

Groton Daily Independent

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Wednesday, Feb. 15

Emmanuel Lutheran: League at 6:30 p.m., Confirmation at 7 p.m.

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

School Breakfast: Mini pancakes, fruit, juice, milk.

School Lunch: Mini corndogs, baked beans, fruit, broccoli and dip.

Senior Menu: Beef stew, buttermilk biscuits, Waldorf salad, sherbet.

School Board Meeting: 6 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 16

St. John's Lutheran: Quilting at 9 a.m.

School Breakfast: Cereal, yogurt, fruit, juice, milk.

School Lunch: Turkey gravy, mashed potatoes, corn, fruit.

Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes and ham, green peas, Mandarin orange salad, whole wheat bread.

Apts for Rent

1 bedroom apartment for rent. Move in by Feb. 28th and get a FREE 32" Flat Screen TV! All utilities included except A/C, for \$600. Please call or text 239-849-7674 .

Open: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave.

The cardboard/paper

recycling trailer at the school is **OPEN**

PARTS COUNTER SALES

Self motivated individual needed to fill our Parts Counter Sales position. Duties include parts sales, display stocking, shipping and receiving. Sponsored training, excellent benefits package and the possibility for advancement. Contact Steve at 605-395-6421 or email resume to s.harry@harrysinc.com.

Harry Implement Inc.

PO Box 841
Ferne, SD
57439



Oven Fresh Sandwiches



Hot Desserts



Snack Melts



11 E Hwy 12, Groton ~ 397-8627

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Groton Coffee Cup League

Feb. 13 Team Standings: James Valley 25, Kens 17, Ten Pins 12, Jungle Lanes 10

High Games: Vickie Kramp 198, Joyce Walter 171, Nancy Radke 164, Arlowyn Spencer 164

High Series: Vickie Kramp 496, Joyce Walter 448, Nancy Radke 432

Conde National

Feb. 13 Team Standings: Pirates 22, Cubs 17, Mets 17, Braves 15, Colts 13, Giants 12

Men's High Games: Larry Frohling 190; Lance Frohling 183, 181; Justin Kesterson 174

Men's High Series: Lance Frohling 529, Larry Frohling 507, Bryce Dargatz 459

Women's High Games: Mary Larson 188, Amber East 171, Joyce Walter 161

Women's High Series: Mary Larson 468, Joyce Walter 436, Renee Hanlon 430

Groton City

Feb. 6

Meeting Minutes

February 6, 2017

The Groton City Council met on the above date at 7:00pm at the Groton Community Center for their regular first monthly meeting with the following members present: McGannon, Fliehs, Opp, Peterson, Blackmun, Glover, and Mayor Hanlon presiding. Also present were: Finance Officer Lowary, Attorney Johnson, Brent Wienk, Joe Altentaller, Paul Kosel, and Kathy Sundermeier.

The minutes were approved as read on a motion by Glover and seconded by McGannon. All members present voted aye.

The financial report was approved on a motion by McGannon and seconded by Opp. All members present voted aye.

Moved by Peterson and seconded by Blackmun to authorize the following bills for payment. All members present voted aye.

Executive Payroll 683.06 salaries; Administrative Payroll 6,507.57 salaries; Public Safety Payroll 12,624.42 salaries; Public Works Payroll 17,919.94 salaries; Cultural & Recreational Payroll 1,339.39 salaries; First State Bank 7,800.51 ss & wh; Consol Fed Cr Union 1,125.00 emp savings; SD Municipal Electric 75.00 registration; City of Groton 727.64 dep ref, postage, emp sav, util; US Post Office 200.00 postage; April Abeln 519.08 dep flex; Branden Abeln 11.00 meal; Ameripride 31.70 rug rent; Border States 282.15 splice, bracket; Chase Visa 609.31 supplies; Chief Supply 108.80 uniforms; Colonial Research 115.43 cleaner; Dakota Electronics 161.60 repairs; Darrels Sinclair 1,611.38 tires; Susan Davis 16.00 book; Equipment Blades 238.00 cutting edges; Galls 377.09 uniforms; Groton Independent 55.53 publishing; Guardian Insurance 245.30 emp ins; Heartland Waste 6,473.60 garbage hauling; Terry Herron 11.00 meal; James Valley Tele 580.42 phones, internet; Johnson, Drew 725.00 legal services; Kays Computing 113.99 repairs; Kens Food Fair 219.37 supplies; Paul Kosel 36.00 meal, med flex; Shawn Lambert 11.00 meal; Anita Lowary 316.47 med flex; Macs 8.79 hitch pin; Matheson Tri-Gas 306.34 helmet; Stacy Mayou 460.17 med flex; Midstates Group 27.00 lamination; NW Energy 10.52 nat gas; Ramkota Hotel 205.98 motel room; S&S Lumber 156.84 supplies; SD Dept of Health 30.00 testing; Donald Shanholt 186.04 refund; SD Public Assurance Alliance 887.56 ins; SD Retirement 8,031.00 retirement; SD State Treasurer 10,225.40 sales tax; Dan Sunne 266.30 mileage, meals; Verizon 41.81 comm; Dwight Zerr 11.00 lunch

Brett Wienk and Joe Altentaller came before the Council to offer services by the National Guard for Groton City projects. Cleanup week and baseball improvements were the main suggestions and the Guard will help April 1-2 and May 6-7. Brett and Joe leave the meeting.

Blackmun gave the Baseball Foundation report. They recommend a gate of \$3 for all adults attending regardless of which team they are attending. Groton will host the Jr. Legion State Tournament on the 1st weekend of August. Division of teams and coaches needed were discussed.

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Terry Herron, Shawn Lambertz and Stacy Mayou enter the meeting and gave department reports. The chip/seal project, age and condition of the steamer, water meters failure to read, rubble site gate, summer employees returning, baseball light harnesses, a house moving through Groton, a guy wire damage, police vehicle equipment, and cameras.

Terry, Shawn, and Stacy left meeting following their reports.

Summer employees advertisements will be started immediately.

Finance Officer Lowary presented several fund reports for 2016, an email communication, and the wind damage settlement. Moved by Peterson and seconded by Glover to accept insurance settlement offer. All members present voted aye.

Moved by McGannon and seconded by Opp to pass the following resolution on the new pre-disaster mitigation plan. All members present voted aye.

RESOLUTION TO ADOPT THE BROWN COUNTY PDM PLAN

WHEREAS the City of Groton has experienced severe damage from strong winds, flooding, hail, heavy snow, heavy rain, and tornadoes on many occasions in the past century, resulting in property loss, loss of life, economic hardship, and threats to public health and safety;

WHEREAS a Hazard Mitigation Plan has been developed after more than one year of research and work by the City of Groton, Brown County Emergency Management, NECOG, and the Pre-Disaster Mitigation Committee;

WHEREAS the Plan recommends hazard mitigation actions that will protect the people and property affected by the natural hazards that face the City;

WHEREAS a public meeting was held to review the Plan as required by law;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Mayor and Council of Groton that:

1. The Hazard Mitigation Plan is hereby adopted as an official plan of City of Groton,
2. The respective City official identified in the strategy of the Plan is hereby directed to implement the recommended action assigned to them. These officials will report annually on the activities, accomplishments, and progress to Brown County Emergency Management
3. The City of Groton Finance Officer will provide annual progress reports on the status of implementation of the plan to the Mayor and City Council. This report shall be submitted to the City Council by November 1st of each year.

