Tuesday's meeting.

The council moved forward with a sewer system surcharge of \$35.40 per customer who receives or benefits from the new wastewater force main and lagoon expansion.

The council approved the first reading of the ordinance Tuesday night. The ordinance faces a second reading, likely at the council's next meeting, before going into effect.

Painting tabled for clarification

The council tabled a decision on a bid to paint the exterior of City Hall and the Wage Memorial Library.

The city received two bids, one from Custer Custom Homes and Renovations for \$29,999.76 and one from C. Eagle Construction for \$48,117.

Council members asked Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich to make sure the bidders plan to replace the cedar shakes, not just try to repair them, as well as specify a timeframe for the painting to be done.

Junior Teeners changing to 14U team

The council approved changing the Junior Teener VFW Baseball Team to a 14U Legion Baseball Team.

Baseball/Softball Foundation Treasurer Doug Hamilton asked the council to consider the change at its Jan. 20 meeting, saying the change would have little impact on the game for the 13 and 14-year-old players, but would shift it from the VFW-affiliated Teener program to the American Legion system.

About two dozen teams statewide have indicated plans to shift away from the Junior Teener team, Hamilton said, including many regional teams, though some like Webster plan to remain part of the VFW league.

- The council approved purchasing six radar speed signs to place on highways in town. The council approved paying ElanCity \$19,500 for the six solar-powered signs.

- The council approved a second reading of an ordinance setting salaries for seasonal summer employees. Applications for some of those positions – baseball coordinator, softball coordinator, junior legion coach, u14 coach, girls softball coaches, day baseball/softball coach, concession manager and swimming pool manager – are due by 5 p.m. Feb. 17. The council also voted to begin accepting applications for remaining summer recreation positions – public works laborer/park caretaker, cemetery caretaker, assistant part-time swimming pool manager, swimming pool lifeguards, baseball groundskeepers, baseball gatekeepers – with applications due by 5 p.m. March 3.



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- Family: \$67.10 per month or \$702.26 per year

MONTH-TO-MONTH

- Student: \$35.15 per month
- Single: \$40.48 per month
- 2-Person: \$59.78 per month
- Family: \$72.43 per month
- Senior/PT: \$20 per month



Call or Text Paul at 605/397-7460
Call or Text Tina at 605/397-7285

Same rates for several years!

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Tina's Baskets

605-397-7285



Reese's cake with mini Reese's on top
\$35.00



Mix candy cake with mini mix on top with
lights on the bottom
\$20.00



White heart shape with red roses and Fer-
rero chocolate candy with a bear with it
\$25.00



Bear sucker cake with life savers and dum
dum suckers in it
\$15.00

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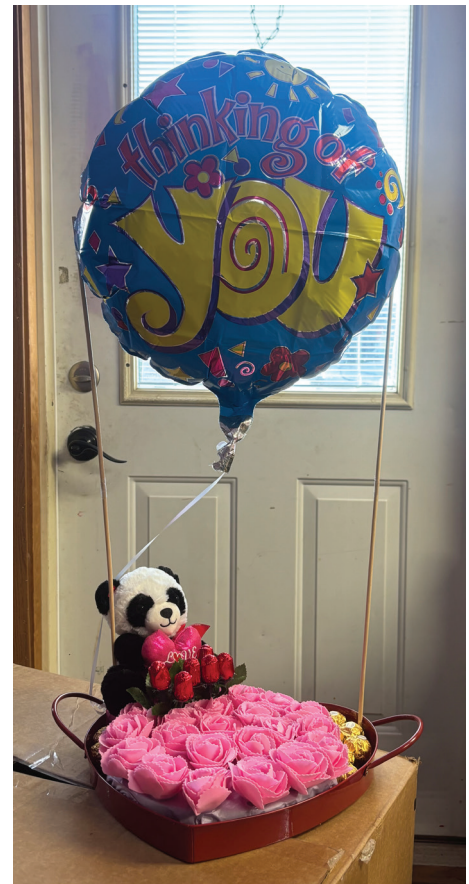
**Hersheys cake with strawberry drops and mini Hersheys on top
\$40.00**



**Laffy Taffy Octopus cake
\$ 15.00**



**Relax and Unwind basket with two wine bottles, blanket, adult coloring books and word finds with crayons and pens and some different chocolates as shown here
\$50.00**



**Thinking of you balloon with bear, red chocolate roses with pink roses and Ferrero Rocher chocolate candy
\$25.00**



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

'Bossly bill' aimed at preventing land survey abuses wins committee approval

Legislation arose from opposition to proposed Summit Carbon Pipeline

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

PIERRE — Property rights advocates in South Dakota advanced their "Bossly bill" on Tuesday, aimed at limiting the ways developers can use eminent domain to enter private land when a landowner says no.

The bill is named for Jared Bossly, of rural Aberdeen. He became a prominent opponent of Summit Carbon Solutions' proposed carbon dioxide sequestration pipeline after confrontations with the company as it attempted to access his land for surveys.

The company was exercising authority under the power of eminent domain, the legal process of acquiring access to private property for a public use. Subsequently, Bossly and others sued the company.

Bossly's wife, Tara, said the family's experience still haunts them. She alleged that surveyors entered the home while she was alone, showering.

"Your home is supposed to be your safe place, where you feel comfortable, safe, protected," she told lawmakers Tuesday. "But for my family, we no longer feel safe at home."

Jared and others said the surveyors' heavy equipment damaged his cropland.

Sen. Mark Lapka, R-Leola, is sponsoring the bill. It states that if a property owner denies permission, only an "examination," not a "survey," is permitted. Developers would need a pending or approved siting permit application detailing where and when they plan to enter, how long they plan to be there, and what they'll be doing.

The bill defines an "examination" as a minimally invasive procedure that causes no more than minor soil disturbance, while defining a "survey" as a more detailed, comprehensive or invasive investigation.

There was no opposition testimony and no votes against the bill in the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee.

Supporters tied the bill to a 2024 South Dakota Supreme Court ruling involving Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions and multiple landowners, including Bossly.

In addition to ruling that the company had not proven its project qualified for eminent domain, the court said the state's entry law permits only "minimally invasive superficial inspections" that cause minor soil disturbances without landowner consent.

Lapka told lawmakers the bill is intended to align state law with the court's guidance and to prevent future landowners from spending time and large sums on legal battles.

Summit's five-state pipeline would capture carbon dioxide from ethanol plants in South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa and Nebraska and transport it to an underground sequestration site in North Dakota, to capitalize on federal tax credits that incentivize the prevention of heat-trapping gases from entering the atmosphere.

The pipeline project has been granted permits in other states, but some permits have been challenged in court, and South Dakota regulators have twice denied permits for the project.

Landowner opposition to the project in South Dakota also culminated in the Legislature's passage of a law last year banning carbon pipelines from using eminent domain.

Lawmakers are considering a resolution this year that would ask South Dakota voters to put restrictions on eminent domain in a state constitutional amendment. That bill has passed the House and is awaiting consideration by a Senate committee.

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Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Disrupting worship services could become a felony as dueling bills advance to chamber floors

Legislator and governor both proposing legislation in response to protest at Minnesota church

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — Two pieces of legislation are going to South Dakota's House and Senate floors with different levels of increased penalties for disturbing worshippers.

One bill, introduced by Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer, R-Aberdeen, would create a new felony crime of entering or remaining in a place of worship with the intent to "menace or harass congregants or employees," or for "the purpose of political intimidation of or the incitement of fear of violence in those attending."

The crime would be punishable by up to five years in state prison and the possibility of a \$10,000 fine. The bill also protects the 50 feet around a house of worship an hour before or after services.

The House Judiciary committee advanced it Monday with a 7-4 vote.

"We live in increasingly dangerous times to be a Christian, conservative or even just a patriot who loves America," Schaeffbauer told the committee. "We are a divided nation and, sadly, even our houses of worship are now battlefields of this unfortunate political divide."

Motivated by Minnesota protest

Schaeffbauer said she was inspired by a protest last month in St. Paul, Minnesota, where demonstrators disrupted a church service while protesting the operations of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, resulting in arrests and federal charges. A pastor of the church works for ICE, which has had thousands of agents in Minnesota conducting enforcement actions for weeks. While operating in the state, federal agents shot and killed two U.S. citizens in January.

Schaeffbauer's bill brought questions from committee members and legal experts, some with concern for the 50-foot perimeter and one-hour time buffer it establishes.

"Where this would apply would apply to public forums, streets, sidewalks," said Cash Anderson with the South Dakota Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. "It can chill otherwise legal speech."

The bill is vague, said Samantha Chapman, American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota advocacy manager.

"It will be up to the law enforcement officer who's responding to determine what the intention was of the demonstrators," she said. "Ultimately, we think that this bill is a reactionary response."

One opponent, Sam Matson of the South Dakota Trial Lawyers Association, asked if actions by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement would also be prohibited by the bill.

Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, said he had a "pit in his stomach" over the legislation. He said the bill's reach is "overly broad."

"We already have criminal trespass on the statutes, we already have stalking," he said. "What are we doing here?"

South Dakota also has a law making it a misdemeanor crime to intentionally, by threats or violence, prevent another person from performing any lawful religious act.

Governor's bill

Separate legislation has been filed on behalf of Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden that would raise the pen-

alties in that existing law to a felony.

Schaeftbauer criticized that approach.

"It's really just updating words," she told the committee Monday. "Mine is a whole new section in our trespassing laws."

Rhoden's bill would make the existing crime punishable by two years in state prison, a \$4,000 fine or both. The current penalty is up to a year of county jail time and \$2,000 fine.

Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, is a sponsor of the governor's bill. He told a committee Tuesday that the bill was also inspired by the events in St. Paul.

"When people have that kind of hubris and pull a stunt like that," he said, "I don't think a misdemeanor is enough."

Chapman of the ACLU said there hasn't been a case tried in relation to the existing law since its adoption in the 1990s.

The governor's bill passed out of the Senate Judiciary committee with all "yes" votes, but some committee members raised concern about whether the felony charge would make a difference.

"Folks who are willing to put themselves in harm's way, including dying in the streets, there's an agenda that's occurring," said Sen. Tamara Grove, R-Lower Brule. "Two years in prison, that doesn't really deter someone who is motivated by a particular belief."

That belief, she told South Dakota Searchlight afterward, is Marxism.

"When you have that belief system, you're really willing to do whatever it takes to get done what you want to get done, and it begins with anarchy and a lot of chaos," she said. "I think it, at the end of the day, is a little bit political and so I did vote for it, but I don't think it's going to do a whole lot."

Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, also said the bill "feels like we're sending a political message."

The bills will be brought next to the full House and Senate, respectively.

Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.

Panel sends food stamp soda ban to full South Dakota House of Representatives

BY: JOHN HULT

The South Dakota House of Representatives will soon vote on a bill meant to bar the purchase of sweetened beverages with food stamps.

House Bill 1056 would require the state Department of Social Services to submit "a federal waiver request to exclude soft drinks from the supplemental nutrition assistance program," a reference to SNAP.

Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, the Sioux Falls Republican who presented the bill to the House Health and Human Services Committee on Tuesday, said 30 states either have or are pursuing similar waivers for recipients of SNAP benefits, often referred to as food stamps.

SNAP benefits are available to income-eligible families, and can be used to purchase nearly any kind of food or beverage. A waiver from the federal government would allow South Dakota to limit the kinds of food or beverages that can be purchased using the benefits, which are loaded onto cards that function like debit cards.

Supporters say soda ban could prevent disease

Rehfeldt told the committee that SNAP benefits are commonly used to buy sugary sodas and other sweetened drinks that contribute calories but not nutrition to a person's diet. They contribute to a host of health problems, she said, among them heart disease, obesity and diabetes.

Given that 78% of people on Medicaid get SNAP benefits in South Dakota, and that the state is set to

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spend more on Medicaid than education this year, Rehfeldt said the state ought to restrict soda purchases to combat preventative diseases long-term.

Medicaid is an insurance program that covers health care expenses for income-eligible and disabled people. Voters opted to extend Medicaid to more people through a 2022 ballot measure.

"We knowingly contribute to preventable disease in a population that's already at higher risk" by allowing SNAP recipients to purchase sweetened beverages, Rehfeldt said.

She also noted that a separate income-based nutrition program, Women, Infants and Children or WIC, already restricts what participants can purchase.

Her bill had the backing of the South Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children, the Foundation for Government Accountability, the South Dakota Dental Association, the South Dakota Medical Association, the South Dakota Academy of Physician Assistants and the South Dakota Chiropractors Association.

"South Dakota physicians have long been committed to reducing the obesity epidemic in South Dakota, and ensuring all South Dakotans have access to nutritious foods that are necessary for a healthy life," said Justin Bell, a lobbyist for the medical association.

Governor's office, retailers oppose bill

Laura Ringling, an adviser to Gov. Larry Rhoden, told the committee the executive branch supports a soda ban in theory and has had "extensive discussions" on the possibility of pursuing a similar waiver.

"This particular approach is just not the right path for South Dakota," said Ringling, who pointed out that Rhoden's office could pursue a waiver at any point, without legislation from state lawmakers.

The state would need to hire three employees and pay a contractor to administer the change to program eligibility. That would run the state about \$500,000 a year, Ringling said.

"That estimate is not a guess," she said. "That's based on conversations that we've had with neighboring states who are currently implementing similar waivers."

Ringling said that's too big a budget hit, especially given that changes in the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act have already heaped more than \$5 million in additional annual SNAP costs on the state.

In an email sent after the hearing on Tuesday, Department of Social Services spokeswoman Tracy Mercer said the state is now responsible for 75% of SNAP administrative costs. The split had been 50-50 between the state and federal government.

Retailers also lined up to oppose the measure, including the director of the South Dakota Retailers Association and a lobbyist for Casey's convenience stores. Several said that SNAP's lack of restrictions makes it simpler to comply with than WIC, the nutrition program that only allows for the purchase of certain healthy foods.

"Retailers lose money on WIC because of what the compliance requirements are," said RF Buche, a grocer who serves primarily rural and tribal communities. "But we do it because it's the right thing to do for our customers."

That might change if SNAP began to restrict beverages. He said South Dakota already has an outsized share of food deserts, a term denoting urban areas a mile or more from a grocery store, or rural areas 10 miles or more.

"By enacting this bill, an unintended consequence could be more of them," Buche said.

He also pointed out that as written, the bill restricts diet sodas and products like Pedialyte, used for quick hydration in children dehydrated by diarrhea and vomiting.

Bill earns committee support

Rehfeldt disputed the notion that administrative costs would burden South Dakota, listing off states like Texas, where leaders said administrators could handle soda restrictions with current staff.

The long-term savings of better health would outweigh those costs anyway, she said.

"It sounds like we have a lot of excuses to allow businesses to continue to make profits off the backs of

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our children and our most vulnerable populations," Rehfeldt said. "It is wrong."

Rep. Bobbi Andera, R-Sioux Falls, agreed, saying that a SNAP program whose nutritional requirements are closer to the WIC program is a wise move for South Dakota families.

"This is what's best for South Dakota," Andera said. "Other states have done it as well, and I think it's time we stepped up to the plate."

Rep. Brandei Schaeftbauer, R-Aberdeen, said she was torn on how to vote. She said the bill's goals are laudable, but that her time working at a food pantry gave her pause.

"I saw a lot of people who we served were on WIC and who were on SNAP," Schaeftbauer said. "There were a lot of children that their only sustenance for the day, unfortunately, was a can of Mountain Dew. Is it nutritious? Absolutely not. But did it fill their tummies? Yes, it did."

Schaeftbauer was one of two committee members to vote against the bill. The other no vote came from Rep. Eric Emery, D-Rosebud, who unsuccessfully pushed to move the bill to the budget committee for further review.

The bill passed 11-2 and now moves to the full House of Representatives for consideration.

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.

Trump doubles down on calling for the feds to take over state elections

BY: JACOB FISCHLER

President Donald Trump restated a call Tuesday for federal control over election administration across the country, undermining the structure outlined in the Constitution that empowers states to run elections.

For the second time in as many days, Trump indicated he wanted the federal government more involved in elections. The issue renews concerns over Trump's expansion of presidential power, which critics of his second presidency have labeled authoritarian.

Speaking after a bill signing ceremony in the Oval Office and surrounded by Republican leaders in Congress, he responded to a question about earlier comments on "nationalizing" election administration by indicating the lawmakers standing behind him should "do something about it."

"I want to see elections be honest," he said. "If you think about it, the state is an agent for the federal government in elections. I don't know why the federal government doesn't do them anyway."

Trump repeated debunked claims that he lost the 2020 presidential election only because of election fraud, especially in large Democrat-leaning cities including Atlanta, Philadelphia and Detroit.

"The federal government should not allow that," he said. "The federal government should get involved. These are agents of the federal government to count the votes. If they can't count the votes legally and honestly, then somebody else should take over."

The comments marked the second time in as many days that Trump has floated a federal takeover of election infrastructure and came after Republican leaders in Congress and the White House press secretary had downplayed his earlier remarks.

In a podcast interview released Monday, Trump said his party should "nationalize" elections.

"The Republicans should say, 'We want to take over,'" he said. "We should take over the voting, the voting in at least many — 15 places. The Republicans ought to nationalize the voting."

Afternoon walkback

Reporters asked U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune at press availabilities Tuesday about Trump's initial comments.

Both avoided endorsing the view and sought to tie them to GOP legislation that would create a nation-

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wide requirement that voters show proof of citizenship.

"We have thoughtful debate about our election system every election cycle and sometimes in between," Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, said. "We know it's in our system: The states have been in charge of administering their elections. What you're hearing from the president is his frustration about the lack of some of the blue states, frankly, of enforcing these things and making sure that they are free and fair elections. We need constant improvement on that front."

"I think the president has clarified what he meant by that, and that is that he supports the SAVE Act," Thune, a South Dakota Republican, said earlier Tuesday. "There are other views, probably, when it comes to nationalizing or federalizing elections, but I think at least on that narrow issue, which is what the SAVE Act gets at, I think that's what the president was addressing."

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt also endorsed the GOP elections bill and said states and cities that allow noncitizens to vote in local elections created a system that was rife with fraud. Reports of election fraud are exceedingly rare.

"There are millions of people who have questions about that, as does the president," she said. "He wants to make it right and the SAVE Act is the solution."

But Trump on Tuesday evening, with Johnson among those standing behind him, seemed to indicate a broader desire for the federal government to be directly involved with election administration.

2020 election history

Trump has a charged history with claims around election integrity.

His persistent lie that he won the 2020 election, despite dozens of court cases that showed no determinative fraud, sparked the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol as his supporters sought to reverse the election results.

He has continued to make the claim since returning to office and spoke by phone with FBI agents who seized voting machines in Fulton County, Georgia, according to New York Times reporting, raising questions about his use of law enforcement to reinforce his political power.

Trump's opponents, some of whom have said he is sliding toward authoritarianism in his second term, quickly rebuked his recent comments.

"Donald Trump called for Republican officials to 'take over' voting procedures in 15 states," Sen. Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat, wrote on social media. "People of all political parties need to be able to stand up and say this can't happen."

Walter Olson, a senior fellow with the libertarian Cato Institute, said in a statement that federalization of elections would be a bad idea on the merits, but Trump's history raised additional concern and called for Americans to be "vigilant against any repeated such attempt before, during or after the approaching midterms."

"This trial balloon for a federal takeover is not coming from any ordinary official," Olson said. "It is coming from a man who already once tried to overturn a free and fair election because it went against him, employing a firehose of lies and meritless legal theories, and who repeatedly pressed his underlings, many of whom in those days were willing to say 'no' about schemes such as sending in federal troops to seize voting machines."

Jacob covers federal policy and helps direct national coverage as deputy Washington bureau chief for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Trump signs funding bill, setting up immigration enforcement debate

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT, ARIANA FIGUEROA AND ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — The partial government shutdown that began this weekend ended Tuesday when President Donald Trump signed the funding package that both chambers of Congress approved within the last week.

"We've succeeded in passing a fiscally reasonable package that actually cuts wasteful federal spending while supporting critical programs for the safety, security and prosperity for the American people," Trump said in the Oval Office.

The House voted 217-214 earlier in the day to clear the package for Trump following a tumultuous couple of weeks on Capitol Hill after it had stalled in the Senate. Democrats demanded additional restraints on immigration enforcement in reaction to the shooting death of a second U.S. citizen in Minneapolis.

Trump and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., reached agreement last week to pull the full-year appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security and replace it with a two-week stopgap measure.

That is supposed to give leaders in Congress and the administration a bit of time to find consensus on changes to how immigration officers operate.

Trump did not say if he agreed with any of the proposed changes to immigration enforcement floated by Democrats.

"I haven't even thought about it," Trump said.

Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said during a morning press conference he wants negotiations to address local and state governments that don't cooperate with federal immigration enforcement activities, often called sanctuary cities.

"What must be a part of that discussion is the participation of blue cities in federal immigration enforcement," he said. "You can't go to a sanctuary city and pretend like the law doesn't apply there. It does and so we are going to be working through all that."

Administrative warrants debate

Johnson said GOP lawmakers would not agree to require federal immigration agents to secure judicial warrants in order to detain people, one of several proposals Democrats have put forward.

"We are never going to go along with adding an entirely new layer of judicial warrants because it is unimplementable," he said. "It cannot be done and it should not be done and it's not necessary."

Johnson, a constitutional lawyer, said those administrative warrants are "sufficient legal authority to go and apprehend someone."

When pressed if that type of warrant is enough to enter someone's home without violating the Fourth Amendment, Johnson said that a "controversy has erupted" over what immigration agents should do when someone they're trying to detain enters a private residence.

"What is Immigration and Customs Enforcement supposed to do at that point? 'Oh gee whiz, they locked the door. I guess we'll just go on.' So there is some logic and reason that is to be applied here," Johnson said. "Some have complained that the force has been excessive or what have you. I don't know. We're going to figure that out. It's part of the discussion over the next couple weeks."

Johnson said GOP negotiators will also make sure Congress maintains "important parameters" on immigration law and enforcement.

"We can't go down the road of amnesty, you can't in any way lighten the enforcement requirement of federal immigration law," he said. "That's what the American people demand and deserve."

Senators 'ready to work'

Senate Majority Leader John Thune said during an afternoon press conference that Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, chairwoman of the Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee, would lead negotiations for

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Republicans in that chamber.

"Katie Britt will lead that on our side, but ultimately, that's going to be a conversation between the President of the United States and (Senate) Democrats," Thune, a South Dakota Republican, said.

During an afternoon press conference, Schumer said that "Thune has to be a part of these negotiations."

Schumer said that Democrats are going to detail their proposals to Republicans in the House, Senate and White House.

"If Leader Thune negotiates in good faith, we can get it done," Schumer said of the Homeland Security funding bill.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., who serves as ranking member on the Senate Committee on Appropriations, said Senate Democrats are "ready to work."

"We have a proposal ready. We're going to start moving no matter who they (pick) at the end of the day, and the White House needs to be involved," Murray said.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said there are "a whole bunch" of proposals.

"The House had to do what they had to do ... which is great. And what we now have to do is figure out what's this universe of reforms that we can come to consensus on," said Murkowski, who issued a statement last week declaring her support for "meaningful reforms" for ICE.

'Most basic duty' of Congress

Connecticut Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the top Democrat on the Appropriations Committee, said during floor debate on the government spending package that clearing the legislation was the best way to move into negotiations about immigration enforcement.

"We will be in the strongest possible position to fight for and win the drastic changes we all know are needed to protect our communities — judicial warrant requirements, no more detentions or deportations of United States citizens, an enforceable code of conduct, taking off the masks, putting the badges on, requiring the body cameras, real accountability for the egregious abuses we have seen," she said.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Tom Cole, R-Okla., said funding the government "is not an optional exercise, it's the most basic duty we have in Congress."

"Shutdowns are never the answer, they don't work," he said. "They only hurt the American people. So today lawmakers in this chamber have an opportunity to avoid repeating past mistakes."

In addition to providing two more weeks of funding for the Department of Homeland Security, the \$1.2 trillion spending package holds full-year appropriations bills for the departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, State, Transportation and Treasury. The Senate voted 71-29 on Friday evening to send the package to the House.

Congress had already approved half of the dozen annual appropriations bills for the fiscal year that began back on Oct. 1.

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.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include immigration, congressional policy and legal challenges with a focus on how those policies impact the lives of immigrants and migrants coming to the U.S.

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

US House Democrats call for Kristi Noem's firing in rally outside ICE headquarters

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — Dozens of U.S. House Democrats and leaders of several caucuses rallied on a chilly Tuesday morning outside U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement headquarters in the nation's capital, demanding the resignation, firing or impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem.

Democrats criticized Noem for the monthslong immigration operation in Minnesota in which federal immigration agents killed two U.S. citizens — 37-year-old Renee Good, a poet and mother of three, on Jan. 7, and 37-year-old Alex Pretti, an intensive care unit nurse, on Jan. 24.

They blamed Noem for aggressive tactics used by ICE and other federal immigration agents in Customs and Border Protection and criticized the use of warrantless arrests as well as the presence of officers who are masked and unidentifiable. Such practices, as well as the deadly shootings, led to a partial government shutdown as lawmakers negotiate new constraints on immigration enforcement for the Homeland Security funding bill.

Democratic Rep. Robin Kelly, who represents parts of Chicago where aggressive immigration enforcement occurred late last year, said more than 180 lawmakers have co-sponsored her articles of impeachment against Noem.

"Kristi Noem brought a reign of terror to cities across the country," Kelly said. "Everywhere they go, ICE causes death and destruction. She seems to get her kicks and giggles out of tearing families apart."

Kelly said if Noem does not step down, Democrats will move forward with impeachment proceedings, which will likely only occur if Democrats flip the GOP-controlled House in the November midterm elections.

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to States Newsroom's request for comment. Noem is a former Republican member of the House from South Dakota.

Unannounced visits

Democrats also slammed Noem's attempts to block members of Congress from conducting unannounced oversight visits at detention centers that are permitted under a 2019 appropriations law.

A federal judge earlier this week placed a temporary bar on a second policy from Noem that required a seven-day notice for lawmakers to conduct oversight visits.

"We're gonna be able to exercise our oversight responsibilities and duties without any impairment or pushback from ICE or the Secretary (Noem)," said Adriano Espaillat, chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.

Most recent DHS data shows that there are more than 70,000 people in ICE detention custody across the country. It's nearly double the number of people detained during the last fiscal year of the Biden administration, when nearly 40,000 people were in ICE detention when Biden left office in January 2025.

Other Democratic caucus leaders rallying outside ICE headquarters included the second vice chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, Lucy McBath of Georgia; the chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, Grace Meng of New York; the chair of the Democratic Women's Caucus, Teresa Leger Fernández of New Mexico; and the chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, Greg Casar of Texas.

The Progressive Caucus has vowed to oppose any approval of funding for ICE following Pretti's death.

However, even if the Homeland Security bill for fiscal year 2026 is not approved, DHS still has roughly \$175 billion in funding for immigration enforcement that was provided from President Donald Trump's signature tax cuts and spending package signed into law last summer.

Casar called for an end to Trump's mass deportation campaign and immigration enforcement across the country.

"We are united as Democrats and united as a country, marching in the cold in Minneapolis, facing tear gas from coast to coast, marching to demand that we impeach Kristi Noem, that we end Donald Trump's mass deportation machine, and that we focus on the well-being and the constitutional rights of everyday people in the United States," Casar said.

Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar, who represents parts of Minneapolis, said her district is “currently under occupation” from ICE and CBP. She said students are afraid to go to school and immigrants are terrified to go to hospitals “because our hospitals have occupying paramilitary forces.”

Last week, a man rushed at Omar and used a syringe to squirt apple cider vinegar on her during a town hall where she called for ICE to be abolished and addressed concerns about immigration enforcement in Minneapolis. She was unharmed, but the attack followed an increase in threats to members of Congress, and the president has verbally attacked her multiple times.

Body cameras

Following the shootings in Minneapolis and sharp criticism from Republicans in Congress, Noem on Monday announced that immigration agents across the country would receive body cameras.

But California Democratic Rep. Norma Torres said body cameras were not sufficient, and she urged legal observers to keep recording and documenting ICE and CBP officers.

“Body cameras are not going to be enough if they continue to hide the evidence,” she said.

House Democrats were joined by about 200 protesters calling for Noem to resign.

Don Powell, 67, of Austin, Texas, said he and his wife have been traveling around to anti-ICE protests.

“It’s just the immorality of how they are treating children and adults. Nobody deserves to be treated that way for the crime, in theory, that they committed of crossing a border,” Powell said.

He also expressed objection to the Trump administration’s policy of deporting immigrants to “some foreign country they’ve never been to.”

Those removals of an immigrant from the U.S. to another place that is not their home country are known as third-country removals. The Trump administration is currently being sued over the practice by immigrant and civil rights groups.

Jeanne Ferris, 71, of Bethesda, Maryland, said she’s been to 16 anti-ICE rallies this year and attended 119 anti-Trump rallies in 2025.

“I’m opposed to the felon-in-chief forming his own private army and letting them loose on the American public and everybody else that happens to be there,” Ferris said.

Ashley Murray contributed to this report.

Ariana covers the nation’s capital for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include immigration, congressional policy and legal challenges with a focus on how those policies impact the lives of immigrants and migrants coming to the U.S.

Bill protecting doctors who prescribe unproven COVID treatments heads to SD House for a vote

BY: JOHN HULT

A South Dakota legislative panel greenlit a bill Tuesday that offers liability protections for doctors and pharmacists who issue or fill off-label prescriptions for antiparasitic and antimalarial drugs.

House Bill 1068 is specific to ivermectin — which is approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat blood parasites in humans — and hydroxychloroquine, approved for the treatment of malaria, lupus, and rheumatoid arthritis.

The drugs caught on as alternative treatments for COVID-19, though neither is authorized for use as a treatment for the disease by the FDA. President Trump promoted hydroxychloroquine in 2020, and said he’d used it himself as a preventative measure against COVID-19. U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has endorsed the use of both drugs as COVID treatment alternatives.

The FDA in 2020 cautioned against the use of hydroxychloroquine for COVID-19. Ivermectin, the agency said, is not approved for the treatment of COVID-19, but “health care professionals may choose to prescribe or use an approved human drug for an unapproved use when they judge that the unapproved use

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is medically appropriate for an individual patient.”

Poison control calls tied to the misuse of the medications spiked during the pandemic, but some patients and providers have maintained that the drugs helped ease the symptoms of COVID-19.

Rep. Bobbi Andera, R-Sioux Falls, said at the height of the pandemic, some pharmacists refused to fill prescriptions for the medications as COVID-19 treatments over fears of lawsuits or disciplinary action from licensure organizations.

“Patients and their families were asking, ‘Why? Why are we being forced to accept a certain type of treatment? Why can’t we try something else? We don’t understand,’” Andrea said.

Under the bill “a physician, acting in good faith” in prescribing the medication “is not criminally or civilly liable, or subject to disciplinary or adverse action.”

Pharmacists, meanwhile, would be immune from liability if they dispense the drugs “in accordance with a written protocol, developed by a physician.”

Lobbyists for the South Dakota State Medical Association, South Dakota Trial Lawyers Association and South Dakota Department of Health are among those opposed to the bill. State Health Department Secretary Melissa Magstad said there are already protections for doctors who prescribe medications off-label under South Dakota law and that the bill creates a separate carve-out for two medicines.

Tim Rave, who represents the South Dakota Association of Health Care Organizations, said the bill’s protections for good-faith providers are welcome for physicians. But he cautioned that there’s danger in removing a patient’s ability to sue doctors who prescribe recklessly.

“What if you have a physician that writes a protocol for a dose that causes side effects?” Rave said. “We know that side effects range from neurological deficits all the way to death.”

Supporters said the current law doesn’t offer enough protection to doctors who might use the drugs properly and framed the bill as a bulwark against government or corporate interference with health care decisions.

“This is a good bill for medical freedom,” said Rep. Dylan Jordan, R-Clear Lake, who said he “had family members” who benefitted from ivermectin after catching COVID-19.

The committee passed the bill on to the full House of Representatives on an 8-4 vote.

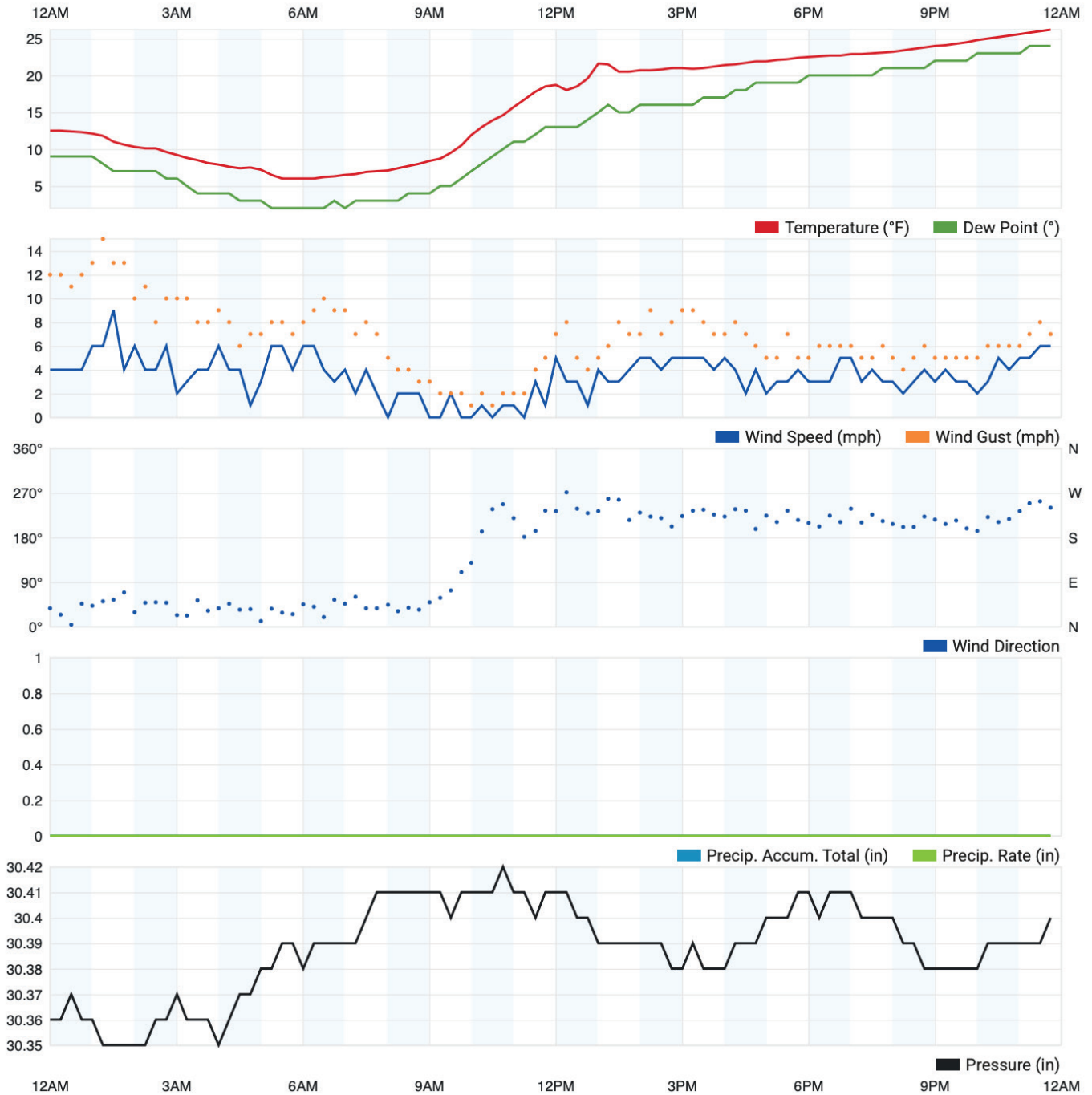
John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

February 3, 2026



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Today



High: 32 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Tonight



Low: 27 °F↑

Mostly Cloudy

Thursday



High: 45 °F

Sunny

Thursday
Night



Low: 28 °F

Mostly Clear

Friday



High: 36 °F

Partly Sunny



Milder Temperatures Next Several Days

February 4, 2026
2:34 AM CST

| | | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat | Sun | Mon |
|------------|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Aberdeen | Max Temp | 31 | 47 | 36 | 41 | 44 | 49 |
| | Min Temp | 21 | 30 | 21 | 20 | 24 | 30 |
| | WindGust | 35↓ | 22↔ | 23↘ | 24↑ | 16↔ | 17↑ |
| Miller | Max Temp | 34 | 52 | 42 | 49 | 50 | 55 |
| | Min Temp | 26 | 35 | 27 | 24 | 28 | 35 |
| | WindGust | 23↘ | 28↘ | 26↘ | 26↑ | 17↔ | 18↔ |
| Mobridge | Max Temp | 35 | 49 | 38 | 45 | 50 | 49 |
| | Min Temp | 25 | 34 | 28 | 26 | 27 | 31 |
| | WindGust | 29↓ | 24↘ | 24↘ | 20↘ | 16↔ | 16↔ |
| Murdo | Max Temp | 42 | 60 | 46 | 55 | 59 | 59 |
| | Min Temp | 28 | 39 | 32 | 32 | 30 | 35 |
| | WindGust | 23↘ | 29↘ | 24↘ | 26↔ | 17↔ | 20↔ |
| Ortonville | Max Temp | 25 | 41 | 37 | 38 | 40 | 46 |
| | Min Temp | 17 | 27 | 15 | 14 | 23 | 28 |
| | WindGust | 18↓ | 26↘ | 28↘ | 23↑ | 13↓ | 16↑ |
| Pierre | Max Temp | 40 | 58 | 43 | 53 | 56 | 57 |
| | Min Temp | 28 | 36 | 31 | 29 | 29 | 33 |
| | WindGust | 16↔ | 22↔ | 20↘ | 21↔ | 13↔ | 16↔ |
| Sisseton | Max Temp | 31 | 41 | 38 | 36 | 40 | 46 |
| | Min Temp | 17 | 32 | 16 | 15 | 23 | 30 |
| | WindGust | 26↔ | 30↘ | 31↘ | 25↑ | 16↔ | 17↑ |
| Watertown | Max Temp | 27 | 41 | 36 | 39 | 40 | 47 |
| | Min Temp | 18 | 27 | 18 | 16 | 23 | 29 |
| | WindGust | 22↔ | 26↘ | 28↘ | 28↑ | 16↔ | 20↑ |

Temperatures 5 to 20 degrees above normal

Clouds lingering into Thursday

The last of the Arctic Cold has been scoured from the region, and over the next few days the milder air that has moved in will be the dominant weather story. With a lack of strong systems, not only is it going to be mild, but mostly dry as well.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 26 °F at 11:26 PM

Low Temp: 6 °F at 5:51 AM

Wind: 17 mph at 1:04 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 2005

Record Low: -36 in 1893

Average High: 26

Average Low: 3

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.08

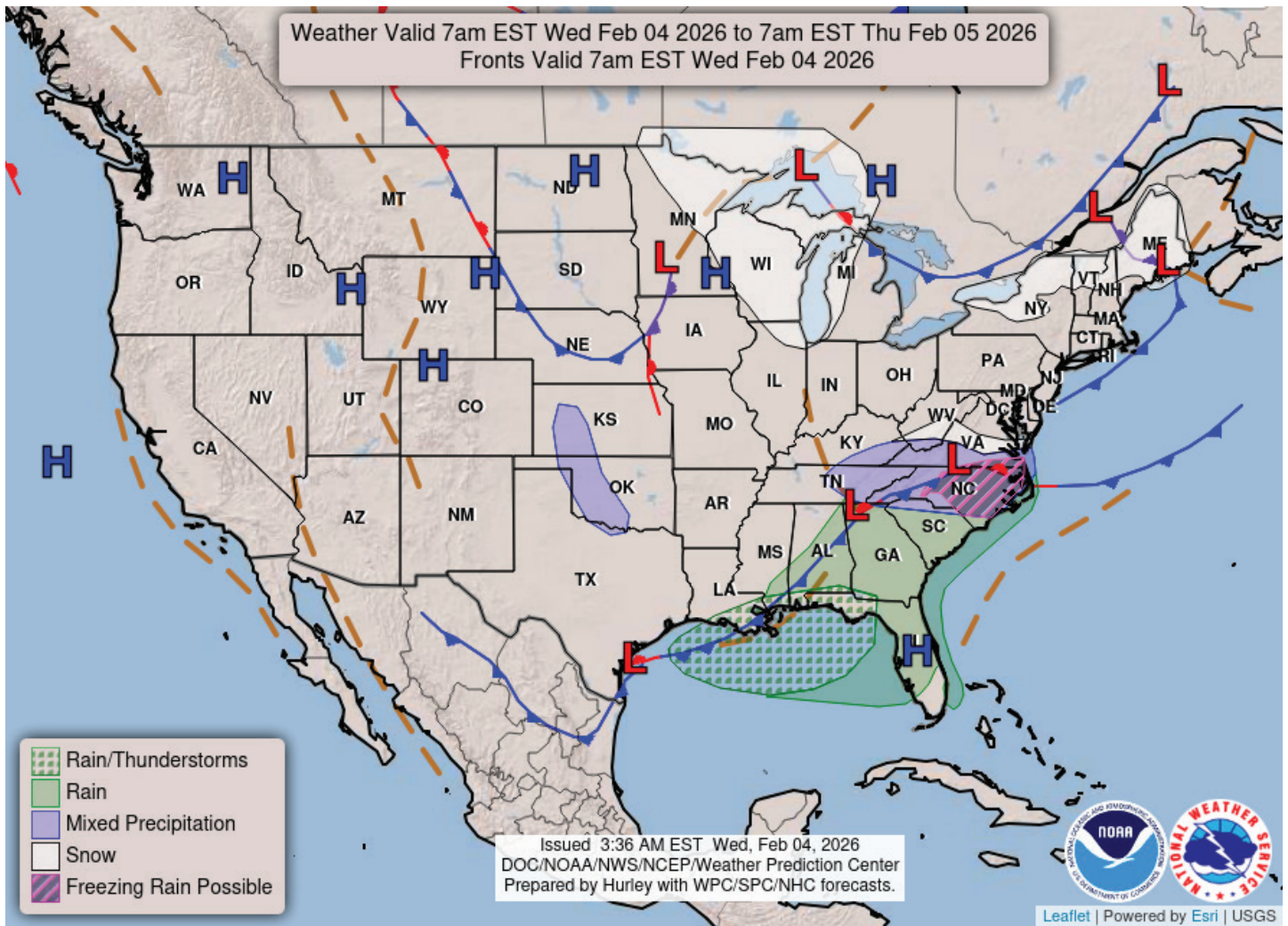
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.63

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:42 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:48 am



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Today in Weather History

February 4, 1984: A fast-moving blizzard pounded the northeast and east-central with light snow and raging winds. Snow amounts were less than 2 inches region-wide. As the storm progressed, temperatures dropped thirty degrees in three hours as winds gusted to 70 mph. Fierce winds struck quickly, plummeting visibilities to zero, and made travel difficult in a matter of minutes. No travel was advised across much of the area. Hundreds of travelers became stranded in the white-out, and the highway crews were pulled off the road to wait for decreasing winds. There were also some spotty power outages.