The Planning & Zoning Commission had recommended the rezoning of the Olive Grove Golf Course from Ag Fringe to Commercial 2. Moved by Glover and seconded by Opp to give first reading to Ordinance 709, The Rezoning of Olive Grove Golf Course. All members present voted aye.

Members were reminded of the District SDML meeting in Bowdle on Mar 28.

At 8:08pm the Council adjourned into executive session on a motion by Opp and seconded by Glover to discuss legal matters SDCL 1-25-2 (3) and personnel matters under SDCL 1-25-2 (1). All members present voted aye. Council reconvened at 8:50pm.

Meeting adjourned.

Scott Hanlon, Mayor

Anita Lowary, Finance Officer

Former Congressman Clint Roberts Passes Away

PIERRE, S.D. – Clint Roberts, a former member of the U.S. House of Representatives from South Dakota, died last night in Pierre. Roberts, 82, represented South Dakota's second congressional district in the U.S. House from 1981 to 1983.

"I was deeply saddened to learn of the death of Congressman Clint Roberts," said Gov. Dugaard. "Throughout his years in the Legislature, in Congress and in state government, Clint brought good humor and common sense to his work. Clint and his family are good friends, and Linda and I extend our thoughts and prayers to Clint's family."

Roberts was born on Jan. 30, 1935, in Lyman County, South Dakota, and spent his life on his family's ranch. Roberts served in the state Senate from 1973 to 1979. As a state senator, he served as assistant minority leader from 1975 to 1976 and as president pro tempore from 1977 to 1978. After a campaign for the Republican nomination for governor in 1978, Roberts served as South Dakota's secretary of agriculture from 1979 to 1980, during the administration of Gov. William J. Janklow.

In 1980, Roberts was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from the state's second congressional district, which included the western portion of the state. He narrowly lost reelection in 1982 after the state lost its second district. Roberts again ran for governor in 1986, finishing a close second to George S. Mickelson, and served in Mickelson's administration as director of the South Dakota Energy Office.

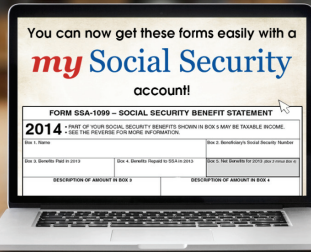
Roberts' funeral will be held at 11 a.m. CST on Friday, Feb. 17, 2017, at the First United Methodist Church in Pierre followed by a luncheon. Burial will be at the Presho Cementary to be followed with cookies and prayers at the Presho Methodist Church.

Gov. Dugaard requests that all flags in South Dakota fly at half-staff on Friday, Feb. 17, the day of Rep. Roberts' funeral.

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**Need a copy of your
SSA-1099 or SSA-1042S?**



www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount

The following is an article from Jim Borland, Acting Deputy Commissioner for Communications.

Did you know that your Social Security benefits may be taxable? This includes your monthly retirement, survivor, and disability benefits. About one-third of people receiving Social Security benefits must pay taxes on some of these benefits, depending on the amount of their taxable income. This may happen if you have other significant income in addition to your Social Security benefits.

To find out whether you must pay taxes on your benefits, you will need your Social Security Benefit Statement (Form SSA-1099/1042S). You should automatically receive it in the mail each January. It shows the total amount of benefits you received from Social Security in the previous year so you know how much Social Security income

to report to the Internal Revenue Service on your tax return. The benefit statement is not available for people who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI), as SSI payments are not taxable.

If you didn't receive your Benefit Statement or misplaced it, you can get an instant replacement easily by using your secure my Social Security account. If you don't already have an online account, you can create one in minutes. Go to <https://www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount>, and select "Sign In or Create an Account." Once you are logged in, select the "Replacement Documents" tab to obtain your replacement 1099 or 1042S benefit statement. You can also use your personal my Social Security account to keep track of your earnings each year, manage your benefits, and more.



Call or Text
Paul at
397-7460
or Tina at
397-7285
for
membership
Information

GDI Living Fitness
25 Main St., Downtown Groton

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6 School Board Meeting February 15, 2017 – 6:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of January 9, 2017 school board meeting and January 23, 2017 special school board meeting.

2. Approval of North Central Special Education Co-Op (NCSEC) agenda items...as fiscal agent.

3. Approval of January District bills for payment.

4. Approval of January 2017 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.

5. Approval of January 2017 School Transportation Report.

6. Approval of January 2017 School Lunch Report.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

7. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.

8. Program Overview Presentations

a. CTE...D. Donley, A. Franken, L. Tietz, B. Lingbeck

b. Destination Imagination...J. Donley, J. Milbrandt

9. Adoption of formal resolution calling for bond election on April 11, 2017.

10. HS Project finance presentation and discussion [Tom Grimmond, Dougherty & Company]

11. Discuss dates for public meetings concerning high school project.

12. Review and approval of 2017-2018 school calendar.

13. School Board Committee Reports:

a. Building, Grounds, & Transportation: Clint Fjelstad, Merle Harder, Marty Weismantel

b. Personnel, Policy, & Curriculum: Deb Gengerke, Grant Rix

c. Negotiations: Kelly Kjelden, Steve Smith

14. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Present Certificates of Appreciation in honor of South Dakota School Board Recognition Week.

2. 1st Reading of Recommended Policy Changes to Policy AE Wellness Policy.

3. Set fee for summer 2017 driver's education.

4. Review South Dakota Department of Health Food Service Inspection of Groton Area Elementary from 2/6/17.

5. Approve resignation of Mrs. Sarah Honerman at the end of the 2016-2017 school year.

6. Executive session pursuant to SDCL 1-25-2(1) to discuss Superintendent's evaluation and SDCL 1-25-2(2) student issue.

7. Offer 2017-2018 administrative contracts.

ADJOURN

Today in Weather History

February 15, 1969: Heavy snow along with winds to 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow which closed many roads. The heaviest snow fell in the southeast part of the state where up to one and a half feet of snow was reported.

February 15, 1990: Heavy snow developed across southwest South Dakota early on the 15th and moved slowly across the state before ending early on the 16th. A narrow band of 10 to 12 inches accumulated in Central South Dakota from Pierre to near Huron. Lesser amounts of 3 to 6 inches fell north and south of the heavy snow band. Some of the heavier snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Aberdeen and Sioux Falls, 10 inches Pierre, and 12 inches at Huron.

1982: A "meteorological bomb" exploded in the Atlantic southeast of Newfoundland. The term is used to describe a storm that rapidly intensifies. An intense cyclone off the Atlantic coast capsized a drilling rig killing 84 persons, and sank a Soviet freighter resulting in 33 more deaths. The storm produced 80 mph winds that whipped the water into waves fifty feet high.

2000: Amarillo, Texas set unusual temperature records today. The high of 82 degrees smashed the old daily high of 76 degrees set in 1921. The morning low of 41 degrees broke the old high-low record for the date of 40 degrees, which was also set in 1921.