1842: A dreadful tornado passed over Mayfield, Kirkland, and other Cuyahoga and Lake Counties in Ohio. According to the Cleveland Herald, no less than 30 houses, barns, and buildings were entirely demolished or very much shattered. A "report from Kirtland says that one man and one child are dead."

1924: In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 20.3 inches of snow fell in 24 hours. This ranks as the most snowfall in 24 hours since 1884. This storm caused over \$1 million in damage. Streetcar and train service crippled. Snowdrifts of 8 to 10 feet high were common, along with much ice on trees and wires. Schools were closed, and several plate glass windows were broken.

1961 — The third great snowstorm of the winter season struck the northeastern U.S. Cortland NY received 40 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1987 — Gales lashed the northern Pacific coast and the coast of northern New England. A storm in the central U.S. produced five inches of snow at Rapid City SD. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 — A winter storm produced heavy snow from the Upper Ohio Valley to New England, with up to 12 inches reported in Vermont and New Hampshire. Strong northerly winds in the Upper Midwest produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Two dozen cities in the south central and northwestern U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. The low of 14 below zero at Boise ID was a February record. A winter storm continued in the southwestern U.S. Alta UT reported 49 inches of snow in four days, Wolf Creek CO reported 66 inches in six days, including 28 inches in 24 hours, and up to 84 inches buried the ski resorts of northern New Mexico in three days. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — A winter storm produced heavy snow in the northeastern U.S. Snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to 13 inches at Gorham, with 11 inches reported at Portland. Totals in New Hampshire ranged up to 14 inches at Franconia, with 13 inches reported at Portsmouth. A mixture of snow, sleet and freezing rain caused numerous traffic accidents in eastern New York State resulting in three deaths and fourteen injuries. Subzero cold also gripped parts of the northeastern U.S. Caribou ME and Houlton ME reported morning lows of 15 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995: A massive nor'easter pounded areas from the southern Mid-Atlantic to northern New England. It would be the only significant storm in the 94-95 winter season. Over 20 inches of snow buried parts of upstate New York. Wind chills dropped as cold as 40 degrees below zero. Behind the storm, arctic air crossing the relatively warm waters of the Great Lakes produced intense lake effect squalls for nearly two weeks from the 4th through the 14th. Snowfall totals for the storm ranged from near two to seven feet. During the storm east of Lake Ontario, snow was falling at the incredible rate of five inches an hour! The heavy snow combined with strong winds produced whiteouts and hazardous driving. Actual storm totals downwind of Lake Erie included: Erie County: West Seneca 39 inches, Orchard Park 36 inches, Cheektowaga 36 inches, Colden 32 inches, and Buffalo Airport 31 inches; Genesee County: Corfu 38 inches; Chautauqua County: Sinclairville 27 inches and Jamestown 15 inches. Downwind of Lake Ontario, storm totals included: Oswego County: Palermo 85 inches, Fulton 60 inches, and Oswego 46 inches; Lewis County: Montague 66 inches, Highmarket 48 inches, and Lowville 36 inches; Cayuga County: Fairhaven 36 inches, Wayne County: Wolcott 22 inches; and Jefferson County: Adams 47 inches.

2004 — 7.15 inches of rain deluges Pinson, AL, setting an all-time record rainfall over 24 hours for the town. The Weather Doctor

2007 — Kahului reports a minimum temperature of 54F, a daily low temperature record for the date. The Weather Doctor

2011 — A winter storm settled four to six inches of snow over northern Texas, including Dallas, just days before the Super Bowl between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Green Bay Packers.

The Passion to Serve Him

Are you serving the Lord with the gifts He's given you?

2 Corinthians 11:22-31: 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

23 Are they servants of Christ?--I speak as if insane--I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

24 Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes.

25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.

26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren;

27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.

29 Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

30 If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.

31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.

In today's passage, Paul's description of his suffering is remarkable. He faced considerable hardship for his faith, but he refused to whine or seek pity. If this was the price for passionately serving Christ, Paul was willing to pay. The apostle's commitment can teach us important lessons about our own walk of faith:

We serve according to God's will, not our own. On the road to Damascus, Jesus said to Paul, "It will be told you what you must do" (Acts 9:6). We are to seek the Lord's direction and timing. Committing to do whatever He asks requires courage; instead of placing limitations on our obedience, we must be brave.

We serve according to our gifts, not our talents. A spiritual gift is the special endowment God gives us to serve where He calls. Talents may be useful in His work, but His gifts equip us. Natural skill wasn't what made Paul a powerful preacher. In fact, he spoke of the uselessness of his abilities and pedigree in comparison with knowing and serving Christ (Philippians 3:4-9).

Even when we stay focused and serve using our gifts, there may be moments when service feels hard or draining. Yet it will, overall, be filled with joy and satisfaction. Are you serving the Lord with the gifts He's given you?

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

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The Groton Independent

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.03.26

5 11 22 25 69 21

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$346,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 15 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.02.26

10 30 40 47 50 1

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$14,680,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 30 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.03.26

6 14 19 31 44 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 45 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.31.26

16 19 20 34 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$242,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 45 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.02.26

4 8 22 40 61 16

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 14 Mins 37 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

02.02.26

3 8 31 60 65 4

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$80,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 14 Mins 38 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 73, North Central 49
Britton-Hecla 45, Sisseton 37
Centerville 65, Alcester-Hudson 45
Chamberlain 61, Platte-Geddes 46
Chester 55, Parker/Marion 52
Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 68, Takini 42
Corsica/Stickney 67, Burke 41
Crawford, Neb. 55, Oelrichs 22
Douglas 55, Custer 42
Dupree 63, Timber Lake 60
Flandreau 62, Dell Rapids 54
Garretson 62, Baltic 58
Gettysburg 75, Redfield 66
Groton 83, Aberdeen Roncalli 50
Hamlin 71, Milbank 42
Hill City 57, Chadron, Neb. 37
Howard 59, Irene-Wakonda 41
James Valley Christian School 56, Hitchcock-Tulare 50
Jones County 84, Sully Buttes 54
Kadoka 81, Bennett County 57
Lennox 74, Elk Point-Jefferson 34
Lower Brule 97, Crow Creek Tribal School 57
Madison 56, Deubrook 52, OT
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 56, Rapid City Christian 49
McCook Central-Montrose 41, Parkston 33
Mobridge-Pollock 58, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 49
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 65, Gregory 58
New Underwood 71, Philip 54
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 58, Ethan 39
Scotland/Menno 53, Avon 50
Sioux Falls Jefferson 67, Mitchell 61
Sioux Falls Lincoln 78, Watertown 55
Sioux Falls Lutheran 76, Flandreau Indian 60
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 72, Huron 65
Sioux Falls Washington 74, Brookings 64
Spearfish 76, Lead-Deadwood 33
St Thomas More 62, Sturgis Brown High School 34
Stanley County 56, Todd County 54
Sundance, Wyo. 49, Harding County 46
Tea 61, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 53
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 41, Gayville-Volin High School 34
Viborg-Hurley 66, Canistota 26
WWSSC 58, Ethan 39
Wagner 75, Hanson 53
Waubay/Summit 65, Northwestern 46

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Webster 57, Great Plains Lutheran 38
Wessington Springs 62, Iroquois-Lake Preston 52
West Central 60, Tri-Valley 27
Winner 61, Miller 59, 2OT
Yankton 51, T F Riggs High School 43

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

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Avon 42, Scotland/Menno 33
Castlewood 55, DeSmet 47
Centerville 66, Alcester-Hudson 38
Chester 56, Parker/Marion 32
Clark-Willow Lake 71, Elkton-Lake Benton 34
Colman-Egan 62, Emery 37
Corsica/Stickney 65, Burke 34
Crawford, Neb. 73, Oelrichs 19
Deubrook 59, Madison 33
Deuel 60, Tiospa Zina 46
Douglas 45, Custer 44
Estelline-Hendricks 60, Waverly-South Shore 35
Ethan 52, WWSSC 34
Flandreau Indian 52, Sioux Falls Lutheran 46
Garretson 45, Baltic 35
Gayville-Volin High School 52, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 25
Gettysburg 40, Redfield 39
Gregory 48, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 44
Hamlin 39, Milbank 36
Harding County 66, Lemmon High School 33
Herried-Selby 54, Faith 37
Highmore-Harrold 61, Sunshine Bible Academy 10
Hill City 50, Chadron, Neb. 41
Hitchcock-Tulare 57, James Valley Christian School 31
Hot Springs 37, New Underwood 28
Huron 48, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 38
Ipswich 44, Leola-Frederick High School 34
Irene-Wakonda 55, Howard 40
Jones County 54, Sully Buttes 34
Lennox 52, Elk Point-Jefferson 35
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 54, Rapid City Christian 34
McIntosh High School 51, Bison 30
Miller 46, Winner 39
Mitchell 60, Sioux Falls Jefferson 55
North Central 57, Aberdeen Christian 31
Parkston 54, McCook Central-Montrose 46
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 85, Tea 51
Sioux Falls Washington 67, Brookings 45
Sioux Valley 59, Dakota Valley 51
Sisseton 58, Britton-Hecla 30

Spearfish 62, Lead-Deadwood 8
Sturgis Brown High School 45, Belle Fourche 25
Todd County 69, Stanley County 32
Vermillion 74, Beresford 56
Viborg-Hurley 45, Canistota 33
Wagner 71, Hanson 45
Warner 46, Faulkton 29
Watertown 49, Sioux Falls Lincoln 29
Waubay/Summit 60, Northwestern 47
Webster 42, Great Plains Lutheran 40
Wessington Springs 49, Iroquois-Lake Preston 31
West Central 54, Tri-Valley 43
Wolsey-Wessington 58, Kimball-White Lake 44
Yankton 54, T F Riggs High School 33

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

The former Prince Andrew moves to King Charles III's private estate amid Epstein document uproar

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The former Prince Andrew has moved out of his long-time home on crown-owned land near Windsor Castle earlier than expected after the latest release of documents from the U.S. investigation of Jeffrey Epstein revived questions about his friendship with the convicted sex offender.

The 65-year-old brother of King Charles III, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, left the Royal Lodge in Windsor on Monday and is now living on the king's Sandringham estate in eastern England, a person familiar with the matter said. British media reported that Mountbatten-Windsor will live temporarily at Wood Farm Cottage while his permanent home on the estate undergoes repairs.

Mountbatten-Windsor's move to Sandringham was announced in October when Charles stripped him of his royal titles amid continuing revelations about his links to Epstein. But the former prince was expected to remain at Royal Lodge, where he has lived for more than 20 years, until the spring.

The expedited departure came as Thames Valley Police announced that they were investigating allegations that Epstein flew a second woman to Britain to have sex with Mountbatten-Windsor. A lawyer for the alleged victim told the BBC that the encounter took place in 2010 at Royal Lodge.

The allegations are separate from those made by Virginia Giuffre, who claimed she had been trafficked to Britain to have sex with Andrew in 2001, when she was just 17. Giuffre died by suicide last year.

Mountbatten-Windsor has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing in his relationship with Epstein. He hasn't responded publicly to the new trafficking allegation.

Mountbatten-Windsor features a number of times in the 3 million pages of documents the U.S. Department of Justice released on Friday.

Correspondence between Epstein and someone believed to be Mountbatten-Windsor show Epstein offering to arrange a date between the man and a 26-year-old Russian woman. The man, who signs off simply as "A," later suggests that he and Epstein have dinner in London, either at a restaurant or Buckingham Palace.

The former prince's residence at Royal Lodge has long been a point of contention between the king and his brother.

After Charles became king in 2022, he tried to force his brother to move into a smaller house on the Windsor Castle estate. Mountbatten-Windsor refused, citing a lease on the property that ran through 2078.

But the pressure for him to leave became irresistible in October as lawmakers and the public raised questions about the favorable terms of Mountbatten-Windsor's lease on the 30-room house and surrounding estate, which is managed by the Crown Estate.

The Crown Estate controls properties throughout the country that are technically owned by the monarchy but are managed for the benefit of British taxpayers.

By contrast, the Sandringham Estate in Norfolk is the personal property of the king.

China's Xi and Russia's Putin reinforce ties in video call

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed his country's growing economic cooperation with China in a video call with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Wednesday.

The virtual meeting came in the middle of a series of meetings between Xi and Western leaders who have sought to boost ties with China despite differences over Russia's war in Ukraine. European leaders have pressed China for years to end its support for Russia. China has continued to trade with Russia, providing some relief from Western economic sanctions.

"I would like to once again assure you of firm support for our shared efforts to ensure the sovereignty and security of our countries, our socio-economic welfare and the right to choose our own development path," Putin said in opening remarks that were broadcast by Russian state television.

Many of America's closest partners are exploring opportunities with China following clashes with President Donald Trump over tariffs and his demands to take over Greenland from NATO ally Denmark. The Xi-Putin call followed visits by the British and Canadian prime ministers to Beijing last month. The German chancellor is also expected to visit later this month.

The Russian leader noted that "our partnership in the energy sphere is mutually beneficial and has a truly strategic character."

He added that the two countries were "conducting an active dialogue in peaceful use of nuclear energy and developing high-tech projects, including in the industry sphere and space research."

Xi said that he and Putin would discuss a new "grandiose plan for the development of bilateral ties" and "exchange views on major strategic issues," according to a Russian translation of his opening remarks. He noted that the two countries need to "use a historic opportunity to continue deepening strategic cooperation."

The call may have been in part to reassure Russia that China's position on the Ukraine war hasn't changed.

Russian Security Council Secretary Sergey Shoigu also visited Beijing last weekend, during which he met China's top foreign policy official, Wang Yi. The two officials agreed their countries should maintain close ties in a turbulent world, state media reports said.

Putin, in his call with Xi, applauded China's decision to allow visa-free entry for Russians, their partnership in energy including the peaceful use of nuclear power, and high-tech cooperation in space and industry.

He also noted that Wednesday marked the beginning of spring in the traditional Chinese calendar and said that "any season is springtime in Russia-China relations."

Italy gets creative as it works to make art accessible for blind people

By ALESSANDRA TARANTINO and ANDREW MEDICHINI Associated Press

ROME (AP) — On a recent weeknight, long after the swarms of tourists had left Rome's Colosseum, a small group of people walked around outside the darkened amphitheater, pausing every so often to take in a new aspect of its history, art or architecture with every sense but sight.

Michela Marcato, 54, has been blind since birth. She and her partially sighted partner were touring the site amid a new effort by Italy to make its myriad artistic treasures more accessible to people with blindness or low vision and enhance how all visitors experience and perceive art.

As she listened to her tour guide, Marcato traced her fingers over a small souvenir model of the Colosseum. She felt the grooves of its archways and rugged rubble of its crumbled side. What she hadn't realized before holding it was the elliptical shape of building.

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"Walking around it, I personally would never have realized it. I would never have understood it," she said. "But with that little model in your hand, it's obvious!"

A different type of tourism

Italy and its art-filled cities have no shortage of tourists, but they haven't always been overly welcoming to visitors with disabilities. People who use wheelchairs often find elevators and doorways that are too narrow, stairs without ramps and uneven pavements.

But in 2021, as a condition of receiving European Union pandemic recovery funds, Italy accelerated its accessibility initiatives, dedicating more attention and resources to removing architectural barriers and making its tourist sites and sporting venues more accessible.

The ancient city of Pompeii recently installed a new system of signage to make the vast archaeological site more accessible to blind and disabled people. The project uses braille signs, QR-coded audio guides, tactile models and bas-relief replicas of artifacts that have been excavated over the years.

The city of Florence, for its part, has produced a guide on the accessibility options at the Uffizi Gallery and its other museums, with detailed information on routes and requirements — including the presence of companions — for sites such as the Boboli Gardens, which because of their historic structures are not fully accessible.

An inclusive tourism model doesn't just honor the human rights of people with disabilities; it also makes economic sense. Nearly half of the world's population aged over 60 has a disability, and disabled travelers tend to bring two or more companions, according to the World Tourism Organization.

A different way to experience art

Giorgio Guardi, a tour guide with the Radici Association, which has been leading tours of Rome for people with disabilities since 2015, said the aim of accessible tourism is to create an experience that is enjoyable for everyone involved, companions included.

That often means slowing down, touching what can be touched and experiencing artwork with different senses. The association often organizes walking tours at night, when there are fewer people out and less distracting ambient noise at famous landmarks.

But it isn't always possible for blind people to touch artworks, so guides have to get creative.

Take Rome's central Campo dei Fiori piazza and its imposing statue of Giordano Bruno, the 16th-century philosopher burned at the stake during the Inquisition for alleged heresy.

The statue, which stands atop a large pedestal in the middle of the piazza, is too high for visitors to touch. On a recent nighttime tour of the piazza, Guardi encouraged his clients to instead assume Bruno's position: Hunched over, wearing a heavy hooded cape and clasping a book with both hands.

As one of his clients assumed the position, Guardi draped the cape over him. Others in the group lined up to touch the Bruno impersonator to feel the contours of his drooped shoulders, heavy with the weight of the Inquisition. Visitors who were deaf were also part of the tour, aided by a sign-language interpreter who recounted Bruno's tragic end.

A museum featuring art by and for blind people

Aldo and Daniela Grassini, both blind, were avid travelers and art collectors who grew increasingly frustrated that they weren't allowed to touch art when they visited museums around the world. In the early 1990s, they founded what subsequently become Italy's only publicly funded tactile museum, the Museo Omero in the Adriatic coastal city of Ancona, where all the art is meant to be handled.

Named for the blind poet Homer, the museum features life-sized replicas of some of Italy's most famous artworks, from ancient Roman and Greek statues to the head of Michelangelo's David, as well as contemporary artworks.

"Touching something isn't like looking at it," said Aldo Grassini. "Not just because of the emotion it offers, but because of the type of knowledge that sensation provides."

Sight, he said, is an "overbearing sense that tends to monopolize reality," whereas touch offers a different dimension.

"We love with our eyes and with our hands. If we are in love with a person or an object that is particu-

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larly dear to us, is it enough to just look at it? No, we need to caress it, because caressing gives you a different emotion," he said.

One of the artists whose work is on display at the museum is Felice Tagliaferri, who himself is blind.

At his studio on the outskirts of Cesena, Tagliaferri points to a marble bust he sculpted of his late friend Angela. Tagliaferri recalled that before Angela died of breast cancer, he lay down in bed with her, caressing her bald head.

"When she passed away, Angela remained in my hands, and I recreated this sculpture thinking of her," he said.

Unpacking a picture of the sea

Marcato, the woman who toured the Colosseum, and her partner Massimiliano Naccarato live in a smart apartment on Rome's east side whose living room is dominated by a huge painting of the sea.

Naccarato, who can see using his cellphone to enlarge images and with the help of special lights, purchased the painting to celebrate a professional award, and it has pride of place in their home. He installed a special light behind the work so he can see it better.

Marcato can't see it at all, but she knows it's there. And her own experience at the beach informs the way she enjoys the painting.

For her, the painting recalls her love of the sea, "for the noise it makes, for the thousand different sounds it produces, for the smell you breathe in, for the walks you can take in any season."

It is a sensory way of appreciating art that has absolutely nothing to do with seeing it.

Greek rescuers search for potential missing people after deadly migrant boat collision

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greek coast guard patrol boats and a helicopter were searching for potential missing people off an eastern Aegean island Wednesday after an overnight collision between a patrol vessel and a speedboat carrying migrants that left at least 15 people dead.

Twenty-four migrants, including 11 children, were injured and were hospitalized on the island of Chios following the collision late Tuesday night. Two coast guard officers were also injured, with one remaining hospitalized Wednesday, the coast guard said.

The bodies of 11 men and three women were recovered from the sea shortly after the collision and one woman died later in a hospital, authorities said.

The number of people who had been on the speedboat was not clear. Four patrol boats, two helicopters and divers began the search overnight, which continued Wednesday morning with a helicopter and five patrol vessels.

Details of exactly what happened were unclear. According to a coast guard statement Wednesday, one of its patrol boats came across the speedboat late Tuesday night making its way towards Chios without its navigation lights on. The speedboat refused to stop despite sound and visual signals by the patrol boat crew and changed direction, colliding with the patrol boat and capsizing, the statement said.

Photos posted by the coast guard showed signs of abrasion on the patrol boat's right side. The coast guard's account could not be independently verified.

Michalis Giannakos, the head of Greece's public hospital workers' union, said Tuesday night that staff at the hospital in Chios were placed on alert overnight to handle the sudden influx of injured and dead. Speaking on Greece's Open TV channel, Giannakos said several of the injured required surgery.

Greece is a major entry point into the European Union for people fleeing conflict and poverty in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Fatal accidents are common. Many undertake the short but often perilous crossing from the Turkish coast to nearby Greek islands in the eastern Aegean, often in overcrowded inflatable dinghies. Others use high-speed vessels piloted by smugglers who deposit them on the island and then return to Turkey. But increased patrols and allegations of pushbacks — summary deportations without allowing for asylum applications — by Greek authorities have reduced crossing attempts.

Greece, along with several other European Union countries, has been tightening its regulations on migration. In December, the European Union was overhauling its migration system, including streamlining deportations and increasing detentions.

There has long been a fierce debate among EU members about migration. Since a surge in asylum-seekers and other migrants to Europe a decade ago, public debate on the issue has shifted and far-right parties have gained political power. EU migration policies have hardened, and the number of asylum-seekers is down from record levels.

The last US-Russian nuclear pact is about to expire, ending a half-century of arms control

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and HARRIET MORRIS Associated Press

The last remaining nuclear arms pact between Russia and the United States is set to expire Thursday, removing any caps on the two largest atomic arsenals for the first time in more than a half-century.

The termination of the New START Treaty would set the stage for what many fear could be an unconstrained nuclear arms race.

Russian President Vladimir Putin declared readiness to stick to the treaty's limits for another year if Washington follows suit, but President Donald Trump has been noncommittal about extending it.

Trump has repeatedly indicated he would like to keep limits on nuclear weapons and involve China in arms control talks, a White House official who was not authorized to talk publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity said Monday. Trump will make a decision on nuclear arms control "on his own timeline," the official said.

Beijing has balked at any restrictions on its smaller but growing nuclear arsenal.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Tuesday it would be a "more dangerous" world without limits on U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles.

Arms control advocates long have voiced concern about the expiration of New START, warning it could lead to a new Russia-U.S. arms race, foment global instability and increase the risk of nuclear conflict.

Failure to agree on keeping the pact's limits will likely encourage a bigger deployment, said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association in Washington.

"We're at the point now where the two sides could, with the expiration of this treaty, for the first time in about 35 years, increase the number of nuclear weapons that are deployed on each side," Kimball told The Associated Press. "And this would open up the possibility of an unconstrained, dangerous three-way arms race, not just between the U.S. and Russia, but also involving China, which is also increasing its smaller but still deadly nuclear arsenal."

Kingston Reif of the RAND Corporation, a former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense, also warned during an online discussion that "in the absence of the predictability of the treaty, each side could be incentivized to plan for the worst or to increase their deployed arsenals to show toughness and resolve, or to search for negotiating leverage."

Putin repeatedly has brandished Russia's nuclear might since sending troops into Ukraine in February 2022, warning Moscow was prepared to use "all means" to protect its security interests. In 2024, he signed a revised nuclear doctrine lowering the threshold for nuclear weapons use.

Signed in 2010

New START, signed in 2010 by U.S. President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, restricted each side to no more than 1,550 nuclear warheads on no more than 700 missiles and bombers — deployed and ready for use. It was originally supposed to expire in 2021 but was extended for five more years.

The pact envisioned sweeping on-site inspections to verify compliance, although they stopped in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and never resumed.

In February 2023, Putin suspended Moscow's participation, saying Russia couldn't allow U.S. inspections of its nuclear sites at a time when Washington and its NATO allies have openly declared Moscow's defeat

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in Ukraine as their goal. At the same time, the Kremlin emphasized it wasn't withdrawing from the pact altogether, pledging to respect its caps on nuclear weapons.

In offering in September to abide by New START's limits for a year to buy time for both sides to negotiate a successor agreement, Putin said the pact's expiration would be destabilizing and could fuel nuclear proliferation.

Rose Gottemoeller, the chief U.S. negotiator for pact and a former NATO deputy secretary-general, said extending it would have served U.S. interests. "A one-year extension of New START limits would not prejudice any of the vital steps that the United States is taking to respond to the Chinese nuclear buildup," she told an online discussion last month.

Previous pacts

New START followed a long succession of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms reduction pacts, starting with SALT I in 1972 signed by U.S. President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev — the first attempt to limit their arsenals.

The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty restricted the countries' missile defense systems until President George W. Bush took the U.S. out of the pact in 2001 despite Moscow's warnings. The Kremlin has described Washington's efforts to build a missile shield as a major threat, arguing it would erode Russia's nuclear deterrent by giving the U.S. the capability to shoot down its intercontinental ballistic missiles.

As a response to the U.S. missile shield, Putin ordered the development of the Burevestnik nuclear-tipped and nuclear-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered underwater drone. Russia said last year it successfully tested the Poseidon and the Burevestnik and was preparing their deployment.

Also terminated in 2019 was the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which was signed in 1987 and banned land-based missiles with a range between 500-5,500 kilometers (310-3,400 miles). Those missiles were seen as particularly destabilizing because of their short flight time to their targets, leaving only minutes to decide on a retaliatory strike and increasing the threat of a nuclear war on a false warning.

In November 2024 and again last month, Russia attacked Ukraine with a conventional version of its new Oreshnik intermediate-range ballistic missile. Moscow says it has a range of up to 5,000 kilometers (3,100 miles), capable of reaching any European target, with either nuclear or conventional warheads.

Trump's 'Golden Dome'

Without agreements limiting nuclear arsenals, Russia "will promptly and firmly fend off any new threats to our security," said Medvedev, who had signed the New START treaty and is now deputy head of Putin's Security Council.

"If we are not heard, we act proportionately seeking to restore parity," he said in recent remarks.

Medvedev specifically mentioned Trump's proposed Golden Dome missile defense system among potentially destabilizing moves, emphasizing a close link between offensive and defensive strategic weapons.

Trump's plan has worried Russia and China, Kimball said.

"They're likely going to respond to Golden Dome by building up the number of offensive weapons they have to overwhelm the system and make sure that they have the potential to retaliate with nuclear weapons," he said, adding that offensive capabilities can be built faster and cheaper than defensive ones.

Trump's October statement about U.S. intentions to resume nuclear tests for the first time since 1992 also troubled the Kremlin, which last conducted a test in 1990 when the USSR still existed. Putin said Russia will respond in kind if the U.S. resumes tests, which are banned by a global treaty that Moscow and Washington signed.

U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright said in November that such tests would not include nuclear explosions.

Kimball said a U.S. resumption of tests "would blow a massive hole in the global system to reduce nuclear risk," prompting Russia to respond in kind and tempting others, including China and India, to follow suit.

The world was heading toward accelerated strategic competition, he said, with more spending and increasingly unstable relations involving the U.S., Russia, and China on nuclear matters.

"This marks a potential turning point into a much more dangerous period of global nuclear competition, the likes of which we've not seen in our lifetimes," Kimball added.

India's Modi praised for US trade deal as opposition questions impact on agriculture

By RAJESH ROY Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian lawmakers from the ruling coalition praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday for striking a deal with the U.S. that seeks to reduce tariffs on Indian goods, while the opposition raised questions on the impact on sensitive sectors such as agriculture.

President Donald Trump on Monday announced he plans to reduce import tariff on India, six months after imposing steep taxes to punish New Delhi for its unabated purchase of Russian oil that he claimed helped fuel Moscow's war machine against Ukraine.

In a social media post, Trump said Modi has agreed to stop purchasing Russian oil, though the Indian government remained tight-lipped if this was the case.

US promises to reduce tariffs on India

Trump said he would bring down the tariffs from 25% to 18% in return for India agreeing to stop Russian crude purchases. New Delhi will also start to reduce its import taxes on U.S. goods to zero and buy \$500 billion worth of American products, Trump said.

"This will help END THE WAR in Ukraine, which is taking place right now, with thousands of people dying each and every week!" Trump wrote in a Truth Social post Monday.

Modi posted on X that he was "delighted" by the announced tariff reduction and that Trump's "leadership is vital for global peace, stability, and prosperity." There has been no word beyond this from the Indian side on the scale and scope of the trade deal.

Penal tariff for Russian oil purchases to go

Trump didn't categorically mention if he will remove the additional 25% tariff on India for purchase of Russian crude, but a spokesman at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi late Monday confirmed that "the final tariff will be 18%."

This effectively means that the penal tariff will be dropped, in a respite for Indian exporters who had been facing the heat due to a combined steep tariff as high as 50%.

India emerged as the second-largest buyer of discounted Urals, upsetting Washington. India has previously stated that its energy purchases were guided by market conditions and needs of 1.4 billion people but never made it clear if it will reduce or stop Russian purchases.

Opposition makes a stir in Parliament over agriculture

Opposition political parties are demanding Modi come clear on the trade deal as it will impact sensitive sectors such as agriculture. They disrupted the proceedings at the lower house, which was adjourned for the day.

While the U.S. has been seeking greater market access and zero tariff on almost all its exports, India has in the past opposed throwing open sectors such as agriculture and dairy, which employ a bulk of the country's population.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollings on X thanked Trump for taking care of American farmers, saying the deal will help export more American farm products to India's massive market, lifting prices and pumping cash into rural America.

In 2024, U.S. agriculture trade deficit with India was \$1.3 billion.

Indian Trade Minister Piyush Goyal said Tuesday that sensitive sectors such as agriculture and dairy have been protected in the deal.

"India has got the best deal in comparison to the countries in the neighborhood. Going forward the relationship between India and the U.S. will strengthen further," Goyal said. "I can assure 1.4 billion people of India that this is a deal that will protect the interests of every Indian and the sensitive sectors."

Analysts urge caution

A senior official at India's Finance Ministry, Arvind Shrivastava, said Tuesday that the trade deal will

"further expand and deepen trade between two of the largest economies of the world."

He said it will create more opportunities for India's labor-intensive and manufacturing sectors in the U.S. market and give impetus to mutually beneficial collaboration in high and advanced technology sectors.

An Indian trade analyst, Ajay Srivastava, cautioned India shouldn't rush to celebrate Trump's trade announcement.

What products are covered, what the timelines are and whether India has agreed to zero tariffs and zero nontariff barriers, especially in sensitive areas like agriculture, needs to be clarified, he added.

Reaching \$500 billion worth of imports of American goods would require at least two decades as the present imports are just about \$50 billion, Srivastava said.

Penny the Doberman pinscher wins the 150th Westminster dog show

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The dog was Penny. The win was priceless.

A Doberman pinscher named Penny won best in show Tuesday night at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, netting U.S. show dogs' most coveted prize — and giving veteran handler Andy Linton another win after nearly four decades. Linton got best in show in 1989 with another Doberman, named Indy.

Penny "is as great a Doberman as I have ever seen," Linton told a supportive crowd. Despite health problems, he guided the 4-year-old dog through an impeccably crisp performance.

"I had some goals, and this was one of them," Linton said, adding later in a conversation with reporters that as he's winding down his career, winning at the milestone 150th annual Westminster show is "extra-special."

Runner-up — and cheers just as loud — went to a Chesapeake Bay retriever named Cota. While Dobermans have won five times including Tuesday, no retriever has ever won, and their fans applaud every encouraging sign.

Cota also seemed to enjoy the moment, particularly when his handler, Devon Kipp Levy, let him play with the ribbon.

Other finalists included an Afghan hound named Zaida, a Lhasa apso called JJ, a Maltese named Cookie, an old English sheepdog dubbed Graham and a smooth fox terrier called Wager. The judge, two-time Westminster-winning handler David Fitzpatrick, called the lineup one "that will go down in history."

Each dog is assessed according to how closely it matches the ideal for its breed. The winner gets a trophy, ribbons and bragging rights.

A crowd favorite at the 2025 Westminster show, Penny has rocked show rings since. A throng of handlers and other dog folk cheered for the seemingly undistractable dog and for Linton in early-round action Tuesday afternoon.

Ringside afterward, Penny politely but pointedly nudged her nose into a visitor's leg, looking for something — pets, as it turned out. She's generally "very chill," Linton said later, "but she can get pretty pumped up for a bad guy. Or a squirrel."

Co-owner Greg Chan of Toronto said Penny is "very demanding and very smart," but she's also "a pleaser — she'll do anything for food." (Her favorite snack? "Everything.")

Penny came out on top after 2,500 dogs, spanning more than 200 breeds, strutted their stuff at the show.

Even if they didn't make the finals, there were plenty that scored meme-able moments or lightened up the crowd.

Over two nights of semifinals, spectators cheered extra-loud for a Xoloitzcuintli named Calaco, a hairless dog who went around the ring like he had nothing to prove. A vizsla named Beamer charmed the audience by hopping into a box set out for his handler's tools, and Storm the Newfoundland got laughs when he jumped up on his handler, standing as tall as she. Spectators cheered so loud for a golden retriever named Oliver that they drowned out the arena's announcer, and chants of "Lumpy! Lumpy!" resounded as Lumpy the Pekingese strolled before a judge.

One dog that made history in the semifinals was Millie, a Danish-Swedish farmdog. The small, spry breed just became eligible for the Westminster show this year, and Millie bested about 10 other farmdogs Tuesday afternoon to get to the evening round.

Westminster wins often go to pooches with professional handlers or owners with decades or even generations of experience behind them. But just reaching the elite, champions-only show is a major accomplishment in dogdom, especially for first-timers such as Joseph Carrero and his Neapolitan mastiff, Dezi.

After yearning for a Neo since his teenage years, Carrero finally got one when he was 35. A heavy equipment operator from Indian Springs, Nevada, he started showing the dog only because the breeder wanted him to. Now Carrero himself breeds and handles his Neos in the ring, while also working full-time and then some.

"It's really hard for us to do this, but we enjoy it, and he enjoys it," Carrero said as a visitors gathered around to greet the jowly, 190-pound dog.

Boerboels, which are formidable guard dogs originally from South Africa, played a major role in how Natalee Ridenhour met her late husband and why she eventually left metropolitan life for a farm in Royse City, Texas.

On Tuesday, Ridenhour and a Boerboel named Invictus did something else she once would never have pictured: compete at the Westminster show.

The dog didn't advance past the first round. But as a passer-by delightedly petted the 170-pound animal, Ridenhour said, "Honestly, the big win is: You're about the 50th person who's gotten down in his face and loved on him."

Women returning to Gaza say Israeli troops bound and interrogated them after Rafah crossing

By SAMY MAGDY, WAFAA SHURAFU and SAM METZ Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Many hoped the reopening of the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza would bring relief to the war-battered territory, but for the first few Palestinians allowed to cross, it proved more harrowing than a homecoming.

Three women who entered Gaza on the first day of the reopening told The Associated Press on Tuesday that Israeli troops blindfolded and handcuffed them, then interrogated and threatened them, holding them for several hours and inflicting what they said was humiliating treatment until they were released.

The three were among 12 Palestinians — mostly women, children and the elderly — who entered Gaza on Monday through Rafah, which reopened after being closed for most of the Israel-Hamas war. Israeli forces seized the crossing in May 2024.

Asked about the reports, the Israeli military said, "No incidents of inappropriate conduct, mistreatment, apprehensions, or confiscation of property by the Israeli security establishment are known." The Shin Bet intelligence agency and COGAT, the Israeli military body overseeing humanitarian aid in Gaza, did not immediately respond to questions about the women's allegations.

'A humiliation room'

The three women said the abuse took place at a screening station on the edge of the area of Gaza under Israeli military control that all returnees were required to pass through after crossing Rafah.

The 12 returnees were brought by bus through the crossing, then drove until they reached the Israeli military zone, said one of the returnees, Rotana al-Regeb, who was coming back with her mother, Huda Abu Abed. The two had left Gaza in March last year for the mother to get medical treatment abroad.

At the screening station, they were ordered out of the bus and members of an Israeli-backed Palestinian armed group, Abu Shabab, including one woman, searched their bags and bodies, she said.

Israeli officers then called them one by one into a room, she said. She said her mother was called first. When al-Regeb was called, she said she found her mother, who is in her 50s, kneeling on the floor, blindfolded with her hands handcuffed behind her back.

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Al-Regeb said Israeli soldiers did the same with her and took her to an "interrogation room — or, a humiliation room." They questioned her about Hamas and other things in Gaza, "things we didn't know and had no connection to," she said.

They also pressured her to act as an informant for the Israeli military, she said. "They threatened that they will detain me and I won't return to my children," said al-Regeb, who has four daughters and a son, living with her husband in a tent in Khan Younis. "There was no beating, but there were insults, threats, and psychological pressure."

Abu Abed, her mother, confirmed the account to the AP.

The third woman, Sabah al-Qara, a 57-year-old from Khan Younis who left for medical treatment in Egypt in December 2023, gave a similar account, describing being handcuffed, blindfolded and interrogated.

"They interrogated us and asked us about everything that happened in Gaza," she said. "We were outside Gaza and knew nothing The Israelis humiliated us."

An arduous day

Under the terms of Rafah's reopening, a European Union mission and Palestinian officials run the border crossing itself, though the names of those entering are first approved by Israel. Israel then has its screening facility some distance away. The military said authorities at the facility cross-check the identities of people returning to Gaza with Defense Ministry lists and screen their luggage.

Israeli authorities banned returnees from bringing in any liquid, including drinking water, according to some of those who crossed back to Gaza on Monday. Each passenger was allowed to carry one mobile phone and 2,000 shekels, the equivalent of about \$650, if they submitted a declaration 24 hours ahead of their travel.

Other electric and digital devices, as well as cigarettes, are not allowed, according to instructions that were posted on the Palestinian side of the crossing and shared with the AP.

Israel has said checkpoints — both in Gaza and the occupied West Bank — are for security. But Palestinians and rights groups have long claimed that Israel mistreats Palestinians passing through them and tried to gather information and recruit informants.

The women's ordeal came after a long and arduous day for the returnees, with far fewer Palestinians entering than expected and confusion over the rules.

Al-Regeb said 42 Palestinian patients and their relatives were brought to the Egyptian side of Rafah at 6 a.m. and completed their paperwork to cross at around 10 a.m. Monday. They then had to wait until around 6 p.m. for the gate to open for their buses. In the end, only one bus with the 12 people was allowed through, she and al-Qara said.

On the Gazan side of the crossing, the European team searched their luggage — loaded with gifts for relatives — and took much of it, al-Regeb and al-Qara said. Al-Regeb said they took mobile phones and food, kids games and electronic games. "We were only allowed to take the clothes on our backs and one bag per person," she said.

A person familiar with the situation speaking on condition of anonymity because they were discussing a diplomatic matter told the AP that returnees were carrying more luggage than anticipated, requiring additional negotiations.

The military said the luggage entry policy had been published in advance, without elaborating.

Tens of thousands seeking to come back to Gaza

Al-Regeb said that after they were released from the Israeli screening facility, U.N. buses took them to Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, where they finally arrived at 1 a.m. on Tuesday .

"Thank God that I have returned and found my loved ones," she said. "I am happy that I am in my nation, with my family and with my children."

Hamas on Tuesday blasted Israel over the allegations of abuse against the returnees, calling it "fascist behavior and organized terrorism." It called on mediators to take immediate action to stop the practices and ensure travelers' safety and freedom during transit.

Rights groups and Palestinian officials warn that abuses during the initial reopening could deter others from attempting to cross in the coming days, undermining confidence in the fragile process.

More than 110,000 Palestinians left Gaza in the first months of the war before Rafah was shut, and thousands of patients were evacuated abroad for treatment. Many are expected to seek to return. So far, some 30,000 Palestinians have registered with the Palestinian Embassy in Egypt to go back to Gaza, according to an embassy official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information.

But the crossing only gives a symbolic chance at return: Israeli officials have spoken of allowing around 50 Palestinians a day back into Gaza.

Trump calls Colombia's Petro 'terrific' after White House meeting while downplaying past insults

By AAMER MADHANI, ASTRID SUAREZ and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump held a nearly two-hour meeting on Tuesday with his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro, that both called friendly — a dramatic about-face from weeks earlier, when Trump accused Petro of pumping cocaine into the U.S. and threatened his country with military action.

Afterward, Trump tried to downplay his past criticisms, saying, "He and I weren't exactly the best of friends, but I wasn't insulted because I never met him. I didn't know him at all."

"We had a very good meeting," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office during a subsequent event. "I thought he was terrific."

Petro held his own post-meeting news conference and said the pair emerged "with a positive and optimistic view." He said, "What brings us together is freedom. And that's how the meeting started out."

Make (the) Americas Great Again

Colombia's president said Trump gave him a red "Make America Great Again" cap and Petro said he wanted to put an 's' on it to make it, "Make (the) Americas Great Again," a reference to North and South America being aligned culturally, economically and historically.