1895 - A big Gulf snowstorm produced six inches at Brownsville TX and Mobile AL, 15 inches at Galveston TX, and 24 inches of snow at Rayne LA in 24 hours. Snow fell at the very mouth of the Mississippi River. Houston TX received 22 inches of snow, and nine inches blanketed New Orleans LA. (David Ludlum)

1936 - The temperature at Parshall ND plunged to 60 degrees below zero to establish a state record. On the 6th of July that same year the temperature at Steele ND hit 121 degrees, also a state record. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm crossing the central U.S. produced severe thunderstorms which spawned tornadoes in Louisiana and Mississippi. Tornadoes injured four persons at Pierre Pass LA, three persons at Tangipahoa LA, two persons at Lexie MS and two persons at Nicholson MS. Thunderstorm winds gusting

to 100 mph killed one person south of Sulphur LA. Jackson MS was drenched with 1.5 inches of rain in ten minutes. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure brought heavy snow to parts of Michigan, with eleven inches reported at Rogers City. A cold front crossing the Northern Rockies produced wind gusts to 74 mph at Livingston MT, and created blizzard conditions in Idaho. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

The Livestream logo features a red and white stylized leaf or flame icon to the left of the word "livestream" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font.

Upcoming Events

Thursday at Milbank








Girls' Basketball

JV at 6:30, Varsity at 8:00

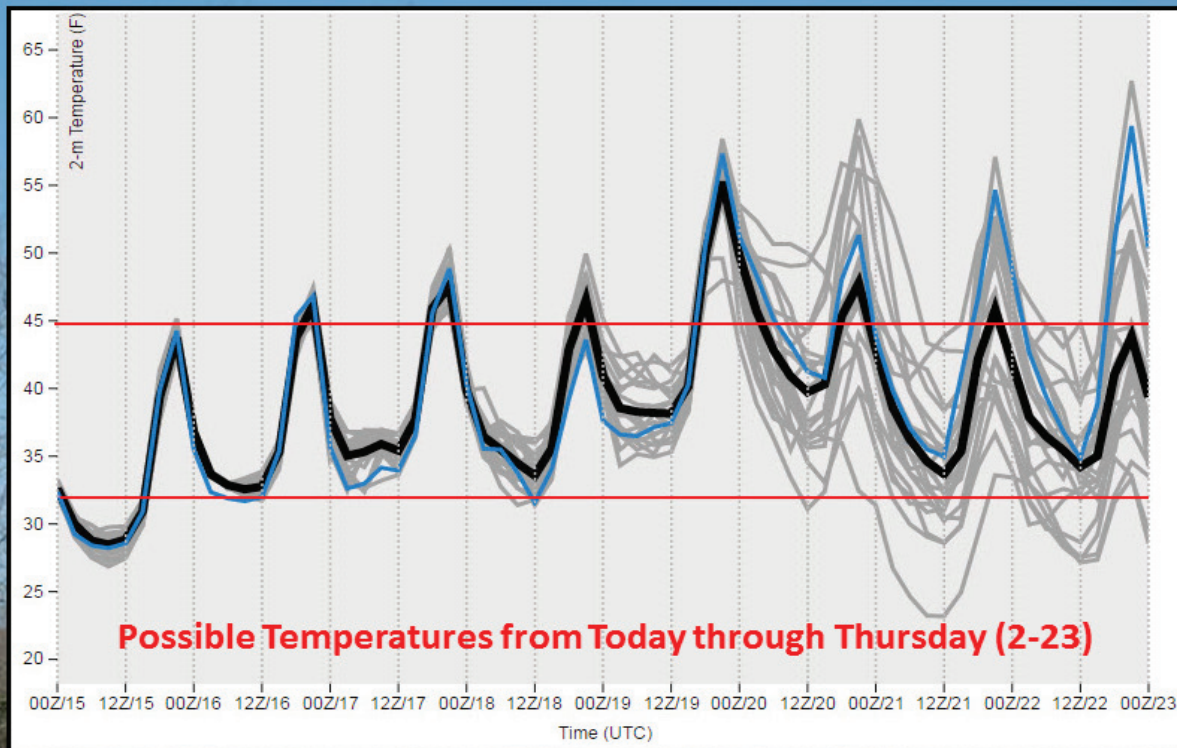
gdilive.com

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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
						
Patched Fog then Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 45 °F	Low: 24 °F	High: 52 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 50 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 50 °F

February Thaw Continues



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD



February 15, 2017

Published on: 02/15/2017 at 5:12AM

Dry conditions with well above normal temperatures will continue through the rest of the work week and into the weekend. Highs in the 40s and 50 can be expected. Some locations will see 60 degrees over the next few days.

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Yesterday's Weather

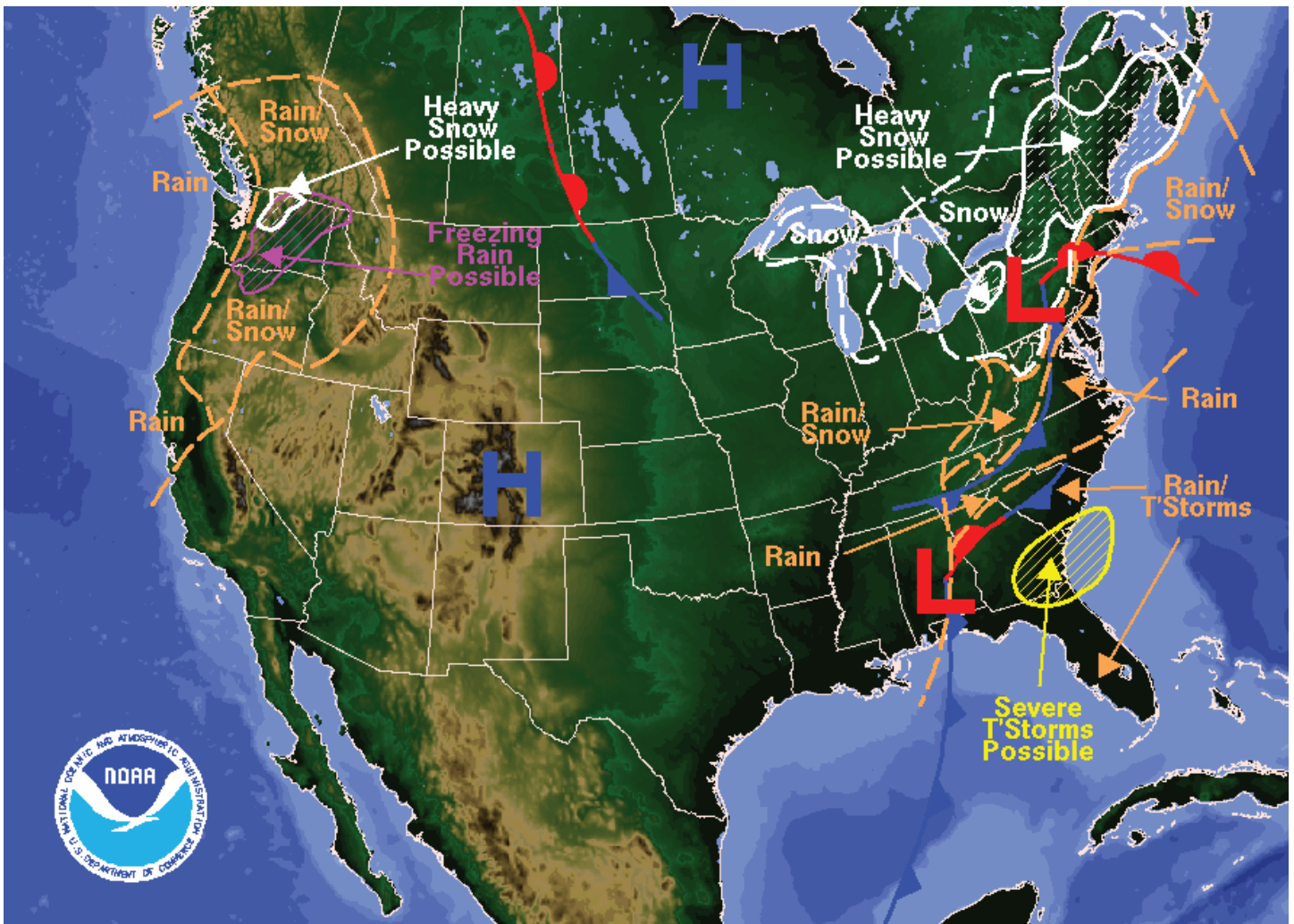
High Outside Temp: 41.1 F at 1:52 PM
Low Outside Temp: 27.6 F at 11:55 PM