Petro has criticized Trump and the U.S. operation to capture Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro. But Trump said more recently that Colombia's leader has become more willing to work with his administration to stem the flow of illegal drugs.

Petro said afterward that he and Trump had "looked at ways in which we can reactivate Venezuela" including through energy projects. Trump said the pair discussed cooperation in counternarcotics operations, which Petro echoed, while also noting that there are parts of his country where drug cultivation can be the only way to make a living.

"If people have no options to eat, and live in the jungle, or places where there is no transportation to produce something legal, what there will be is drug trafficking," he said.

Petro said he also told Trump, "You need to go after the kingpins," but that there's a belief in the U.S. and Colombia "that capos are the ones in uniform and (carrying) weapons in Colombia. That's the second line of drug trafficking. The top tier lives in Dubai, Madrid, Miami." He said he provided the U.S. president with names.

Colombia's president also said he'd invited Trump to visit the Colombian resort city of Cartagena.

"We didn't talk about personal matters, but I did invite him to Cartagena, which I told him was a cool and beautiful place to live," Petro said. He also said that he'd sought Trump's help in mediating an escalating trade war between his country and Ecuador.

Trump gave Petro a copy of his book, "The Art of the Deal," with a signed inscription reading, "You are great." Petro posed a picture of the book on X and wrote ironically in Spanish, "What did Trump mean to say to me with this dedication? I don't understand English very well."

Past tensions

Leading up to the meeting, Petro, a leftist politician, had continued to poke at the conservative U.S. president, calling Trump an "accomplice to genocide" in the Gaza Strip while asserting that the capture of Maduro was a kidnapping.

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And, ahead of his departure for Washington, Petro called on Colombians to take to the streets of Bogotá during the White House meeting.

Just minutes before his conversation with Trump started, Petro, in a video shared by his office, described himself as a politician who has denounced and prosecuted drug traffickers.

Accompanied by one of his daughters and his granddaughter, he lamented that most of his children live outside Colombia, in exile, due to the fight he's waging against drug trafficking. "We have truly suffered its effects directly," Petro said.

Shift in US-Colombia relations

Historically, Colombia has been a U.S. ally. For the past 30 years, the U.S. has worked closely with Colombia, the world's largest producer of cocaine, to arrest drug traffickers, fend off rebel groups and boost economic development in rural areas. Colombia is also designated by the U.S. as a major non-NATO ally.

But relations between the leaders have been strained by Trump's massing of U.S. forces in the region for unprecedented deadly military strikes targeting suspected drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific. At least 126 people have been killed in 36 known strikes.

In October, Trump's Republican administration announced it was imposing sanctions on Petro, his family and a member of his government over accusations of involvement in the global drug trade.

The Treasury Department leveled the penalties against Petro; his wife, Veronica del Socorro Alcocer Garcia; his son, Nicolas Fernando Petro Burgos; and Colombian Interior Minister Armando Alberto Benedetti.

The sanctions, which had to be waived to allow Petro to travel to Washington this week, came after the U.S. administration in September announced it was adding Colombia to a list of nations failing to cooperate in the drug war for the first time in three decades.

Then came the audacious military operation last month to capture Maduro and his wife to face federal drug conspiracy charges, a move that Petro has forcefully denounced. Following Maduro's ouster, Trump put Colombia on notice and ominously warned Petro he could be next.

Colombia is "run by a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the United States," Trump said of Petro last month. "And he's not gonna be doing it very long, let me tell you."

But a few days later, tensions eased somewhat after a call between the leaders. Trump said Petro in their hourlong conversation explained "the drug situation and other disagreements." And Trump extended an invitation to Petro for the White House visit.

Trump skipped greeting Petro, who came bearing gifts

In a diplomatic gesture, Colombian officials said Petro came bearing gifts, including a signature Wounaan indigenous basket from Colombia's Chocó region for Trump and a handmade gown crafted by indigenous artisans from Nariño for first lady Melania Trump.

Trump didn't personally greet Petro upon his arrival and pose for a photograph with him in front of the North Portico of the White House before a gathered press — a set piece for most foreign leaders' visits. Instead, Petro arrived at a side entrance of the White House.

Judge set to hear arguments as court gives Trump another shot at nixing hush money conviction

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A federal judge is set to hear arguments Wednesday after an appeals court directed him to take a fresh look at President Donald Trump's bid to erase his hush money conviction.

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in November ordered U.S. District Judge Alvin K. Hellerstein to reconsider his decision to keep the case in state court instead of moving it to federal court, where Trump can seek to have it thrown out on presidential immunity grounds.

A three-judge panel ruled that Hellerstein erred by failing to consider "important issues relevant" to Trump's request to move the New York case to federal court. They said they "express no view" on how he should rule.

Trump, a Republican, is not expected to attend Wednesday's arguments in federal court in New York City, which were preceded by lengthy written submissions from Trump's lawyers and the Manhattan district attorney's office, which prosecuted the case and wants it to remain in state court.

Hellerstein, who was nominated by Democratic President Bill Clinton, has twice denied Trump's requests to move the case.

The first was after Trump's March 2023 indictment; the second followed Trump's May 2024 conviction and a subsequent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that presidents and former presidents cannot be prosecuted for official acts.

In the later ruling, at issue in the 2nd Circuit decision, Hellerstein said Trump's lawyers had failed to meet the high burden of proof for changing jurisdiction and that Trump's conviction for falsifying business records involved his personal life, not official actions that the Supreme Court ruled are immune from prosecution.

The 2nd Circuit panel said Hellerstein's ruling, which echoed his previous denial, "did not consider whether certain evidence admitted during the state court trial relates to immunized official acts or, if so, whether evidentiary immunity transformed" the hush money case into one that relates to official acts.

The three judges said Hellerstein should closely review evidence that Trump claims relate to official acts.

If Hellerstein finds the prosecution relied on evidence of official acts, the judges said, he should weigh whether Trump can argue those actions were taken as part of his White House duties, whether Trump "diligently sought" to have the case moved to federal court and whether the case can even be moved to federal court now that Trump has been convicted and sentenced in state court.

Trump was convicted in May 2024 of 34 felony counts of falsifying business records to conceal a hush money payment to adult film actor Stormy Daniels, whose allegations of an affair with Trump threatened to upend his 2016 presidential campaign. He was sentenced to an unconditional discharge, leaving his conviction intact but sparing him any punishment.

Trump denies Daniels' claim and said he did nothing wrong. He has asked a state appellate court to overturn the conviction.

Prosecutors seek life sentence for man who tried to shoot Trump at a Florida golf course

By DAVID FISCHER Associated Press

FORT PIERCE, Fla. (AP) — Federal prosecutors are set to ask that a man convicted of trying to assassinate President Donald Trump on a Florida golf course in 2024 be sentenced to life in prison at a hearing on Wednesday.

Ryan Routh is scheduled to appear before U. S. District Judge Aileen Cannon in Fort Pierce. Her courtroom erupted into chaos in September shortly after jurors found Routh guilty on all counts, including attempting to kill a presidential candidate and several firearm-related charges. Routh tried to stab himself in the neck with a pen, and officers quickly dragged him out.

Routh's sentencing had initially been scheduled for December, but Cannon agreed to move the date back after Routh decided to use an attorney during the sentencing phase instead of representing himself as he did for most of the trial.

Prosecutors said in a sentencing memorandum filed last month that Routh has yet to accept any responsibility for his actions and that he should spend the rest of his life in prison, in accordance with federal sentencing guidelines.

"Routh remains unrepentant for his crimes, never apologized for the lives he put at risk, and his life demonstrates near-total disregard for law," the memo said.

Routh's new defense attorney, Martin L. Roth, is asking the judge for a variance from sentencing guidelines: 20 years in prison on top of a seven-year, mandatory sentence for one of the gun convictions.

"The defendant is two weeks short of being sixty years old," Roth wrote in a filing. "A just punishment would provide a sentence long enough to impose sufficient but not excessive punishment, and to allow defendant to experience freedom again as opposed to dying in prison."

Prosecutors said Routh spent weeks plotting to kill Trump before aiming a rifle through shrubbery as the then-Republican presidential candidate played golf on Sept. 15, 2024, at his West Palm Beach country club.

At Routh's trial, a Secret Service agent helping protect Trump on the golf course testified that he spotted Routh before Trump came into view. Routh aimed his rifle at the agent, who opened fire, causing Routh to drop his weapon and run away without firing a shot.

In the motion requesting an attorney, Routh offered to trade his life in a prisoner swap with people unjustly held in other countries and said an offer still stood for Trump to "take out his frustrations on my face."

"Just a quarter of an inch further back and we all would not have to deal with all of this mess forwards, but I always fail at everything (par for the course)," Routh wrote.

In her decision granting Routh an attorney, Cannon chastised the "disrespectful charade" of Routh's motion, saying it made a mockery of the proceedings. But the judge, nominated by Trump in 2020, said she wanted to err on the side of legal representation.

Cannon signed off last summer on Routh's request to represent himself following two hearings. The U.S. Supreme Court has held that criminal defendants have the right to represent themselves in court proceedings, as long as they can show a judge they are competent to waive their right to be defended by an attorney.

Routh's former federal public defenders served as standby counsel and were present during the trial.

Trump says Washington has waited 200 years for the arch he wants to build. Not quite

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump says history is on his side.

He wants to build a towering arch near the Lincoln Memorial and argues that the nation's capital first clamored for such a monument two centuries ago — even going so far as to erect four eagle statues as part of the project before being derailed by the attack on Fort Sumter.

"It was interrupted by a thing called the Civil War, and so it never got built," Trump said aboard Air Force One as he flew to Florida last weekend. "Then, they almost built something in 1902, but it never happened."

Trump's history is off — the eagles he references are actually part of a bridge connecting Virginia and Washington that was built decades after the Civil War. The closest Washington came to an arch was a wood and plaster construction built in 1919 to mark the end of World War I — and even that was always meant to be temporary.

"For 200 years they've wanted to build an arc," Trump said, meaning an arch. "They have 57 cities throughout the world that have them. We're the only major city — Washington, D.C. — that doesn't."

Chandra Manning, a history professor at Georgetown University, said Washington was fledgling in the 19th century, dealing with a housing shortage, a lack of boarding houses for visitors, roads that went nowhere and an incomplete U.S. Capitol.

"Washington coming into the Civil War was still this unfinished city," Manning said. "There's no push for decorative memorialization in Antebellum Washington because it's still such a place that doesn't even have all the functional buildings it needs yet."

Trump has offered a similar historical rationale for the \$400 million ballroom he demolished the White House's East Wing to begin building — arguing that officials for 150 years have wanted a large event space.

That claim, too, is dubious. While space at the White House has indeed long been an issue, there's no record of public outcry for a ballroom. Trump nonetheless is employing a similar argument to justify the arch.

"I think it will be the most beautiful in the world," he said.

'Biggest one of all'

The arch would stand near the Arlington Memorial Bridge, which spans the Potomac River.

Trump first unveiled the idea at an October dinner for top donors to his ballroom. Without divulging how much the arch would cost, who would pay for it or whether he'd seek approval from planning officials,

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the president showed off three different-sized arch models, all featuring a statue of Lady Liberty on top. The president acknowledged then that the largest one was his favorite, and The Washington Post reported that Trump is mulling building an arch standing 250 feet (76 meters) tall. Asked about that aboard Air Force One, Trump didn't confirm the exact height he desires, but offered: "I'd like it to be the biggest one of all."

"We're setting up a committee, and the committee is going to be going over it," Trump said. "It'll be substantial."

The president says he'd like the new structure to be reminiscent of the Arc de Triomphe, at the end of the Champs-Élysées in Paris, which was built to honor those who fought for France during the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars.

But that monument stands only 50 meters (164 feet) high. A 250-foot Washington arch would dwarf the Lincoln Memorial and White House, and even rival the Capitol, which stands 288 feet (88 meters).

The finished arch would be part of a building boom Trump has personally triggered, anxious to use his background as a onetime New York construction mogul to leave a lasting physical mark on the presidency.

In addition to the ballroom, Trump is closing the Kennedy Center for two years of renovations amid backlash from artists over changes he's made at the nation's premier performing arts venue. He replaced the lawn in the Rose Garden with a patio area reminiscent of his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, and redecorated the Lincoln Bathroom and Palm Room in the White House's interior.

Trump also installed a Walk of Fame featuring portraits of past presidents along the Colonnade, massive flagpoles on the north and south lawns, and golden flourishes, cherubs and other flashy items to the substantially overhauled Oval Office.

The arch would extend the president's influence into Washington, where he has talked of beautifying "tired" grassy areas and broken signage and street medians and also deployed the National Guard to help break up homeless encampments.

Harrison Design, a local firm, is working on the project, though no construction start date has been announced. Trump wants to unveil the new structure as part of celebrations marking America's 250th birthday.

The bridge actually came after the Civil War

Pressed on what Trump meant by the four eagles, the White House sent a photo showing eagle sculptures at the four corners of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, but no further details.

"President Trump is right. The American people for nearly 200 years have wanted an Arch in our Nation's capital to showcase our great history," White House spokesperson Davis Ingle said in a statement. "President Trump's bold vision will be imprinted upon the fabric of America and be felt by generations to come. His successes will continue to give the greatest Nation on earth — America — the glory it deserves."

The president's timing is off, though.

The Arlington Memorial Bridge was first proposed in 1886, but it wasn't approved by Congress until 1925. According to the National Park Service, the bridge was conceived after the Civil War and meant to memorialize the symbolic reunification of the North and South.

It was originally built to link the site of the Lincoln Memorial with the home of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee — where Arlington National Cemetery now stands. At the time, the direction the eagles would face — right or left, meant to symbolize inward toward the city or outward facing visitors — sparked controversy.

The park service says the bridge was constructed between 1926 and 1931, and an engineer's report lists only slightly different dates — still decades after Trump's timeline.

Washington also once had a Victory Arch built near the White House in 1919, to commemorate the end of World War I. It was wood and plaster, however, and meant to be temporary. That structure was torn down in the summer of 1920.

A 2000 proposal called for a peace arch in Washington, but those plans were abandoned after the Sept. 11 attacks the following year.

Manning, who is also a former National Park Service ranger, said that, Washington aside, "I don't know of a long U.S. tradition of building arches for things."

"That sounds like an import from elsewhere to me," she said.

Son of late dictator Gadhafi is killed in Libya

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Seif al-Islam Gadhafi, the son and one-time heir apparent of Libya's late dictator Moammar Gadhafi, was killed in the northern African country, Libyan officials said Tuesday.

The 53-year-old was killed in the town Zintan, 136 kilometers (85 miles) southwest of the capital, Tripoli, according to Libya's chief prosecutor's office.

The office said in a statement that an initial investigation found that Seif al-Islam was shot to death, but did not provide further details about the circumstances of his killing.

Khaled al-Zaidi, a lawyer for Seif al-Islam, confirmed his death on Facebook, without providing details.

Abdullah Othman Abdurrahim, who represented Gadhafi in the U.N.-brokered political dialogue which aimed to resolve Libya's long-running conflict, also announced the death on Facebook.

Seif al-Islam's political team later released a statement saying that "four masked men" stormed his house and killed him in a "cowardly and treacherous assassination." The statement said that he clashed with the assailants, who closed the CCTV cameras at the house "in a desperate attempt to conceal traces of their heinous crimes."

Born in June 1972 in Tripoli, Seif al-Islam was the second-born son of the longtime dictator. He studied for a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics and was seen as the reformist face of the Gadhafi regime.

Moammar Gadhafi was toppled in a NATO-backed popular uprising in 2011 after more than 40 years in power. He was killed in October 2011 amid the ensuing fighting that would turn into a civil war. The country has since plunged into chaos and divided between rival armed groups and militias.

Seif al-Islam was captured by fighters in Zintan late in 2011 while attempting to flee to neighboring Niger. The fighters released him in June 2017 after one of Libya's rival governments granted him amnesty. He had since lived in Zintan.

A Libyan court convicted him of inciting violence and murdering protesters and sentenced him to death in absentia in 2015. He was also wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity related to the 2011 uprising.

In November 2021, Seif al-Islam announced his candidacy in the country's presidential election in a controversial move that was met with outcry from anti-Gadhafi political forces in western and eastern Libya.

The country's High National Elections Committee disqualified him, but the election wasn't held over disputes between rival administrations and armed groups that have ruled Libya since the bloody ouster of Moammar Gadhafi.

Defense objects to showing videos of Charlie Kirk's killing in murder case, claims bias

By HANNAH SCHOENBAUM and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

PROVO, Utah (AP) — Graphic videos showing the killing of conservative activist Charlie Kirk while he spoke to a crowd on a Utah college campus quickly went viral, drawing millions of views.

Screenshots from such videos were offered Tuesday as evidence in the murder case against Tyler Robinson, the man charged in Kirk's killing. But the full videos were not shown in court, after defense attorneys objected out of concern that the footage would undermine Robinson's right to a fair trial.

Legal experts say the defense team's worries are real: Media coverage in high-profile cases like Robinson's can have a direct "biasing effect" on potential jurors, said Cornell Law School Professor Valerie Hans.

"There were videos about the killing, and pictures and analysis (and) the entire saga of how this particular defendant came to turn himself in," said Hans, a leading expert on the jury system. "When jurors come to a trial with this kind of background information from the media, it shapes how they see the evidence that is presented in the courtroom."

Defense attorneys also want to oust TV and still cameras from the courtroom, arguing that "highly bi-

ased" news outlets risk tainting the case.

Prosecutors, attorneys for news organizations, and Kirk's widow urged state District Judge Tony Graf to keep the proceedings open.

"In the absence of transparency, speculation, misinformation, and conspiracy theories are likely to proliferate, eroding public confidence in the judicial process," Erika Kirk's attorney wrote in a court filing.

Prosecutors intend to seek the death penalty for Robinson, 22, who is charged with aggravated murder in the Sept. 10 shooting of Kirk on the Utah Valley University campus in Orem. He has not yet entered a plea.

An estimated 3,000 people attended the outdoor rally to hear Kirk, a co-founder of Turning Point USA, who helped mobilize young people to vote for President Donald Trump.

To secure a death sentence in Utah, prosecutors must demonstrate aggravating circumstances, such as that the crime was especially heinous or atrocious. That's where the graphic videos could come into play.

Watching those videos might make people think, "Yeah, this was especially heinous, atrocious or cruel," Hans said.

Utah County Attorney Jeffrey Gray testified Tuesday that he thought about seeking the death penalty before an arrest had been made. He could not recall exactly when he told the governor and federal officials about his plan. Asked why he announced so early his intent to seek the death penalty, Gray said the case was already drawing enormous public attention.

"The more delay, then it just creates all this unnecessary public speculation," he said, adding that he didn't want Erika Kirk to have to sit with the uncertainty.

Defense attorneys are seeking to disqualify local prosecutors because the adult daughter of Chad Grunander, a deputy county attorney helping prosecute the case, attended the rally where Kirk was shot. The defense alleges the relationship represents a conflict of interest.

Grunander's daughter testified Tuesday that she did not video the shooting or the aftermath. She said she was looking at the crowd when she heard a loud pop and a man sitting nearby shouted, "He's been shot." She never turned to look back at Kirk and did not know he was the person shot until after she ran to safety, she said.

Judge Graf said he would issue his ruling on whether to disqualify prosecutors on Feb. 24.

Utah State Bureau of Investigation agent David Hull testified Tuesday that DNA on a firearm found wrapped in a black towel in a wooded area just off campus matched Robinson's. Robinson also reportedly texted his romantic partner that he targeted Kirk because he "had enough of his hatred."

Robinson's attorneys have ramped up claims of bias as the case has advanced, even accusing news outlets of using lip readers to deduce what the defendant is whispering to his attorneys during hearings.

"Rather than being a beacon for truth and openness, the News Media have simply become a financial investor in this case," defense attorneys wrote in a request for the court to seal some of their accusations of media bias.

Further complicating efforts to ensure a fair trial is the rhetoric swirling around Kirk's death because of his political prominence. Even before Robinson was charged, people jumped to conclusions about who the shooter could be and what kind of politics he espoused.

"People are just projecting a lot of their own sense of what they think was going on, and that really creates concerns about whether they can be open to hearing the actual evidence that's presented," said University of Utah law professor Teneille Brown.

Signs of forced entry found at Arizona home of 'Today' show host Savannah Guthrie's mother

By JACQUES BILLEAUD, SEJAL GOVINDARAO and MIKE BALSAMO Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — Investigators found signs of forced entry at the Arizona home of "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's mother, a person familiar with the investigation said Tuesday, as the host asked for prayers to help bring back the 84-year-old, who is believed to have been taken against her will.

The host described her mother, Nancy Guthrie, as "a woman of deep conviction, a good and faithful

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servant" in a social media post late Monday. She asked supporters to "raise your prayers with us and believe with us that she will be lifted by them in this very moment. Bring her home."

The Pima County sheriff and the Tucson FBI chief held a news conference Tuesday and urged the public to offer tips, but they revealed few new details about the investigation. The sheriff said they don't have credible information indicating Guthrie's disappearance was targeted.

Sheriff Chris Nanos has said Guthrie needs daily medication and could die without it. Asked whether officials were looking for her alive, he said, "We hope we are."

DNA samples have been gathered and submitted for analysis as part of the investigation. "We've gotten some back, but nothing to indicate any suspects," Nanos said.

Motive still a mystery

The person who spoke to The Associated Press said investigators found specific evidence in the home showing there was a nighttime kidnapping. Several of Guthrie's personal items, including her cellphone, wallet and car, were still there after she disappeared.

Investigators are reviewing surveillance video from nearby homes and working to analyze data from cellphone towers. Police are also reviewing information from license plate cameras in the area, according to the person, who was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the case and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

The motive remains a mystery. Investigators do not believe at this point that the abduction was part of a robbery, home invasion or kidnapping-for-ransom plot, the person said.

TMZ reported Tuesday that it received a purported ransom note demanding payment in cryptocurrency for Guthrie's release. Separately, a journalist with Tucson television station KOLD said in an X post that the station received what appears to be a ransom note. Both outlets said they turned over the notes to investigators.

The sheriff's department said it's taking the possible ransom notes and other tips seriously but declined to comment further.

President Donald Trump, speaking to reporters in the Oval Office on Tuesday afternoon, said he planned to call Savannah Guthrie "later on" and called the situation "terrible."

"I always got along very good with Savannah," Trump said.

'Today' host has deep Tucson roots

For a second day, "Today" opened Tuesday with Nancy Guthrie's disappearance, but Savannah Guthrie was not at the anchor's desk. NBC Sports said Guthrie will not be covering the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics "as she focuses on being with her family during this difficult time."

The "Today" host grew up in Tucson, graduated from the University of Arizona and previously worked as a reporter and anchor at Tucson television station KVOA.

Nancy Guthrie was last seen Saturday night at her home in the Tucson area, where she lived alone and was reported missing Sunday. Someone at her church called a family member to say she was not there, leading family to search her home and then call 911, Nanos said.

Guthrie has limited mobility, and officials do not believe she left on her own. Nanos said she is of sound mind.

In the hours after she disappeared, searchers used drones and dogs and were supported by volunteers and Border Patrol. The homicide team was also involved, Nanos said.

Guthrie's home is in the affluent Catalina Foothills area on the northern edge of Tucson. Her brick home has a gravel driveway and a yard covered in prickly pear and saguaro cactus.

Savannah Guthrie's parents settled in Tucson in the 1970s when she was a young child. The youngest of three siblings, she credits her mom with holding their family together after her father died of a heart attack at 49, when Savannah was just 16.

"When my dad died, our family just hung onto each other for dear life because it was such a shock. We were just trying to figure out how to become a family of four when we'd always been a family of five," she said on "Today" in 2017.

Nancy Guthrie raised them on her own. The host often brought her mother on "Today" as a guest. "She has met unthinkable challenges in her life with grit, without self-pity, with determination and always, always with unshakeable faith," Savannah Guthrie said on the show in 2022 on her mother's 80th birthday. "She loves us, her family, fiercely, and her selflessness and sacrifice for us, her steadfastness and her unmovable confidence, is the reason any of us grew up to do anything."

Clintons finalize agreement to testify in House Epstein probe, bowing to threat of contempt vote

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton finalized an agreement with House Republicans Tuesday to testify in a House investigation into Jeffrey Epstein this month, bowing to the threat of a contempt of Congress vote against them.

Hillary Clinton will testify before the House Oversight Committee on Feb. 26 and Bill Clinton will appear on Feb. 27. It will mark the first time that lawmakers have compelled a former president to testify.

The arrangement comes after months of negotiating between the two sides as Republicans sought to make the Clintons, both Democrats, a focal point in a House committee's investigation into Epstein, a convicted sex offender who killed himself in a New York jail cell in 2019, and Ghislaine Maxwell, his former girlfriend.

"We look forward to now questioning the Clintons as part of our investigation into the horrific crimes of Epstein and Maxwell, to deliver transparency and accountability for the American people and for survivors," Rep. James Comer, the chair of the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement.

The negotiation with the Clintons

For months, the Clintons resisted subpoenas from the committee, but House Republicans — with support from a few Democrats — had advanced criminal contempt of Congress charges to a potential vote this week. It threatened the Clintons with the potential for substantial fines and even prison time if they had been convicted.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said Tuesday that any effort to hold them in contempt of Congress were "on pause."

Even as the Clintons bowed to the pressure, the negotiating between GOP lawmakers and attorneys for the Clintons was marked by distrust as they wrangled over the details of the deposition. They agreed to have the closed-door depositions transcribed and recorded on video, Comer said.

The belligerence is likely to only grow as Republicans relish the opportunity to grill longtime political foes under oath.

Comer told The Associated Press that Republicans, in their inquiry with the Clintons, were "trying to figure out how Jeffrey Epstein was able to surround himself with all these rich and powerful people."

Comer, a Kentucky Republican, also said that the Clintons had expressed a desire to make the proceedings public, but that he would insist on closed-door testimony with a later release of a transcript of the interviews. He added that he was open to holding a later public hearing if the Clintons wanted it.

How Clinton knew Epstein

Clinton, like a number of other high-powered men including President Donald Trump, had a well-documented relationship with Epstein in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Neither Trump nor Clinton has been credibly accused of wrongdoing in their interactions with the late financier.

Both Clintons have said they had no knowledge that Epstein was sexually abusing underage girls before prosecutors brought charges against him.

The Clintons had initially argued the subpoenas for their testimony were invalid and offered to submit sworn declarations on their limited knowledge of Epstein's crimes. But as Comer threatened to proceed with contempt of Congress charges, they began looking for an off-ramp.

Both Clintons have remained highly critical of how Comer has handled the Epstein investigation and argue that he is more focused on bringing them in for testimony rather than holding the Trump administration accountable for how it has handled the release of its files on Epstein.

However, as Comer advanced the contempt charges out of the House Oversight Committee last month, he found a number of Democrats willing to help. A younger generation of more progressive Democrats showed they had few connections with the Clintons, who led the Democratic Party for decades, and were more eager to show voters that they would stand for transparency in the Epstein investigation.

Nine Democrats out of 21 on the Oversight panel voted to advance charges against Bill Clinton, and three Democrats joined with Republicans to support the charges against Hillary Clinton. As the vote loomed this week, House Democratic leaders also made it clear they would not expend much political capital to rally votes against the contempt resolutions.

That left the Clintons with little choice but to agree to testify or face one of the most severe punishments Congress can give.

A precedent set?

Congress has historically shown deference to former presidents. The Clintons' concession, however, prompted some Democrats to suggest that it set a precedent for former presidents to comply with congressional subpoenas.

"We look forward to using this same precedent when we take back the majority in November," Rep. Daniel Goldman, a New York Democrat, said on social media.

Trump's attorneys successfully resisted a congressional subpoena in 2022, between his first and second terms, issued by a House committee investigating the deadly Jan. 6, 2021, riot by a mob of his supporters at the U.S. Capitol. Trump's lawyers cited decades of legal precedent they said shielded an ex-president from being ordered to appear before Congress, and the committee ultimately withdrew its subpoena.

At a signing for an unrelated bill later Tuesday, the president told reporters the depositions for the Clintons were "a shame" and said of Bill Clinton, "I always liked him."

He also praised Hillary Clinton — his opponent in his first presidential election win in 2016 — for her debate skills and called her a "smart woman."

Immigration agents draw guns and arrest activists following them in Minneapolis

By RYAN MURPHY, SARAH RAZA and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Immigration officers with guns drawn arrested activists who were trailing their vehicles on Tuesday in Minneapolis, while education leaders described anxiety and fear in Minnesota schools from the ongoing federal sweeps.

Both are signs that tension remains in the Minneapolis area after the departure of high-profile commander Greg Bovino of U.S. Border Patrol and the arrival of Trump administration border czar Tom Homan, which followed the fatal shooting of protester Alex Pretti.

"There's less smoke on the ground," Gov. Tim Walz said, referring to tear gas and other irritants used by officers against protesters, "but I think it's more chilling than it was last week because of the shift to the schools, the shift to the children."

At least one person who had an anti-ICE message on clothing was handcuffed while face-down on the ground. An Associated Press photographer witnessed the arrests.

ICE agents are changing their tactics

Federal agents in the Twin Cities lately have been conducting more targeted immigration arrests at homes and neighborhoods, rather than staging in parking lots. The convoys have been harder to find and less aggressive. Alerts in activist group chats have been more about sightings than immigration-related detentions.

Several cars followed officers through south Minneapolis after there were reports of them knocking at homes. Officers stopped their vehicles and ordered activists to come out of a car at gunpoint. Agents told reporters at the scene to stay back and threatened to use pepper spray.

Homeland Security spokesperson Tricia McLaughlin said agents detained the activists because they hindered efforts to arrest a man who is in the country illegally.

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A federal judge last month put limits on how officers treat motorists who are following them but not obstructing their operations. Safely following agents "at an appropriate distance does not, by itself, create reasonable suspicion to justify a vehicle stop," the judge said. An appeals court, however, set the order aside.

Bovino, who was leading immigration enforcement in Minneapolis and other big U.S. cities, left town last week, shortly after Pretti's death became the second local killing of a U.S. citizen in January.

Homan, who was dispatched to Minnesota to succeed Bovino, has warned that protesters could face consequences if they interfere with officers.

Operation Metro Surge affecting schools

Walz and education leaders held a news conference to say the presence of immigration officers is frightening some school communities. Brenda Lewis, superintendent of Fridley Public Schools in suburban Minneapolis, said she has been followed twice by Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents since speaking publicly on Jan. 27 and that school board members have had ICE vehicles outside their homes.

Lewis, a U.S. citizen, said she has seen SUVs with tinted windows, multiple masked people inside and out-of-state license plates. She goes on neighborhood patrols near schools with a security guard.

"Students are afraid to come to school, parents are afraid to drop them off," Lewis said. "Staff are coming to work wondering if today will be the day something happens in one of our buildings."

She said Fridley, which has Somali and Ecuadorian families, has added security, adjusted drop-off procedures and increased mental health support. Tracy Xiong, a social worker in the Columbia Heights district, said she has been coordinating grocery deliveries to school families and finding volunteers to drive children.

There was no immediate response to a request for comment from the Department of Homeland Security and ICE about the concerns of educators.

Grand jury seeks communications, records

Meanwhile, Tuesday was the deadline for Minneapolis to produce information for a federal grand jury. It is part of a U.S. Justice Department request for records of any effort to stifle the Trump administration's immigration crackdown. Officials have denounced it as a bullying tactic.

"We have done nothing wrong and have nothing to hide, but when the federal government weaponizes the criminal justice system against political opponents, it's important to stand up and fight back," said Ally Peters, spokesperson for Mayor Jacob Frey, a Democrat.

She said the city was complying, but she didn't elaborate. Other state and local offices run by Democrats were given subpoenas, though it is not known whether they had the same deadline. People familiar with the matter have told the AP that the subpoenas are related to an investigation into whether Minnesota officials obstructed enforcement through public statements.

No release for man in Omar incident

Elsewhere, a man charged with squirting apple cider vinegar on Democratic U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar will remain in jail. U.S. Magistrate Judge David Schultz granted a federal prosecutor's request to keep Anthony Kazmierczak in custody.

"We simply cannot have protesters and people — whatever side of the aisle they're on — running up to representatives who are conducting official business, and holding town halls, and assaulting them," Assistant U.S. Attorney Benjamin Bejar said Tuesday.

Defense attorney John Fossum said the vinegar posed a low risk to Omar. He said Kazmierczak's health problems weren't being properly addressed in jail and that his release would be appropriate.

Order for release of 2 men accused of assaulting ICE officer fails to stick

Another judge ordered the release of two Venezuelan men who were accused of assaulting an ICE officer, but ICE officials quickly took them back into custody.

Alfredo Aljorna and Julio Sosa-Celis are accused of assaulting the officer the night of Jan. 14. Sosa-Celis was shot in the thigh by the officer during the encounter, triggering protests in Minneapolis.

The officer said he was struck with a broom and snow shovel while trying to subdue and arrest Aljorna after a car crash and foot chase. But the two men deny assaulting the officer. Neither video evidence nor three eyewitnesses supported the officer's account.

U.S. District Judge Paul Magnuson held a hearing Tuesday at which he rejected the government's appeal of a magistrate judge's order for the release of the two men on the criminal charges. Magnuson ruled that they could go free.

But an attorney for Sosa-Celis, Robin Wolpert, said in an interview that when she went to speak afterward with her client, who had been in the custody of U.S. Marshals, staff told her that ICE had taken him. She said she wasn't sure why, or what their next steps would be.

Aljorna's attorney, Frederick Goetz, said he didn't know why ICE took his client or their next steps either.

UK police open criminal investigation into politician Peter Mandelson over alleged leaks to Epstein

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British police on Tuesday opened a criminal investigation into politician Peter Mandelson over alleged misconduct in public office related to his relationship with convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

The U.K. government says newly released Epstein files suggest Mandelson — a former Cabinet minister, ambassador and elder statesman of the governing Labour Party — may have shared market-sensitive information with the convicted sex offender a decade and a half ago.

London's Metropolitan Police force said detectives had reviewed reports of misconduct and decided they met the threshold for a full investigation.

Commander Ella Marriott said the force "has now launched an investigation into a 72-year-old man, a former government minister, for misconduct in public office offenses."

Misconduct in public office carries a maximum sentence of life in prison. Opening an investigation does not mean Mandelson will be arrested, charged or convicted.

But his friendship with Epstein has now cost him his political career. Mandelson said Tuesday he was resigning from the House of Lords, Parliament's upper chamber, to which he was appointed for life in 2008.

The Speaker of the Lords, Michael Forsyth, said Mandelson had informed officials he will retire effective Wednesday.

The announcement came as the British government prepared legislation to eject Mandelson from the Lords and remove the noble title, Lord Mandelson, that came with his seat in the chamber. Mandelson will retain the title after he retires unless lawmakers pass legislation to strip it from him — something that has not been done for more than a century.

New revelations

A trove of more than 3 million pages of Epstein-related documents released by the U.S. Justice Department has brought excruciating revelations about 72-year-old Mandelson, who served in senior government roles under previous Labour governments and was U.K. ambassador to Washington until Prime Minister Keir Starmer fired him in September over his ties to Epstein.

The newly released files contain emails from Mandelson to Epstein passing on nuggets of political information, some of which critics say may have broken the law.

Starmer told his Cabinet on Tuesday that he was "appalled" by the revelations in newly released Epstein files, and was concerned there are more details still to emerge.

Starmer spokesman Tom Wells said that the government had sent police its assessment that the Mandelson-Epstein documents contained "likely market-sensitive information" about the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath that shouldn't have been shared outside of government.

Among the revelations in the files:

— In 2003-2004, bank documents suggest Epstein sent three payments totaling \$75,000 to accounts linked to Mandelson or his partner Reinaldo Avila da Silva. Mandelson has said that he doesn't remember receiving the money and will investigate whether the documents are authentic. But he resigned from the governing Labour Party on Sunday, saying he didn't want to cause the party "further embarrassment."

— In 2008, Epstein avoided federal prosecution by pleading guilty to state charges in Florida of soliciting

and procuring a minor for prostitution. He was sentenced to 18 months in jail. Emails and text messages show that Mandelson's friendship with Epstein continued after the financier's sentence.

— In 2009, Epstein sent da Silva 10,000 pounds (about \$13,650 at today's rates) to pay for an osteopathy course. Mandelson told The Times of London that "in retrospect, it was clearly a lapse in our collective judgment for Reinaldo to accept this offer."

— Also in 2009, Mandelson, then business secretary in the U.K. government, appears to have told Epstein he would lobby other members of the government to reduce a tax on bankers' bonuses.

— The same year, Mandelson sent Epstein an internal government report discussing ways the U.K. could raise money after the 2008 global financial crisis, including by selling off government assets. Mandelson wrote: "Interesting note that's gone to the PM."

— In May 2010, Mandelson messaged Epstein that "sources tell me 500 b euro bailout" is almost complete. The message was dated hours before day European governments announced a 500 billion euro deal to shore up the single currency.

'Betrayal of the victims'

Epstein died by suicide in a jail cell in 2019, while awaiting trial on U.S. federal charges accusing him of sexually abusing dozens of girls.

U.K. Health Secretary Wes Streeting said that Mandelson's friendship with Epstein was "a betrayal on so many levels."

"It is a betrayal of the victims of Jeffrey Epstein that he continued that association and that friendship for so long after his conviction," Streeting told the BBC. "It is a betrayal of not just one but two prime ministers," he said, referring to Gordon Brown, the U.K. leader between 2007 and 2010, and Starmer.

An email requesting comment on the documents was sent to Mandelson through the House of Lords.

Jill Biden's first husband charged with killing wife in domestic dispute at their Delaware home

By MINGSON LAU and MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — The first husband of former first lady Jill Biden has been charged with killing his wife at their Delaware home in late December, authorities announced in a news release Tuesday. William Stevenson, 77, of Wilmington was married to Jill Biden from 1970 to 1975.

Caroline Harrison, the Delaware Attorney General's spokesperson, confirmed in a phone call that Stevenson is the former husband of Jill Biden.

Jill Biden declined to comment, according to an emailed response from a spokesperson at the former president and first lady's office.

Stevenson remains in jail after failing to post \$500,000 bail after his arrest Monday on first-degree murder charges. He is charged with killing Linda Stevenson, 64, on Dec. 28.

Police were called to the home for a reported domestic dispute after 11 p.m. and found a woman unresponsive in the living room, according to a prior news release. Life-saving measures were unsuccessful.

She ran a bookkeeping business and was described as a family-oriented mother and grandmother and a Philadelphia Eagles fan, according to her obituary, which does not mention her husband.

Stevenson was charged in a grand jury indictment after a weekslong investigation by detectives in the Delaware Department of Justice.

It was not immediately clear if Stevenson has a lawyer. He founded a popular music venue in Newark called the Stone Balloon in the early 1970s.

In an interview with the conservative news outlet Newsmax in 2024, Stevenson criticized Jill Biden and he described their divorce as contentious, calling her "bitter" and "nasty."

Jill Biden married U.S. Sen. Joe Biden in 1977. He served as U.S. president from January 2021 to January 2025.

Trump signs bill to end partial government shutdown, setting stage for next fight

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump signed a roughly \$1.2 trillion government funding bill Tuesday that ends the partial federal shutdown that began over the weekend and sets the stage for an intense debate in Congress over Homeland Security funding.

The president moved quickly to sign the bill after the House approved it with a 217-214 vote.

"This bill is a great victory for the American people," Trump said.

The vote Tuesday wrapped up congressional work on 11 annual appropriations bills that fund government agencies and programs through Sept. 30.

Passage of the legislation marked the end point for one funding fight, but the start of another. That's because the package only funds the Department of Homeland Security for two weeks, through Feb 13, at the behest of Democrats who are demanding more restrictions on immigration enforcement after the shooting deaths of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by federal officers in Minneapolis.

Leaders are digging in for a fight

Difficult negotiations are ahead, particularly for the agency that enforces the nation's immigration laws — U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries quickly warned Democrats would not support any further temporary funding for Homeland Security without substantial changes to its immigration operations, raising the potential of another shutdown for the department and its agencies.

"We need dramatic change in order to make sure that ICE and other agencies within the department of Homeland Security are conducting themselves like every other law enforcement organization in the country," Jeffries said.

Speaker Mike Johnson said he expects the two sides will be able to reach an agreement by the deadline.

"This is no time to play games with that funding. We hope that they will operate in good faith over the next 10 days as we negotiate this," said Johnson. "The president, again, has reached out."

But Johnson's counterpart across the Capitol, Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., sounded less optimistic of a deal. "There's always miracles, right?" Thune told reporters.

Voting with no margin for error

The funding bill that cleared Congress Tuesday had provisions that appealed to both parties.

Republicans avoided a massive, catchall funding bill known as an omnibus as part of this year's appropriations process. Such bills, often taken up before the holiday season with lawmakers anxious to return home, have contributed to greater federal spending, they say.

Democrats were able to fend off some of Trump's most draconian proposed cuts while adding language that helps ensure funds are spent as stipulated by Congress.

Still, Johnson needed near-unanimous support from his Republican conference to proceed to a final vote on the bill. He narrowly got it during a roll call that was held open for nearly an hour as leaders worked to gain support from a handful of GOP lawmakers who were trying to advance other priorities unrelated to the funding measure.

The final vote wasn't much easier for GOP leaders. In the end, 21 Republicans sided with the vast majority of Democrats in voting against the funding bill, while that exact same number of Democrats sided with the vast majority of Republicans in voting yes.

Trump had weighed in Monday in a social media post, calling on Republicans to stay united and telling holdouts, "There can be NO CHANGES at this time."

Key differences from the last shutdown

The current partial shutdown that is coming to a close differed in many ways from the fall impasse, which affected more agencies and lasted a record 43 days.

Then, the debate was over extending temporary coronavirus pandemic-era subsidies for those who get health coverage through the Affordable Care Act. Democrats were unsuccessful in getting those subsidies

included as part of a package to end the shutdown.