High Gust: 23.0 Mph at 3:18 PM

Rain: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 65° in 1921
Record Low: -35 in 1939
Average High: 28°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.25
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.72
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 6:01 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:33 a.m.



Weather Forecast for Wed, Feb 15, 2017, issued 3:51 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McCreynolds based on WPC, SPC and NHC forecasts



A PICTURE OF CHRIST

It was the first day in art class and the professor wanted to challenge his students to do something creative. Standing before them he suggested that they draw a picture that had meaning and interest. Pausing for a moment he turned to one student and said, "And what, William, are you going to draw?"

"I believe that I will draw a picture of Christ," he replied.

"But," said the professor, "no one knows what He looks like."

"They will when I'm through," said William.

People may see a representation of Christ on canvas, paper or cloth, but God expects them to see Christ in us – in the way we live. Scripture clearly explains, time and time again, that the Christian is the one, not an artist, who is to provide a "picture of what Christ looks like."

Those around us who know we are Christians will gain an understanding and image of Christ by watching us. They "read" about Christ in how we act and react to the events that come into our lives. They "see" Christ in what we do for others because they know that we are responsible to show His love.

A Christian is to have a "mind" that thinks as Jesus thought, a "heart" that breaks when the ravages of sin are visible, a "hand" that reaches out to those in need, and a "voice" through which He speaks to share His message.

Prayer: Our Father, You have given us a tremendous responsibility to represent You to others. We admit we are unable to do this unless we allow You to live thru us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: 1 John 2:4-6 He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

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News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores By The Associated Press

BOYS' BASKETBALL

Britton-Hecla 57, Leola/Frederick 49
Brookings 58, Brandon Valley 42
Canton 64, West Central 52
Chester 84, Garretson 55
Colome 53, Burke/South Central 42
Corsica/Stickney 77, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 29
Dakota Valley 72, Sioux City, West, Iowa 63
Deubrook 54, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 38
Deuel 59, Arlington 47
Edmunds Central 59, Wakpala 31
Flandreau 76, Baltic 56
Hamlin 67, Great Plains Lutheran 40
Hanson 53, Avon 37
Harding County 62, New England, N.D. 48
Harrisburg 57, Mitchell 37
Huron 67, Yankton 50
Iroquois 49, Howard 43
Kimball/White Lake 62, Wessington Springs 41
Langford 47, Aberdeen Christian 37
Lennox 70, Beresford 66, 3OT
Miller 73, Faulkton 50
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 65, Bon Homme 50
Northwestern 73, Redfield/Doland 66
Ortonville, Minn. 63, Milbank Area 45
Rapid City Central 66, Sturgis Brown 53
Rapid City Stevens 60, Pierre 46
Sioux Falls Lincoln 64, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 57
Sioux Valley 83, Castlewood 53
Sisseton 59, Tiospa Zina Tribal 49
Spearfish 66, Belle Fourche 54
Stanley County 60, Mobridge-Pollock 55
Sully Buttes 72, Sunshine Bible Academy 34
Tri-Valley 69, McCook Central/Montrose 32
Vermillion 77, Wagner 54
Viborg-Hurley 44, Menno 31
Wall 79, Oelrichs 73
White River 93, Philip 63
Winner 68, Platte-Geddes 66, OT

GIRLS' BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 56, Ipswich 44
Baltic 50, Flandreau 37
Belle Fourche 42, Spearfish 30

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Castlewood 65, Sioux Valley 55
Chamberlain 59, Stanley County 53
Colman-Egan 48, Dell Rapids St. Mary 37
Corsica/Stickney 50, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 45
DeSmet 69, Estelline 31
Deubrook 61, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 24
Deuel 44, Arlington 20
Elkton-Lake Benton 61, Lake Preston 53
Ethan 67, Freeman 40
Florence/Henry 57, Clark/Willow Lake 50
Hamlin 55, Great Plains Lutheran 24
Harrisburg 45, Mitchell 18
Herreid/Selby Area 54, Potter County 45
Irene-Wakonda 65, Bridgewater-Emery 53
Kimball/White Lake 61, Wessington Springs 52
Langford 38, Aberdeen Christian 33
Lead-Deadwood 54, Rapid City Christian 22
Leola/Frederick 51, Britton-Hecla 43
Little Wound 70, Todd County 61
McLaughlin 64, Lemmon 53
Menno 59, Viborg-Hurley 31
Milbank 56, Ortonville, Minn. 51
Miller 50, Faulkton 43
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 53, Bon Homme 20
New Underwood 61, Newell 24
Northwestern 57, Redfield/Doland 39
Parker 50, Garretson 34
Parkston 54, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 24
Philip 51, Faith 47
Pipestone, Minn. 76, Lennox 67
Rapid City Central 66, Sturgis Brown 51
Rapid City Stevens 70, Pierre 61
Scotland 46, Canistota 41
Sioux Falls Christian 59, Gayville-Volin 35
St. Thomas More 56, Douglas 35
Sully Buttes 65, Sunshine Bible Academy 12
Vermillion 62, Wagner 40
Wakpala 50, Edmunds Central 38
Wall 59, Oelrichs 55
Warner 60, Waubay/Summit 52
Webster 59, Wilmot 35
West Central 55, Canton 39
White River 47, Jones County 45
Yankton 48, Huron 36

SD lawmaker says abortion bill would protect female fetuses

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota lawmaker says his bill to increase the penalty for performing abortions after 19 weeks of pregnancy is not an attack against women because it would limit abortions of female fetuses.

The Argus Leader reports (<http://argusne.ws/2kHH2xv>) that Republican Rep. Steven Haugaard said Tuesday the bill is aimed at protecting women and girls.

Haugaard says that "half of the abortions include the death of a girl, so it's certainly not an attack against women."

The state House passed the bill Tuesday that would boost the penalty for performing most abortions after 19 weeks of pregnancy from a misdemeanor to a felony.

State law currently makes performing them a misdemeanor, except in medical emergencies.

The state's only abortion clinic, Planned Parenthood in Sioux Falls, does not perform abortions after 14 weeks of pregnancy.