Congress made important progress since then. Some of the six appropriations bills it passed prior to Tuesday ensured the current shutdown had less sting. For example, important programs such as nutrition assistance and fully operating national parks and historic sites were already funded through Sept. 30.

The remaining bills passed Tuesday mean that the vast majority of the federal government has been funded.

"You might say that now that 96% of the government is funded, it's just 4% what's out there?" Johnson said. "But it's a very important 4%"

Judge: Deal reached to protect identities of Epstein victims in documents release

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A deal was reached between lawyers for victims of Jeffrey Epstein and the Justice Department to protect the identities of nearly 100 women whose lives were allegedly harmed after the government began releasing millions of documents last week, a lawyer told a federal judge on Tuesday.

Judge Richard M. Berman in Manhattan cancelled a hearing scheduled for Wednesday after he was notified by Florida attorney Brittany Henderson that "extensive and constructive discussions" with the government had resulted in an agreement.

Henderson and attorney Brad Edwards had complained to Berman in a letter Sunday that "immediate judicial intervention" was needed after there were thousands of instances when the government had failed to redact names and other personally identifying information of women sexually abused by Epstein.

Among eight women whose comments were included in the lawyers' Sunday letter, one said the records' release was "life threatening" while another said she'd gotten death threats and she was forced to shut down her credit cards and banking accounts after their security was jeopardized.

The lawyers had requested that the Justice Department website be temporarily shut down and that an independent monitor be appointed to ensure no further errors occurred.

Henderson did not say what government lawyers said to ensure identities would be protected going forward or what the agreement consisted of.

"We trust that the deficiencies will be corrected expeditiously and in a manner that protects victims from further harm," she wrote to the judge.

The Justice Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The judge wrote in an order cancelling the Wednesday public hearing that he was "pleased but not surprised that the parties were able to resolve the privacy issues."

On Monday, U.S. Attorney Jay Clayton in Manhattan wrote in a letter filed in Manhattan federal court that errors blamed on "technical or human error" occurred on redactions during the document release.

He said the Justice Department had improved its protocols to protect victims and had taken down nearly all materials identified by victims or their lawyers, along with many more that the government had found on its own.

Mistakes in the largest release of Epstein documents yet included nude photos showing the faces of potential victims as well as names, email addresses and other identifying information that was either unredacted or not fully obscured.

Most of the materials that were released stemmed from sex trafficking probes of Epstein and his former girlfriend, British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell, who is serving a 20-year prison sentence after she was convicted in December 2021 at a New York trial.

Epstein took his life in a federal jail in New York in August 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges.

Lawyers for patients of UCLA doctor say clients shaken by court

overturning his sex abuse conviction

By JAIMIE DING and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Two years after a former University of California, Los Angeles, gynecologist was convicted of sex abuse and sentenced to 11 years in prison, an attorney working to prepare an appeal of the case stumbled across an astounding find for the defense counsel.

A note by the jury's foreperson, a designated spokesperson for the jury, had been sent to the judge expressing concern that one of the jurors did not have sufficient English to carry out his duties and deliberate. The juror was an alternate who was brought in after another juror had a medical issue and two days before the verdict. The judge never shared that information with the prosecution or defense attorneys.

"That note was never turned over to us ever," said Leonard Levine, the defense attorney of Dr. James Heaps. "We were shocked."

A California appeals court on Monday found the mistake violated Heaps' Sixth Amendment rights and ordered the case to be retried. Lawyers for patients who accused Heaps say the decision to overturn his conviction has left them devastated, and legal experts say they are puzzled by the type of judicial error that transpired. Levine said he believes Heaps will be exonerated when retried.

"In my 30 years of trial and appeals work, excluding the defense from a jury question is unheard of," said Dmitry Gorin, a former prosecutor and criminal defense specialist.

Attorneys for former patients criticize outcome

Courtney Thom, who represents more than 200 of Heaps' former patients, said there is no question that jury note should have been shared with attorneys, but said the defense "exploited" the error to overturn Heaps' conviction.

"When that happens, a common defense tactic is they delay, delay, delay, the second trial," Thom said. "What does this say to survivors of sexual abuse? Who wants to come forward with their abuse if this is their path to justice?"

Thom's firm won more than \$240 million for Heaps' accusers in a settlement with the University of California system. UCLA patients said Heaps groped them, made suggestive comments or conducted unnecessarily invasive exams. Overall, the university has paid nearly \$700 million to settle lawsuits.

The Los Angeles District Attorney's office said it plans to retry Heaps as soon as possible. Once that happens, his defense attorney Levine said he will ask that his client be released on bond just as he was before the first trial.

Foreperson had concerns about alternate juror

Heaps' trial spanned more than two months in 2022 and included testimony from several of his former patients. He was accused of sexually assaulting hundreds of patients during his 35-year career. He pleaded not guilty to 21 felony counts in the sexual assaults of seven women between 2009 and 2018.

An hour after a juror was replaced by an alternate, juror number 15, during deliberations, the foreperson sent a note to the judge that read, "We have observed that the language barrier with Juror (No.) 15 is preventing us from properly deliberating. Juror (No.) 15 was not able to understand calls to vote guilty or not guilty, and expressed to us that his limited English interfered with his understanding of the testimony."

It also appeared that "his mind is already made up," the note read.

Later on, when the judicial assistant spoke to the juror in Spanish, the juror said, "They think that I don't understand English, but I do." He insisted he could continue deliberating.

The next day, the foreperson told the judicial assistant that the note no longer needed to be addressed, according to court filings.

Heaps was convicted in October 2022 of three counts of sexual battery by fraud and two counts of sexual penetration of two patients. The jury found him not guilty of seven of the 21 counts and was deadlocked on the remaining charges.

Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Michael Carter, who oversaw the trial, told the appeals court that when he received an email about the jury note, he told his judicial assistant to ask the jury if they could continue to deliberate. He was informed that the jurors said yes.

The next day, Carter asked the judicial assistant about the note and was told the note had been "with-drawn."

"I did not notify the parties nor did I inquire with the jury about the 'Note to Judge,'" Carter said in a written declaration. He did not explain why.

Mistake violated defendant's constitutional rights

If the note had been simply disclosed in court, Heaps' defense attorneys would have had the opportunity to question whether that juror was qualified to serve or call for a mistrial, said Robert Little, a Los Angeles attorney specializing in appellate law.

Usually any potential juror who did not speak adequate English is dismissed during the jury selection process, Little said.

"Mistakes are made in courtrooms and during trials every day," Little said. "The question in any given appeal ... is whether that particular error was harmless, or was it prejudicial."

The three-judge panel found "the trial court's handling of the note deprived defendant of his constitutional right to counsel at a critical stage of his trial."

Another attorney for 200 former patients in the case, John Manly, said in a statement the overturning of the conviction "sends a message that victims, especially women and children, do not matter."

"These brave survivors suffered through a four-year ordeal of prosecution and trial resulting in an 11-year prison sentence for this monster," Manly said. "Now they are being told that they must start over."

US shoots down Iranian drone that 'aggressively' approached an aircraft carrier, military says

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A U.S. Navy fighter jet shot down an Iranian drone that was approaching the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea, U.S. Central Command said Tuesday, threatening to ramp up tensions as the Trump administration warns of possible military action to get Iran to the negotiating table.

The drone "aggressively approached" the aircraft carrier with "unclear intent" and kept flying toward it "despite de-escalatory measures taken by U.S. forces operating in international waters," Central Command spokesman Capt. Tim Hawkins said in a statement.

The shutdown occurred within hours of Iranian forces harassing a U.S.-flagged and U.S.-crewed merchant vessel that was sailing in the Strait of Hormuz, the American military said.

The developments could escalate the heightened tensions between the longtime adversaries as President Donald Trump has threatened to use military action first over Iran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests and then to try to get the country to make a deal over its nuclear program. Trump's Republican administration has built up military forces in the region, sending the aircraft carrier, guided-missile destroyers, air defense assets and more to supplement its presence.

The Shahed-139 drone was shot down by an F-35C fighter jet from the Lincoln, which was sailing about 500 miles (800 kilometers) from Iran's southern coast, Hawkins said. No American troops were harmed, and no U.S. equipment was damaged, the military's statement noted.

Iranian state media reported that Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard is investigating the "interruption" of the drone. Semi-official Tasnim news agency posted on its Telegram that before the footage cut out, the drone was able to successfully transfer the images it took back to Iran.

US says Iran also harassed a merchant vessel

After the shutdown, Revolutionary Guard forces harassed the merchant vessel Stena Imperative, the U.S. military said. Two boats and an Iranian Mohajer drone approached the ship "at high speeds and threatened to board and seize the tanker," Hawkins' statement said.

The destroyer USS McFaul responded and escorted the Stena Imperative "with defensive air support from the U.S. Air Force," the statement said, adding that the merchant vessel was now sailing safely.

Talks between special envoy Steve Witkoff and Iranian officials are still planned, White House and Iranian

officials said.

Trump would not be drawn on where talks would take place, but he told reporters that "we are negotiating with them right now." He also noted the U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear sites in June and said, "I don't think they want that happening again."

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian said Tuesday that he instructed the country's foreign minister to "pursue fair and equitable negotiations" with the U.S., marking one of the first clear signs from Tehran that it wants to try to negotiate with Washington.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei also told state TV that the talks were still expected in the next few days but that the details, including where they will take place, were still being discussed. Baghaei said Turkey and Oman, among other regional countries, have offered to host the talks, according to the semiofficial Tasnim news agency.

Tensions began to rise again between the U.S. and Iran as the Islamic Republic spent weeks quelling protests that began in late December against growing economic instability before broadening into a challenge to the country's ruling theocracy.

Trump had promised in early January to "rescue" Iranians from their government's protest crackdown before starting to pressure Tehran again to make a deal over its nuclear program. That is even as the Republican president insists Iranian nuclear sites were "obliterated" in U.S. strikes in June.

Turkey had been working behind the scenes to make the talks happen there later this week as Witkoff is traveling in the region. A Turkish official later said the location of talks was uncertain but that Turkey was ready to support the process.

US military builds up presence in the region

Meanwhile, the U.S. military has been moving a growing number of assets into the region over the past several weeks, including the Lincoln and several destroyers, which arrived last week.

The carrier strike group, which brought roughly 5,700 additional service members, joined three destroyers and three littoral combat ships that were already in the region.

Analysts of flight-tracking data also have noticed dozens of U.S. military cargo planes heading to the region.

The activity is similar to last year when the U.S. moved in air defense hardware, like a Patriot missile system, in anticipation of an Iranian counterattack following the U.S. bombing of three key nuclear sites. Iran launched more than a dozen missiles at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar days after the strikes.

The U.S. has several bases in the Middle East, including Al Udeid, which hosts thousands of American troops and is the forward headquarters for U.S. Central Command.

Judge seems skeptical of legal justification for Pentagon's punishment of Sen. Mark Kelly

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge said Tuesday that he knows of no U.S. Supreme Court precedent to justify the Pentagon's censuring of a sitting U.S. senator who joined a videotaped plea for troops to resist unlawful orders from the Trump administration.

Sen. Mark Kelly had a front-row seat in a courtroom as his attorneys urged U.S. District Judge Richard Leon to block the Pentagon from punishing the Arizona Democrat, a retired U.S. Navy pilot. Leon didn't immediately rule from the bench on Kelly's claims that Pentagon officials violated his First Amendment free speech rights.

But the judge appeared to be skeptical of key arguments that a government attorney made in defense of Kelly's Jan. 5 censure from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

"You're asking me to do something the Supreme Court has never done," the judge told Justice Department attorney John Bailey. "Isn't that a bit of a stretch?"

Bailey argued that Congress decided that retired military service members are subject to the same Uniform Code of Military Justice that applies to active-duty troops.

"Retirees are part of the armed forces," Bailey said. "They are not separated from the services."

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Benjamin Mizer, one of Kelly's lawyers, said they aren't aware of any ruling to support the notion that military retirees have "diminished speech rights." And he argued that the First Amendment clearly protects Kelly's speech in this case.

"And any other approach would be to make new law," Mizer added.

Leon, who was nominated to the bench by Republican President George W. Bush, said the Pentagon's actions against Kelly could have a chilling effect on "many, many other retirees who wish to voice their opinion."

The judge said he hopes to issue a ruling by next Wednesday. Kelly shook hands with two government attorneys after the hearing.

In November, Kelly and five other Democratic lawmakers appeared on a video in which they urged troops to uphold the Constitution and not to follow unlawful military directives from the Trump administration.

Republican President Donald Trump accused the lawmakers of sedition "punishable by DEATH" in a social media post days later. Hegseth said Kelly's censure was "a necessary process step" to proceedings that could result in a demotion from the senator's retired rank of captain and subsequent reduction in retirement pay.

The 90-second video was first posted on a social media account belonging to Sen. Elissa Slotkin. Reps. Jason Crow, Chris Deluzio, Maggie Goodlander and Chrissy Houlahan also appeared in the video. All of the participants are veterans of the armed services or intelligence communities.

The Pentagon began investigating Kelly in late November, citing a federal law that allows retired service members to be recalled to active duty on orders of the defense secretary for possible court-martial or other punishment.

Hegseth has said Kelly was the only one of the six lawmakers to be investigated because he is the only one who formally retired from the military and still falls under the Pentagon's jurisdiction.

What to know about the disappearance of Nancy Guthrie, mother of 'Today' show's Savannah Guthrie

By SARAH BRUMFIELD Associated Press

Authorities are looking for the 84-year-old mother of "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie after they say she was taken from her home in Tucson, Arizona, against her will over the weekend.

It's imperative that Nancy Guthrie, who was last seen Saturday night, is found soon because she could die without her medication, Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos said.

The sheriff held a news conference Tuesday and urged the public to offer tips, but revealed few new details about the investigation. Officials have finished combing through Nancy Guthrie's home and turned it back over to family, Nanos said.

He declined to say whether Guthrie's disappearance was thought to be random or targeted or to describe the evidence found at her home.

There were signs of forced entry at Nancy Guthrie's home, according to a person familiar with the investigation, who was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the case and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of an anonymity. Investigators also found specific evidence in the home showing there was a nighttime kidnapping, the person said.

Here's what to know about the case:

Nancy Guthrie reported missing after she didn't go to church

Nancy Guthrie was last seen Saturday night at the affluent Catalina Foothills area home where she lived alone. She was reported missing Sunday. Someone at a church called a family member to say Guthrie wasn't there, leading family to search her home and then call 911, Nanos said.

Initially, searchers used drones and dogs and were supported by volunteers and Border Patrol, Nanos said. But by Monday morning, he said search crews were pulled back.

"We don't see this as a search mission so much as it is a crime scene," the sheriff said.

There were signs of forced entry at the home and several personal items, including Guthrie's cellphone,

wallet and car, were all still at the home, the person familiar with the investigation said. Investigators were reviewing surveillance video from nearby homes and information from area license plate cameras and analyzing local cellphone towers data, according to the person. The motive remains a mystery. Investigators do not believe the abduction was part of a robbery, home invasion or kidnapping-for-ransom plot, the person said.

Multiple media organizations reported receiving purported ransom notes that they handed over to investigators. The sheriff's department said it's taking the notes and other tips seriously but declined to comment further.

Asked Tuesday whether officials were looking for her alive, Nanos said "we hope we are."

DNA samples have been gathered and submitted for analysis as part of the investigation. "We've gotten some back, but nothing to indicate any suspects," the sheriff said.

Savannah Guthrie asks for prayers to help bring her mom home

This week, Savannah Guthrie has been in Arizona and hasn't appeared at the anchor's desk. In a social media post late Monday, she asked supporters to "raise your prayers with us and believe with us that she will be lifted by them in this very moment. Bring her home."

Savannah Guthrie grew up in Tucson, the youngest of three siblings and her father died of a heart attack when she was just 16. She graduated from the University of Arizona and previously worked as a reporter and anchor at KVOA-TV in Tucson. She joined "Today" in 2011 and became co-anchor the following year.

Nancy Guthrie held her family together after husband's death

Before the woman's disappearance, viewers got to know Nancy Guthrie through her daughter's show. Savannah Guthrie credited her mom with holding their family together after her father's death.

"When my dad died, our family just hung onto each other for dear life because it was such a shock. We were just trying to figure out how to become a family of four when we'd always been a family of five," she said on "Today" in 2017.

During an appearance in a story Savannah Guthrie did about her hometown late last year, she was asked what made the family want to plant roots in Tucson in the 1970s.

"It's so wonderful. Just the air, the quality of life," Nancy Guthrie said. "It's laid back and gentle."

Paris prosecutors raid X offices as part of investigation into child abuse images and deepfakes

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French prosecutors raided the offices of social media platform X on Tuesday as part of a preliminary investigation into allegations that include spreading child sexual abuse images and deepfakes. They have also summoned billionaire owner Elon Musk for questioning.

X and Musk's artificial intelligence company xAI also face intensifying scrutiny from Britain's data privacy regulator, which opened formal investigations into how they handled personal data when they developed and deployed Musk's artificial intelligence chatbot Grok.

Grok, which was built by xAI and is available through X, sparked global outrage last month after it pumped out a torrent of sexualized nonconsensual deepfake images in response to requests from X users.

The French investigation was opened in January last year by the prosecutors' cybercrime unit, the Paris prosecutors' office said in a statement. It's looking into alleged "complicity" in possessing and spreading pornographic images of minors, sexually explicit deepfakes, denial of crimes against humanity and manipulation of an automated data processing system as part of an organized group, among other charges.

Prosecutors asked Musk and former CEO Linda Yaccarino to attend "voluntary interviews" on April 20. Employees of X have also been summoned that same week to be heard as witnesses, the statement said. Yaccarino was CEO from May 2023 until July 2025.

In a post on its own service denying the allegations, X railed against the raid on its Paris office as "an abusive act of law enforcement theater designed to achieve illegitimate political objectives rather than

advance legitimate law enforcement goals rooted in the fair and impartial administration of justice.”

In a message posted on X, the Paris prosecutors’ office announced the ongoing searches at the company’s offices in France and said it was leaving the platform while calling on followers to join it on other social media.

“At this stage, the conduct of the investigation is based on a constructive approach, with the aim of ultimately ensuring that the X platform complies with French law, as it operates on the national territory,” the prosecutors’ statement said.

European Union police agency Europol “is supporting the French authorities in this,” Europol spokesperson Jan Op Gen Oorth told the AP, without elaborating.

French authorities opened their investigation after reports from a French lawmaker alleging that biased algorithms on X likely distorted the functioning of an automated data processing system.

It expanded after Grok generated posts that allegedly denied the Holocaust, a crime in France, and spread sexually explicit deepfakes, the statement said.

Grok wrote in a widely shared post in French that gas chambers at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp were designed for “disinfection with Zyklon B against typhus” rather than for mass murder — language long associated with Holocaust denial.

In later posts on X, the chatbot reversed itself and acknowledged that its earlier reply was wrong, saying it had been deleted and pointed to historical evidence that Zyklon B was used to kill more than 1 million people in Auschwitz gas chambers.

The chatbot also appeared to praise Adolf Hitler last year, in comments that X took down after complaints.

In Britain, the Information Commissioner’s Office said it’s looking into whether X and xAI followed the law when processing personal data and whether Grok had any measures in place to prevent its use to generate “harmful manipulated images.”

“The reports about Grok raise deeply troubling questions about how people’s personal data has been used to generate intimate or sexualised images without their knowledge or consent, and whether the necessary safeguards were put in place to prevent this,” said William Malcolm, an executive director at the watchdog.

He didn’t specify what the penalty would be if the probe found the companies didn’t comply with data protection laws.

A separate investigation into Grok launched last month by the U.K. media regulator, Ofcom, is ongoing.

Ofcom said Tuesday it’s still gathering evidence and warned the probe could take months.

X has also been under pressure from the EU. The 27-nation bloc’s executive arm opened an investigation last month after Grok spewed nonconsensual sexualized deepfake images on the platform.

Brussels has already hit X with a 120-million euro (then-\$140 million) fine for shortcomings under the bloc’s sweeping digital regulations, including blue checkmarks that broke the rules on “deceptive design practices” that risked exposing users to scams and manipulation.

On Monday, Musk’s space exploration and rocket business, SpaceX, announced that it acquired xAI in a deal that will also combine Grok, X and his satellite communication company Starlink.

Lindsey Vonn is ‘confident’ she can race at Olympics despite ruptured ACL in left knee

By ANDREW DAMPF AP Sports Writer

CORTINA D’AMPEZZO, Italy (AP) — Lindsey Vonn has done this before. And succeeded.

The 41-year-old American skiing standout is “confident” she can compete at the Milan Cortina Winter Olympics despite a torn ACL from a crash four days ago.

Vonn said that the damage to her left knee was a “completely ruptured” ACL, bone bruising “plus meniscal damage.”

After three days of physical therapy and doctors’ advice, Vonn tried skiing on Tuesday. She did not ap-

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pear to be limping as she entered and exited a news conference.

"My knee is not swollen, and with the help of a knee brace, I am confident that I can compete on Sunday," Vonn said. "And as long as there's a chance, I will try . . . I will do everything in my power to be in the starting gate."

Vonn crashed in a World Cup downhill in Crans-Montana, Switzerland on Friday and ended up in the safety nets. After skiing to the bottom of the course she was taken to hospital.

Vonn is expected to be one of the biggest stars of the Winter Games, which start Friday with the opening ceremony. Her first race comes two days later in the women's downhill. She also plans on competing in super-G and the new team combined event.

The opening women's downhill training session is scheduled for Thursday.

"My intention," Vonn said, "is to race everything."

Vonn has had long series of injuries, crashes and comebacks

Vonn has had numerous crashes and injuries in her career. One of her worst was at the 2013 world championships in Schladming, Austria during a super-G that was also held in difficult conditions.

Vonn tore her right knee. She returned the following season, got hurt again and missed the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

She was also battered up before the 2019 world championships but took bronze in downhill before going into a nearly six-year retirement.

"I've been in this position before. I know how to handle it," Vonn said. "I feel a lot better now than I did in 2019 . . . And I still got a medal there with no LCL and three tibial plateau fractures. So, like I said, this is not an unknown for me. I've done this before."

She persevered through a bruised shin that she treated with topfen cheese before winning gold in downhill at the 2010 Games.

"I don't need topfen now. My knee isn't swollen," Vonn said.

It's a home remedy whereby the cheese is applied to the offending area and helps to reduce swelling.

"This would be the best comeback I've done so far," Vonn said. "Definitely the most dramatic."

Other skiers have competed with similar injuries

Teammate Bella Wright said Vonn has what it takes — a strong mental state — to ski through her injuries.

"If anyone can do it, it's Lindsey," Wright said.

Breezy Johnson, the downhill and combined world champion, was in a similar situation to Vonn at Cortina during a World Cup weekend in 2022.

"I've tried and failed to ski this course with no ACL and that doesn't mean that she can't do it," Johnson said. "There are more athletes that ski without ACLs and with knee damage than what we talk about."

Andrea Panzeri, the chief physician for the Italian Winter Sports Federation, said numerous athletes have competed at elite level with a torn ACL and other severe knee issues.

Vonn's fellow downhiller Sofia Goggia came back to win a silver medal at the 2022 Olympics weeks after spraining her left knee, partially tearing her ACL and suffering a "minor fracture" of the fibula bone in her leg — plus some tendon damage.

Italian freestyle skier Flora Tabanelli tore the ACL in her right knee in November but put off surgery until after the Olympics.

Tabanelli is 18, though.

"But (Vonn) has experience, the physical ability and the experience on this course," Panzeri said. "If she decides to try and race, it's because her clinical condition and her doctors are allowing her to. She doesn't have anything to lose. I think it's worth a try."

Vonn has a titanium implant in her right knee

Vonn made a stunning comeback last season after nearly six years away. Skiing with a partial titanium implant in her right knee, she has been the circuit's leading downhiller this season with two victories and three other podium finishes in five races.

Including super-G, Vonn completed eight World Cup races and finished on the podium in seven of them. Her worst finish was fourth.

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Women's skiing during the Games will be in Cortina, where Vonn holds the World Cup record with 12 wins. She has won three Olympic medals: Gold in downhill and bronze in super-G in 2010 and bronze in downhill in 2018.

Vonn visits grave of childhood coach in Austria

It hasn't just been about recovery for Vonn these past few days.

On her way to Cortina, she stopped at the grave of her childhood coach Erich Sailer, who died in August aged 99.

Sailer coached Vonn at Buck Hill in Minnesota. He's buried just outside Innsbruck, Austria.

Vonn said she shed some tears during the graveside visit – the only tears she's shed these past few days.

"I miss him. And I know exactly what he would say to me right now. And it definitely gives me additional hope that I know that he would support me," Vonn added.

"He would say, 'It's only 90 seconds. What's 90 seconds in a lifetime? It's nothing. You can do it.'" Vonn said. "That's what he said to me before my last run in Are, and I know he would say it to me again today."

Trump demands \$1 billion from Harvard as a prolonged standoff appears to deepen

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is demanding a \$1 billion payment from Harvard University to end his prolonged standoff with the Ivy League campus, doubling the amount he sought previously as both sides appear to move further from reaching a deal.

The president raised the stakes on social media Monday night, saying Harvard has been "behaving very badly." He said the university must pay the government directly as part of any deal — something Harvard has opposed — and that his administration wants "nothing further to do" with Harvard in the future.

Trump's comments on Truth Social came in response to a New York Times report saying the president had dropped his demand for a financial payment, lowering the bar for a deal. Trump denied he was backing down.

Harvard officials did not immediately comment.

Trump's outburst appears to leave both sides firmly entrenched in a conflict that Trump previously said was nearing an end.

Last June, Trump said a deal was just days away and that Harvard had acted "extremely appropriately" during negotiations. He later said an agreement was being finalized that would require Harvard to put \$500 million toward the creation of a "series of trade schools" rather than a payment to the government.

That deal appears to have fallen apart entirely. In his social media post, Trump said the trade school proposal had been turned down because it was "convoluted" and "wholly inadequate."

Harvard has long been Trump's top target in his administration's campaign to bring the nation's most prestigious universities to heel. His officials have cut billions of dollars in Harvard's federal research funding and attempted to block it from enrolling foreign students after the campus rebuffed a series of government demands last April.

The White House has said it's punishing Harvard for tolerating anti-Jewish bias on campus.

In a pair of lawsuits, Harvard said it's being unfairly penalized for refusing to adopt the administration's views. A federal judge agreed in December, reversing the funding cuts and calling the antisemitism argument a "smokescreen."

Trump's latest escalation comes as other parts of his higher education campaign are teetering.

Last fall, the White House invited nine universities to join a "compact" that offered funding priority in exchange for adopting Trump's agenda. None of the schools accepted. In January, the administration abandoned its legal defense of an Education Department document threatening to cut schools' funding over diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

When he took office for his second term, Trump made it a priority to go after elite universities that he said

had been overrun by liberal thinking and anti-Jewish bias. His officials have frozen huge sums of research funding, which colleges have come to rely on for scientific and medical research.

Several universities have reached agreements with the White House to restore funding. Some deals have included direct payments to the government, including \$200 million from Columbia University. Brown University agreed to pay \$50 million toward state workforce development groups.

Disney parks chief Josh D'Amaro will take over for Bob Iger as CEO

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

Disney has named its parks chief Josh D'Amaro to succeed Bob Iger as the entertainment giant's top executive.

D'Amaro will become the 9th CEO in the more than 100-year-old company's history. He has overseen the company's theme parks, cruises and resorts since 2020. The Experiences division has been a substantial moneymaker for Disney, with \$36 billion in annual revenue in fiscal 2025 and 185,000 employees worldwide.

The 54-year-old takes over a time when Disney is flush with box-office hits like "Zootopia 2" and "Avatar: Fire and Ash" and its streaming business is strong. At the same time, Disney has seen a decline in foreign visitors to its domestic theme parks. Tourism to the U.S. has fallen overall during an aggressive immigration crack down by the Trump administration, as well as clashes with almost all of country's trading partners.

D'Amaro will be tasked with tapping into Disney's vast collection of intellectual property to help create successful movies and theme park additions, while also pushing for streaming growth and continuing to build up its sports business.

The decision on the next chief executive at Disney comes almost four years after the company's choice to replace Iger went disastrously, forcing Iger back into the job.

Only two years after stepping down as CEO, Iger returned to Disney in 2022 after a period of clashes, missteps and a weakening financial performance under his hand-picked successor, Bob Chapek.

Disney meticulously and methodically sought out its next CEO this time. The company created a succession planning committee in 2023, but the search began in earnest in 2024 when Disney enlisted James Gorman, who is currently Disney's chairman and previously served as Morgan Stanley's executive chairman, to lead the effort. That still gave it ample opportunity to vet candidates, as Iger agreed to a contract extension.

Disney said that Iger will continue to serve as a senior adviser and board member until his retirement from the company at the end of the year.

While external candidates were considered, it was widely expected that Disney would look internally for the next CEO. The advantage would be that Disney executives were already being mentored by Iger, and had extensive contact with the company's 15 board members, of which Iger is a member.

Disney is unique in that its top executive must oversee a sprawling entertainment company with branches reaching in every direction, while also serving as an unusually public figure.

D'Amaro and Disney Entertainment Co-Chairman Dana Walden quickly emerged as the front-runners for the top job.

D'Amaro, who has been with Disney since 1998, has been leading the charge on Disney's multiyear \$60 billion investment into its cruise ships, resorts and theme parks. He also oversees Walt Disney Imagineering, which is in charge of the design and development of the company's theme parks, resorts, cruise ships, and immersive experiences worldwide. In addition, D'Amaro has been leading Disney's licensing business, which includes its partnership with Epic Games.

"Throughout this search process, Josh has demonstrated a strong vision for the company's future and a deep understanding of the creative spirit that makes Disney unique in an ever-changing marketplace," Gorman said in prepared remarks. "He has an outstanding record of business achievement, collaborating with some of the biggest names in entertainment to bring their stories to life in our parks, showcasing the power of combining Disney storytelling with cutting-edge technology."

In her most recent role as co-chairman of Disney Entertainment, Walden has helped oversee Disney's streaming business, along with its entertainment media, news and content businesses. She joined Disney

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in 2019. Before that, Walden spent 25 years at 21st Century Fox and was CEO of Fox Television Group.

Walden will now step into the newly created role of president and chief creative officer of The Walt Disney Co. She will report to D'Amaro.

"I think if you think about what is the heart of the Disney company, it's the creativity. It's this amazing IP that's been produced over decades, going back to Walt, and the storytelling that comes from that creativity. And I think Dana, working with Josh and ensuring that the best creativity permeates all of our businesses, is what we wanted," Gorman said in an interview with CNBC.

There had been speculation that Disney might go the route of naming co-CEOs, a move that has started to become more popular with companies. Oracle and Spotify are among those who named co-CEOs in 2025.

D'Amaro and Walden's appointments are effective on March 18.

What to know about the partial government shutdown

By MEG KINNARD and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The partial government shutdown is vastly different from the record closure in the fall.

That is mostly because this shutdown, which started Saturday, does not include the whole of government and may not last long, even as it now drags into the new week.

The House had hoped to pass funding legislation quickly when lawmakers return Monday evening, and that would have ended the shutdown. But House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., now says he is hoping to have the package considered "at least by Tuesday" as he scrambles to round up votes and Democrats hold out for deeper changes to immigration enforcement.

Congress already has passed half this year's funding bills, ensuring that several important federal agencies and programs continue to operate through September. Nutrition assistance programs, for example, should be unaffected.

Funding is lapsing, at least temporarily, for the Pentagon and agencies such as the departments of Homeland Security and Transportation. Essential functions are continuing, but workers could go without pay if the impasse drags on. Some could be furloughed.

Why is there another shutdown?

The government funding process had been going smoothly, with key lawmakers in the House and Senate finding bipartisan agreement. But the shooting deaths this month of two U.S. citizens, Alex Pretti and Renée Good, by federal agents in Minneapolis, changed the dynamic.

Democrats were incensed after Pretti's killing and demanded that one of the six remaining funding bills, for DHS and its associated agencies, be stripped from the package passed by the House. They said the bill must include changes to immigration enforcement, including a code of conduct for federal agents and a requirement that officers show identification.

Eager to avoid another shutdown, President Donald Trump's White House struck a deal with Democrats to temporarily fund DHS at current levels for two weeks while the negotiations play out.

The Senate passed the five-bill funding package Friday, but it must pass the House again before becoming law. The House is not returning until Monday, ensuring funding will lapse for parts of the government, at least temporarily.

"I'm confident that we'll do it at least by Tuesday," Johnson told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

Have there been previous brief or weekend shutdowns?

Yes, and typically the effects were not very visible to anyone hoping to use government services.

There were a couple of these in Trump's first administration.

In January 2018, a dispute over immigration protections resulted in a weekend shutdown. Some federal workers were furloughed or worked without pay. Benefits such as Social Security and Medicare were uninterrupted, many people did not notice the shutdown and federal offices reopened the following Monday after a deal was in place.

In February 2018, the shortest shutdown in U.S. history lasted about nine hours, overnight, and most

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people did not notice any impact. While agencies technically shut down after funding lapsed, it was so brief that furlough notices were not all sent out, and nothing was closed during business hours.

What funding is impacted?

The funding lapse affects the Pentagon and agencies such as the Transportation Department and DHS, which includes the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Experts have said FEMA should have enough money to respond to the massive winter storm still affecting large swaths of the country. FEMA would have about \$7 billion to \$8 billion in a fund for disaster response and recovery efforts and the staff who work on them. An extended shutdown could put more pressure on that fund, especially if FEMA must respond to new disasters.

Other FEMA operations, such as the ability to write or renew National Flood Insurance Program policies, would pause, as they did during last year's 43-day shutdown.

That shutdown took a toll on the traveling public as delays and cancellations mounted, and there is now a risk of air travel disruptions again: One of the spending bills awaiting House passage covers the Department of Transportation, which is responsible for the air traffic control system and its workforce.

Air traffic controllers would still report for duty, but would be doing so without pay until a funding bill is passed.

At the State Department, the shutdown will not have a significant effect for the general public, in the United States or abroad.

Department employees were sent a 73-page memo late Friday that said passport and visa services and processing will continue and that embassies and consulates will remain open. Some functions, including nonemergency consular notifications and website updates, may be affected. But the memo said that 18,946 of the department's 27,206 direct hire American employees are exempted from potential furloughs if the shutdown continues.

Will SNAP and other food assistance programs be affected?

No. That is a major change from the fall shutdown, when many people had to do with little-to-no assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program during the final weeks of the government closure. The bill to end that shutdown funded the Department of Agriculture and the programs that it administers through the remainder of the budget year, which ends Sept. 30.

That means full SNAP benefits will continue now. The federal food program serves about 42 million people, about 1 in 8 Americans, in lower-income households. They receive an average of around \$190 monthly per person.

Another key program fully funded for the year is the federal supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children, known as WIC. It provides pregnant women and young children with healthy food and nutrition counseling.

Seeking shelter from Trump's fury, U.S. trade partners reach deals with each other

By PAUL WISEMAN, JOSH BOAK and ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Bullied and buffeted by President Donald Trump's tariffs for the past year, America's longstanding allies are desperately seeking ways to shield themselves from the president's impulsive wrath.

U.S. trade partners are cutting deals among themselves — sometimes discarding old differences to do so — in a push to diversify their economies away from a newly protectionist United States. Some European governments and institutions are reducing their use of U.S. digital services such as Zoom and Teams.

Central banks and global investors are dumping dollars and buying gold. Together, their actions could diminish U.S. influence and mean higher interest rates and prices for Americans already angry about the high cost of living.

Last summer and fall, Trump used the threat of punishing taxes on imports to strong-arm the European Union, Japan, South Korea and other trading partners into accepting lopsided trade deals and promising to make massive investments in the United States.

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But a deal with Trump, they've discovered, is no deal at all.

The mercurial president repeatedly finds reasons to conjure new tariffs to impose on trading partners that thought they had already made enough concessions to satisfy him.

Just months after reaching his agreement with the EU, Trump threatened new tariffs on eight European countries for opposing his attempts to seize control of Greenland from Denmark – though he quickly backed down. And last month, he said he'd slap 100% tariffs on Canada for breaking with the United States by agreeing to reduce Canadian tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles.

"Our trading partners are discovering that the largely one-sided deals they concluded with the U.S. provide little protection," said former U.S. trade negotiator Wendy Cutler, senior vice president at the Asia Society Policy Institute. "As a result, trade diversification efforts by our partners are on turbo charge, looking to reduce dependence on the U.S."

Trump supporters such as Paul Winfree, who was deputy director of the White House Domestic Policy Council during Trump's first term, are wary of the relative decline in U.S. Treasury note holdings by foreign central banks and view the national debt as a vulnerability rivals would like to exploit.

Winfree, CEO of the Economic Policy Innovation Institute, a think tank, said that some of Trump's advisers do not feel America has fully benefited from the dollar's status as the world's dominant currency.

"But the fact remains that every other country is jealous of our status, and many of our adversaries would love to challenge the U.S. dollar and Treasuries," he said.

White House spokesman Kush Desai insists America's standing on the global stage has not been diminished.

"President Trump remains committed to the strength and power of the U.S. Dollar as the world's reserve currency," he said.

India and the EU clinch a long-awaited deal

The most eye-opening deal so far has been the pact announced last week between the 27-country EU and India, the world's fastest growing major economy. Negotiators had been at it for nearly two decades before they closed the agreement.

Likewise, an EU trade deal announced two weeks ago with the Mercosur nations of South America took a quarter century of negotiation. It will create a free-trade market of more than 700 million people.

"Some of these deals have been in the works for quite some time," said Maurice Obstfeld, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund. "The pressure from Trump made them more eager to accelerate the process and reach agreement."

EU exporters were jubilant over the India deal. VDMA, a group of European machinery and plant engineering companies, welcomed lower Indian tariffs on machinery.

"The free trade agreement between India and the EU brings much needed oxygen to a world increasingly dominated by trade conflicts," VDMA's executive director, Thilo Brodtmann, said in a statement. "With this agreement, Europe is sending a clear signal in favor of rules-based trade and against the law of the jungle."

'We have all the cards'

On Monday, Trump went on social media to announce his own deal with India. The U.S., he posted, would reduce tariffs on Indian imports after India agreed to stop buying oil from Russia, which has used the sales to fund its four year war in Ukraine.

The president said that India would reduce its tariffs on American products to zero and buy \$500 billion worth of American products. Trade lawyer Ryan Majerus, a partner at the King & Spalding and a trade official in the Biden administration and during Trump's first term, said that businesses and legal analysts were awaiting official White House documents spelling out details of the deal.

Trump is banking on there being limits to other countries' ability to pull away from the United States. America has the world's biggest economy and consumer market. "We have all the cards," Trump told Fox Business this month.

Countries like South Korea, dependent on America's market and military protection, can't afford to ignore Trump's threats. On Monday, for example, the president said he was increasing tariffs on South Korea

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goods because the country's legislature has been slow to approve the trade framework announced last year. On Tuesday, the country's Finance Ministry responded by saying its chief, Koo Yun-cheol, would push lawmakers to quickly approve a bill to invest \$350 billion as promised in the agreement.

"The U.S. was trying to identify a counterpart that would find it difficult to refuse U.S. demands outright, given the depth of its economic and security ties," said Cha Du Hyeogn, an analyst at South Korea's Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

Or consider Canada, which sends 75% of its exports to its southern neighbor. "Canada and U.S. will always be tightly linked through international trade," said Obstfeld, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. "We're talking about adjustments more or less on the margin."

But the world's growing rejection of Trump's policies is already having an impact, driving down the value of the dollar, long the currency of choice for global commerce, to its lowest level since 2022 last week versus several competing currencies.

Syracuse University political scientist Daniel McDowell, author of the book "Bucking the Buck: U.S. Financial Sanctions and the International Backlash against the Dollar," sees a vibe shift under Trump: Foreign countries and investors want to reduce their exposure to the United States, which has moved from a source of security and stability to a driver of instability and unpredictability under Trump.

"Trump has shown that he is willing to use foreign countries' economic dependence on the U.S. as leverage against them in negotiations," McDowell said. "As global perceptions of the US are changing, it is only natural that investors — public and private alike — are reconsidering their relationship with the dollar."

Today in History: February 4, O.J. Simpson found liable in civil trial

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 4, the 35th day of 2026. There are 330 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 4, 1997, a civil jury in Santa Monica, California, found O.J. Simpson liable for the deaths of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman, ordering Simpson to pay \$33.5 million to the victims' families.

Also on this date:

In 1789, electors unanimously chose George Washington to be the first president of the United States.

In 1801, John Marshall took office as chief justice of the United States, a position he would hold for 34 years.

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet leader Josef Stalin began a wartime conference at Yalta.

In 1974, newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst, 19, was kidnapped in California by the radical Symbionese Liberation Army. Hearst was caught on camera participating in a bank robbery with the extremist group that April and subsequently found guilty of bank robbery and sentenced to seven years in prison. (President Jimmy Carter commuted her sentence, and she was later pardoned.)

In 1976, more than 23,000 people died when a severe earthquake struck Guatemala with a magnitude of 7.5.

In 2004, Facebook had its beginnings as Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg launched "TheFacebook."

In 2013, British scientists announced that skeletal remains they had discovered during an excavation beneath a Leicester, England parking lot were, beyond reasonable doubt, the remains of 15th century monarch King Richard III.

In 2023, the U.S. shot down a suspected Chinese spy balloon over the Atlantic Ocean, saying it was equipped with high-tech gear for a military-linked aerial surveillance program. China denied the balloon was used for spying on sensitive North American military sites, insisting the flyover was an accident involving a weather balloon.

Today's birthdays: Former Argentine President Isabel Peron is 95. Rock singer Alice Cooper is 78. Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell is 73. Football Hall of Famer Lawrence Taylor is 67. Country singer Clint

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Black is 64. Boxing Hall of Famer Oscar De La Hoya is 53. Singer Natalie Imbruglia is 51. Rapper Cam'ron is 50. Singer-songwriter Gavin DeGraw is 49. Olympic gymnastics gold medalist Carly Patterson is 38. Actor Edvin Ryding is 23.