Information from: Argus Leader, <http://www.argusleader.com>

A guide to recent events in Dakota Access pipeline battle

By **BLAKE NICHOLSON, Associated Press**

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The disputed four-state Dakota Access pipeline could be moving oil in as little as a month, though opponents are promising to continue fighting the project. Here's a look at recent developments, and what's to come:

THE CONSTRUCTION

Texas-based developer Energy Transfer Partners on Feb. 8 received approval from the Army to lay pipe under a Missouri River reservoir in North Dakota — the last remaining section of the 1,200-mile pipeline that would move North Dakota oil through South Dakota and Iowa to Illinois. Drilling work at Lake Oahe began immediately. The development was prompted by pro-energy President Donald Trump, who pushed the Army to advance construction.

ETP spokeswoman Vicki Granado initially said the pipeline would be operational within three months. However, company lawyer David Debold on Monday suggested it could be ready for oil in as little as 30 days. Granado credited the efficiency of the company's equipment and crews, but didn't elaborate.

THE COURTS

The Standing Rock and Cheyenne River Sioux say the \$3.8 billion pipeline threatens their drinking water, cultural sites and ability to practice their religion, which depends on pure water. They asked U.S. District Judge James Boasberg to temporarily halt construction at Lake Oahe until their legal challenges are resolved.

Boasberg on Monday refused, though he scheduled a Feb. 27 hearing on a request by Cheyenne River to force the Army to withdraw its permission for the lake crossing. Standing Rock filed its own motion Tuesday asking that the permission be revoked.

The Oglala and Yankton Sioux tribes in South Dakota have filed similar legal challenges, the Yankton tribe in September and the Oglala Sioux on Saturday.

In a separate lawsuit, pipeline opponents suing police for allegedly using excessive force are appealing a federal judge's recent ruling allowing authorities to continue using tactics such as tear gas and rubber bullets for crowd dispersal.

THE PROTESTS

Law enforcement records show that such tactics haven't been used since Jan. 19, at a blockaded highway bridge in the area of a protest encampment on federal land in southern North Dakota.

The camp has at times housed thousands of protesters who have often clashed with police. It's now home to only a few hundred people and is being cleaned up in advance of spring flooding and a Feb. 22 closing date set by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Many protesters don't plan to leave the area. Cheyenne River Chairman Harold Frazier says that tribe is leasing about 25 acres of land on the Standing Rock Reservation for camps. American Indian activist Chase Iron Eyes also is encouraging a continued presence in the area.

THE BRIDGE

The bridge on U.S. Highway 1806 has been closed since being damaged by fires Oct. 28. Officials have been working in recent weeks to reopen it in the interest of easing tensions.

Guardrail repairs were completed Friday and temporary asphalt patching was finished Monday, at a total cost of about \$10,000, according to Department of Transportation spokeswoman Jamie Olson. However, it won't be reopened until authorities determine tensions have eased enough to warrant it, said Morton County sheriff's spokesman Rob Keller.

The Transportation Department on Monday did reopen eight miles of an 18-mile closed stretch of the highway, "allowing farmers, ranchers, people who have business down there to have more freedom of travel," Keller said.

THE COSTS

Law enforcement continues to maintain a heavy presence in the area despite the fading of protests.

New figures from the state show the law enforcement response over the past half-year has involved officers from 10 states, resulted in 705 arrests and cost taxpayers \$33 million — \$25 million for officer pay, \$3.6 million for travel and lodging, and \$4.3 million for equipment and supplies.

The data show that 92 percent of the 660 people who have been arrested are not from North Dakota.

Follow Blake Nicholson on Twitter at: <https://twitter.com/NicholsonBlake>

South Dakota tries to limit outsiders' money in initiatives

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Top South Dakota Republicans are moving to stem the flow of out-of-state money into its ballot question campaigns after millions of dollars poured in last fall seeking to influence a long list of voter initiatives.

An amendment to South Dakota's bill set to be considered in committee Wednesday would limit ballot question campaigns to \$100,000 in out-of-state contributions per general election cycle.

South Dakota is one of at least two states, along with Arizona, considering such legislation, which experts say likely wouldn't survive a legal challenge. An aide to South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard said that the Republican executive believes it's a concept worth defending in court.

Since Election Day, when voters decided 10 ballot measures, Republicans have frequently complained about out-of-state interests experimenting with South Dakota's laws and constitution.

Daugaard has said out-of-state groups took advantage of the state's low signature requirements and cheap media markets to advance a national agenda. Out-of-state donors pumped over \$10 million into campaigns for or against the state's questions.

A California billionaire whose sister was killed by a stalker bankrolled an amendment that established constitutional rights for crime victims. A Massachusetts group funded a transformative government ethics initiative that was on the books until lawmakers quickly repealed it. And a car title lender based in Georgia with locations in South Dakota tried unsuccessfully to amend the state constitution to allow unlimited interest rates.

"I personally am offended that someone from California is running a campaign to amend state's constitutions because he's grieving over his sister's death," House Speaker Mark Mickelson said during a committee hearing last week.

"Some of you think that's democracy. I think we can improve that process a lot by making sure that the ideas and the debate reflect our issues that we have — the people that live here."

The Arizona bill would completely ban contributions by non-residents and out-of-state committees to ballot measures. Its sponsor, Republican Rep. Bob Thorpe, didn't return email and telephone messages requesting comment.

Daugaard has said he wants legislation that is legally defensible while making sure that South Dako-

tans have the biggest say in debates over ballot measures. His chief of staff, Tony Venhuizen, said the federal courts have recognized in the past that governments have the right to preserve their interest in self-governance. Daugaard believes a legal fight would be worth it for such a law if it was challenged, Venhuizen said.

University of Chicago Law School professor William Baude said he doubts it would survive a court challenge.

The U.S. Supreme Court declared in a 1981 decision that limits on contributions to ballot measure committees are unconstitutional under the First Amendment, said Paul S. Ryan, a vice president at the Washington watchdog Common Cause, which opposes big money in politics.

The high court has said that contributions to candidates can be limited to prevent the corruption of public officials, Ryan said. But, he said, the court found that with a ballot measure, unlike a candidate, there is nobody to be corrupted, so there's no legal justification for limiting donations.

At least two states, Alaska and Hawaii, restrict out-of-state contributions to candidates. A federal court upheld Alaska's law in November, but the case has been appealed. The courts have struck down other states' geographic contribution limitations.

In South Dakota, Daugaard noted last month in his State of the State address that South Dakota was the first state in the nation to put in place initiative and referendum out of a fear that wealthy out-of-state interests would take over the Legislature.

"Now, 120 years later, we find big out-of-state money is taking over our ballot," Daugaard said. "They use the initiative process — the very process we created to protect ourselves from them."

Judge orders evaluation for suspect wounded by SD trooper

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — A judge has ordered a competency hearing for the South Dakota man who was shot by a state trooper last December, even though the man says it's unnecessary.

Fifty-eight-year-old Curt Wayne Adams Sr., of Yankton, is charged with attempted murder, aggravated assault of a police officer and aggravated eluding after he led police on a chase that ended in Yankton. The chase ended when the trooper shot and wounded Adams.

Judge Glen Eng ordered a competency evaluation for Adams on Monday.

The Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan (<http://bit.ly/2l5MzyJ>) reports that Adams' court-appointed attorney would like the competency evaluation to be added to court records, but doesn't doubt Adams' ability to make decisions.

The next hearing is set for March 27. An investigation found the trooper was justified in the shooting.

Information from: Yankton Press and Dakotan, <http://www.yankton.net/>

Mother accused of kidnapping 2 daughters avoids jail time

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota woman accused of kidnapping her two daughters has avoided jail after her attorney asked for downgraded charges.

Twenty-two-year-old Alissa Hayes, of Rapid City, was originally charged with two counts of first-degree kidnapping after police say she had taken her children from the care of Department of Social Services last August. But Hayes' attorney argued Friday that the charges should be changed to a misdemeanor of a parent taking children back instead of a felony kidnapping.

The Rapid City Journal reports (<http://bit.ly/2l5qhNL>) Hayes pleaded guilty to the misdemeanor and received a suspended sentence.

Hayes was accused of taking her then 6- and 2-year-old daughters during a supervised visitation.

Rapid City police said Hayes has a history of abusing methamphetamine. She lost custody of all three of her children.

Information from: Rapid City Journal, <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com>

Platte man guilty of theft resigns as school board president

PLATTE, S.D. (AP) — A former South Dakota Highway Patrol trooper who confessed to taking tens of thousands of dollars in evidence money has stepped down as a school board president.

Brian Biehl, 48, announced his intent to step down during a Platte-Geddes School Board meeting Monday. Superintendent Joel Baily said the board accepted Biehl's decision, appointing Steve Spawn as the new president, the Daily Republic (<http://bit.ly/2ILUGjY>) reported.

The former trooper pleaded guilty last week to grand theft by law enforcement by keeping nearly \$70,000 confiscated from drug searches during his time with the patrol. He is expected to be sentenced in March.

Biehl is hoping to stay on the school board as a member, but some residents expressed wanting him to leave the board entirely.

The maximum penalty for the theft charge is 10 years in prison and a \$20,000 fine, but resident Tim Whalen said Biehl could still become ineligible to be a board member even if he avoids prison. Whalen, an attorney based in Lake Andes, said he has already contacted the state's attorney to remove Biehl if necessary.

"Those wheels are already turning, so it's inevitable that you're going to be removed from the board. It's just a matter of when," Whalen said. "Nothing good comes from fighting this battle."

Resident Monte Wagner said while he considers Biehl a friend, he needs to step down.

"We've got too many black eyes in our community as it sits right now," Wagner said. "We need good things to happen, and having him on there is not good right now."

Information from: The Daily Republic, <http://www.mitchellrepublic.com>

Family of SD woman seeks answers on anniversary of her death

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Family and friends of a South Dakota woman are still looking for answers after police deemed her death last year an accident.

Investigators say 21-year-old Mariah High Hawk died of hypothermia. Her body was found under a utility trailer in Rapid City last February.

But High Hawk's family and friends are calling for an independent investigation, saying she died after being abused because she had bruising on her head, arms and shoulders.

The Rapid City Journal (<http://bit.ly/2kPMHUI>) reports her father, Delbert High Hawk, is leading the push to reopen his daughter's case, and led a march Monday.

Police say prescription painkillers found in Mariah High Hawk's blood likely clouded her judgment. Investigators believe she ran after her boyfriend following an argument and sought shelter under the trailer from freezing rain.

Information from: Rapid City Journal, <http://www.rapidcityjournal.com>

South Dakota lawmakers looking at tough budgeting ahead

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers settled on state revenue targets Tuesday that are millions of dollars lower than past projections, meaning the state will have much less to spend this legislative session than previously anticipated.

The Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations approved projections that are significantly lower than those Gov. Dennis Daugaard included in his December budget address. The governor will work with the Legislature to make up the difference, Bureau of Finance and Management Commissioner Liza Clark said in an email.

Daugaard had proposed modest increases for the upcoming fiscal year to key budget areas including education, Medicaid providers and state workers. But he has since warned that even those might be too much.

The committee adopted a \$1.59 billion target for the upcoming 2018 budget year, which starts July 1. That's down about \$27.8 million, or about 1.7 percent, from the governor's December budget. Lawmakers also set a roughly \$1.55 billion current-year ongoing revenue target, which is down roughly 1.6 percent — or \$25.3 million — from what the governor previously proposed.

Bureau of Finance and Management Deputy Commissioner Jim Terwilliger, the state economist, has said the causes include low inflation, less spending in the farm economy and e-commerce transactions that avoid sales taxes, the state's main revenue source.

"Once that determination of the adopted revenue is made, then spending must be confined within that," Daugaard told reporters last week. "All I can say is that we continue to see weakness."

Republican Sen. Deb Peters, a member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations, said this session is among the most difficult she's seen since starting in the Legislature.

"We've got a tough road to climb right now," she said.

Sex harassment in statehouses easy to conceal

By SEAN MURPHY, Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — When Carol Johnson landed a position as a legislative assistant in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, she saw it as an exciting step toward her goal of serving in elected office herself someday.

But the experience soon soured, Johnson says, when the state legislator she worked for began remarking on her figure and her attire, and later asked her to send him nude photos of herself.

"He regarded me as if my education, experience, hard work and career aspirations meant nothing," said Johnson, 37, about her time in Republican Dan Kirby's office beginning in 2012. "And that's heartbreaking and disgusting."

Kirby, 58, resigned last week in the face of likely expulsion after Johnson testified before an investigating panel. But this outcome isn't the rule in such cases. Only last year, officials confirmed, the speaker of the House opted to quietly dispose of another complaint against Kirby with no formal inquiry or discipline, instead secretly paying \$44,500 to a 28-year-old female aide and her attorneys.

Sexual harassment isn't uncommon in state legislatures, although the number of complaints has never been compiled. Men hold, on average, more than 75 percent of the seats, along with most of the positions of power, while women compose a high percentage of staff members, office employees, interns and lobbyists.

Just last month a South Dakota legislator resigned after admitting having sexual contact with two interns, and a Tennessee lawmaker was expelled last year over reported sexual advances involving as many as 22 women. Sex scandals roiled at least eight other statehouses in the last few years.

Despite persistent incidents, many legislatures lack formal procedures for dealing with sexual harassment. While corporate America, colleges and government agencies have established processes for investigating complaints, state legislatures remain an often murky domain in which top leaders have broad latitude over how or whether to pursue allegations and can sidetrack them if they choose.

In Kirby's case, the confidential payment last year appeared in House accounts as "janitorial supplies," which House officials later claimed was a clerical error.

State legislatures are an ideal environment for covering up sexual improprieties, so women are reluctant to report incidents, said Maya Raghu, a Washington, D.C., attorney specializing in women's issues who has conducted research on workplace sexual harassment.

"There's a real danger when you have one person in charge of receiving complaints, deciding whether or not to conduct an investigation, actually conducting an investigation and then deciding the resolution," Raghu said.

In most corporate systems, workers can contact a human resources department where officials with legal training conduct an inquiry and provide due process. Penalties are set out in company policy.

"I think it sends a message that there will be accountability for harassment," Raghu said.

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Some legislatures have adopted systems for reviewing and investigating complaints, but at least 10, including Oklahoma's, have none at all.

"As I understand it now," said Democratic Rep. Emily Virgin, one of 13 women in the Oklahoma House, "it's completely up to the speaker whether anything happens or not."

In 2013, it came to light that the assembly speaker's office in New York had been secretly making payments totaling more than \$100,000 for sexual incidents involving a former lawmaker. The scandal led to an overhaul of investigative procedures.

Arbitrary systems "are not good for the integrity of a system that wants to protect victims," said New York Assemblywoman Amy Paulin.

In Oklahoma's statehouse, women have to fend for themselves, several members said.

"Have I had other people cross that line? Absolutely," said Virgin, who said she has had disturbing experiences but didn't report them.

Kirby's case produced weeks of chaotic scrambling after news of the secret settlement was reported in The Oklahoman newspaper.

Kirby initially resigned, then rescinded his resignation, and complained he hadn't been formally apprised of the allegations. House leaders also revealed that another member, Democrat William Fourkiller, had been the subject of a complaint in 2015 that hadn't been disclosed. Leaders appointed a special investigating committee but the inquiry's ground rules, requiring non-disclosure agreements, were immediately criticized.

The inquiry was designed "to allow the entire situation to be whitewashed," said Democratic Rep. David Perryman, who refused to participate.

Former House Speaker Jeff Hickman defended concealing the earlier Kirby complaint, saying secrecy protects the privacy of those involved and that the \$44,500 payment was cheaper than litigating the matter.

Responding to Johnson's account, Kirby, who was single, maintained that he and his aide had a consensual relationship, a claim she denied.

"In hindsight, it was poor judgment to work with someone with whom I had a very close and personal relationship with for over five years, but I strongly disagree that our actions warrant my expulsion," he said.

Fourkiller, who also denied any wrongdoing, was directed to receive one-on-one training on professional workplace conduct.

Some Oklahoma lawmakers acknowledged that members are wary of establishing any formal process for ethics issues.

"I guess too many members feel like: 'My turn could be next, so I'm not going to go out on a limb,'" said former state Rep. Gary Banz, whose attempt in 2012 to establish a code of conduct after a bribery scandal was quickly scuttled by his colleagues.

Follow Sean Murphy at www.twitter.com/apseanmurphy

Coach enters no contest plea to team embezzlement

OLIVET, S.D. (AP) — A former high school football coach has pleaded no contest in Hutchinson County to embezzling thousands of dollars from the team.

Thirty-year-old Tony Axtell, of Sioux Falls, changed his plea from not guilty to no contest in court Monday. The former Parkston High School coach and physics teacher is accused of embezzling about \$9,500 from August to October of 2015.

The team's checking account held donations for jerseys, equipment and team activities. The Daily Republic (<http://bit.ly/2kGnt8N>) reports prosecutors say Axtell moved the team's money to his personal and work accounts. Sentencing is scheduled for April.

Information from: The Daily Republic, <http://www.mitchellrepublic.com>

Doctors sue over investment that resulted in bankruptcy

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A dozen South Dakota doctors have gone to court claiming they were given false information about a hospital in which they invested.

The doctors invested in Progressive Acute Care, a company that owned three hospitals in central Louisiana. PAC executives came up with a plan to buy a fourth hospital in Louisiana. The doctors say they were told a return of ten times their investment was possible.

The Argus Leader (<http://argusne.ws/2lLyCFW>) reports the doctors' lawsuit says they were given falsified revenue numbers on the fourth hospital. PAC sustained severe losses that plunged it into bankruptcy in 2016.

Information from: Argus Leader, <http://www.argusleader.com>

Woman arrested in killing of N. Korean leader's half brother

By EILEEN NG, Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysian police arrested a woman Wednesday in connection with the death of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's half brother.

Police released a statement saying the woman was carrying Vietnamese travel documents when she was arrested at Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Kim Jong Nam died Monday after suddenly falling ill at the budget terminal of Kuala Lumpur International Airport, said a senior Malaysian government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the case involves sensitive diplomacy.

Kim, who died on the way to a hospital, told medical workers that he had been attacked with a chemical spray, the official said.

Malaysian officials have provided few other details. Police said an autopsy was planned to determine the cause of death.

Since taking power in late 2011, Kim Jong Un has executed or purged a slew of high-level government officials in what the South Korean government has described as a "reign of terror."

South Korea's spy service said Wednesday that North Korea had been trying for five years to kill Kim. But the National Intelligence Service did not definitively say that North Korea was behind the killing, just that it was presumed to be a North Korean operation, according to lawmakers who briefed reporters about the closed door meeting with the spy officials.

The NIS cited Kim Jong Un's alleged "paranoia" about his half brother. Still, the agency has a history of botching intelligence on North Korea and has long sought to portray the country's leaders as mentally unstable.

Multiple South Korean media reports, citing unidentified sources, said Kim Jong Nam was killed at the airport by two women believed to be North Korean agents. They fled in a taxi and were being sought by Malaysian police, the reports said.

Police were searching for clues in the closed circuit television footage from the airport, said Selangor police chief Abdul Samah Mat. The airport is in Selangor, near Kuala Lumpur.

According to the Malaysian government official, Kim Jong Nam was in a shopping concourse and had not yet gone through security for a planned flight to Macau when the incident occurred.

Kim was estranged from his half brother, the North Korean leader. Although he had been originally tipped by some outsiders as a possible successor to his late dictator father, Kim Jong Il, others thought that was unlikely because he lived outside the country, including recently in Macau, Singapore and Malaysia.

He reportedly fell further out of favor when he was caught trying to enter Japan on a false passport in 2001, saying he wanted to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

A Malaysian police statement confirmed the death of a North Korean man whom it identified from his travel document as Kim Chol, born in Pyongyang on June 10, 1970.

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Ken Gause, who is with the CNA think tank in Washington and has studied North Korea's leadership for 30 years, said Kim Chol was a name that Kim Jong Nam had traveled under. He is believed to have been born May 10, 1971.

While the most likely explanation for the killing was that Kim Jong Un was removing a potential challenger to North Korean leadership within his own family, he could also be sending a warning to North Korean officials to demonstrate the reach of the regime. It follows the defection last year of a senior diplomat from the North Korean Embassy in London who has spoken of his despair at Kim's purges.

Mark Tokola, vice president of the Korea Economic Institute in Washington and a former deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, said it would be surprising if Kim Jong Nam was not killed on the orders of his half brother, given that North Korean agents have reportedly tried to assassinate Kim Jong Nam in the past.

"It seems probable that the motivation for the murder was a continuing sense of paranoia on the part of Kim Jong Un," Tokola wrote in a commentary Tuesday. Although there was scant evidence that Kim Jong Nam was plotting against the North Korean leader, he provided an alternative for North Koreans who would want to depose his half brother.

Among Kim Jong Un's executions and purgings, the most spectacular was the 2013 execution of his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, once considered the country's second-most powerful man, for what the North alleged was treason.

Gause said Kim Jong Nam had been forthright that he did not have political ambitions, although he was publicly critical of the North Korean regime and his half brother's legitimacy in the past.

Kim Jong Nam had been less outspoken since 2011, when North Korean assassins reportedly tried to shoot him in Macau, Gause said, though the details of the attempted killing are murky. South Korea also reportedly jailed a North Korean spy in 2012 who admitted to trying to organize a hit-and-run accident targeting Kim Jong Nam in China in 2010.

Despite the attempts on his life, Kim Jong Nam had reportedly traveled to North Korea since then, so it was assumed he was no longer under threat. Kim Jong Nam may have become more vulnerable, as his defender in the North Korean hierarchy, Kim Kyong Hui — Kim Jong Un's aunt and the wife of his executed uncle — appears to have fallen from favor or died. She has not been seen in public for more than three years, Gause said.

Kim Jong Il had at least three sons with two women, as well as a daughter by a third. Kim Jong Nam was the eldest, followed by Kim Jong Chul, who is a few years older than Kim Jong Un and is known as a playboy who reportedly attended Eric Clapton concerts in London in 2015. It's unclear what position he has in the North Korean government.

A younger sister, Kim Yo Jong, was named a member of the Workers' Party of Korea's Central Committee during a North Korean party congress last May. She has a position in a propaganda and agitation department and is known as Kim Jong Un's gatekeeper, Gause said.

Associated Press writers Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul, South Korea, and Matthew Pennington in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

White House: Mideast peace may not be 2-state solution

By JILL COLVIN and VIVIAN SALAMA, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits the White House, the Trump administration has suggested that peace between the Israelis and Palestinians may not come in the form of a two-state solution — a position that could represent a dramatic shift from 20 years of U.S. policy.

Speaking to reporters ahead of President Donald Trump's meeting Wednesday with Netanyahu, a senior White House official said Tuesday that Trump is eager to begin facilitating a peace deal between the two sides and hoping to bring them together soon.

But the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly on the meeting beforehand, said it will be up to the Israelis and Palestinians to determine what peace will entail — and that peace, not a two-state

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solution, is the goal.

For decades, the U.S. position has been that Israelis and Palestinians must work through direct negotiations to establish two states living side by side, at peace, with Palestinians to ultimately create an independent state. All serious peace negotiations in that time have assumed that the two-state solution was the basis for future peace.

State Department officials expressed surprise at the comments and said Tuesday they were not aware of any policy shift on the desirability of a two-state solution. Three officials said the department was seeking clarification from the White House comments, which came as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson was having dinner with Netanyahu. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

During his final White House news conference, Obama warned that the moment for a two-state solution "may be passing" and said the "status quo is unsustainable."

It was not clear if the Trump White House had intended to declare a major shift in policy during the hastily arranged briefing Tuesday night.

Netanyahu is scheduled to meet with Trump at the White House Wednesday. The two leaders will hold a joint news conference before convening for meetings and a working lunch. The prime minister will then head to Capitol Hill for meetings with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer.

Trump takes pride in his deal-making skills and said during his campaign that he'd love the challenge of negotiating a Mideast agreement. He has appointed his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to lead the effort.

The White House official said the visit was meant to mark a new, closer relationship between Israel and the United States, an alliance that came under strain during the Obama years.

Trump and Netanyahu are likely to discuss peace efforts as well as expanded Israeli settlements, Iran and Trump's campaign pledge to move the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The latter would signal U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a move that would infuriate Palestinians. They claim the eastern sector of the city, captured by Israel in the 1967 war, as their capital.

American presidents have long struck a delicate balance in addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stressing the close U.S. friendship with Israel and lavishing the Jewish state with bountiful aid. But recent presidents also have tried to negotiate, and they have called out Israel for actions seen as undermining peace efforts, such as expanding settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Trump told The Associated Press during his campaign that he wanted to be "very neutral" and try to get both sides together. But his tone became decidedly more pro-Israel as the campaign progressed. He has spoken disparagingly of Palestinians, saying they have been "taken over" by or are condoning militant groups. Some of his top aides challenge the legitimacy of Palestinian demands for a state.

After repeatedly clashing with Obama for eight years, capped by a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlements, Netanyahu seemed relieved by Trump's arrival. Trump slammed the U.S. decision to abstain from the U.N. vote, saying in December that Israel is being treated "very, very unfairly."

Now in office, however, Trump has been forced to re-evaluate and revisit his position on a number of issues — including those relating to Israel.

After initially greeting Israel's settlement announcements with a shrug, Trump appears to be having second thoughts. In an interview with a pro-Netanyahu Israeli daily last Friday, Trump said, "I am not somebody that believes that going forward with these settlements is a good thing for peace."

While Wednesday's meeting is expected to be much warmer than Netanyahu's famously tense encounters with Obama, the Israeli leader will still need to tread with caution on sensitive issues like Israeli settlement construction, Iran and the war in Syria.

In dealing with Trump, Netanyahu will also face some potential pitfalls. Key constituencies, including congressional Democrats and many American Jews, oppose Trump's policies, while at home Netanyahu is under pressure from his hard-line allies to push for policies that Trump may not support.

"Netanyahu seeks to shift the discussion in the U.S.-Israel relationship away from settlements and peace

and back to Iran so that he can put off the difficult political decisions that would roil his coalition and put his rule in jeopardy," said Yousef Munayyer, a political analyst and executive director of the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

"The challenge to Netanyahu is domestic," Munayyer added. "He spent so much time arguing that Obama was the problem that now that we are in the post-Obama era, his right-wing coalition partners want to exploit the moment and take huge steps that would further isolate Israel, trigger international condemnation from other corners, and potentially destabilize the land and Israeli politics."

Ahead of the visit, Netanyahu said he would handle ties with the U.S. in a "prudent manner," but he steered clear of specifics.

The Israeli prime minister is also scheduled to have breakfast Thursday with Vice President Mike Pence before departing for Israel.

Associated Press writer Josh Lederman contributed to this report.

Kate Upton three-peats as SI's swimsuit queen

NEW YORK (AP) — She's once, twice, three times a Sports Illustrated swimsuit cover lady.

Kate Upton is once again gracing the cover of the annual issue, becoming only the fourth woman to do so three times. This year, she's making the splash with three different covers.

Other women who did the cover three times include Tyra Banks, Heidi Klum and Christie Brinkley, who also is featured in this year's edition with her two daughters. Elle Macpherson holds the record with five cover appearances.

Other notables in this year's edition include former cover girl Chrissy Teigen, an expectant mother and athletes including tennis champ Serena Williams and Olympic gold medal gymnast Simone Biles.

Online:

<http://www.si.com/swimsuit>

2 state solution optional? Palestinians puzzled by US view

By **KARIN LAUB**, Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Palestinian officials said Wednesday that there's no alternative to Palestinian statehood, expressing concern over the Trump administration suggestions that a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be optional.

It remains unclear if the comments on the issue by a senior U.S. official ahead of Wednesday's White House meeting between President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signal a shift in long-standing U.S. policy.

Netanyahu is under growing pressure from right-wing Cabinet ministers to abandon the goal of a two-state solution — an idea he publicly endorsed several years ago, albeit with reservations.

Critics say that in any case, Israel's policy of settlement expansion on war-won land is making such a partition deal increasingly difficult.

"All the Cabinet ministers oppose a Palestinian state, including Netanyahu," Gilad Erdan, a Cabinet minister and member of Netanyahu's Likud Party, told Israel's Army Radio on Wednesday.

Far-right education minister Naftali Bennett warned last week that "the earth will shake" if Trump and Netanyahu declare a commitment to a Palestinian state in their meeting.

In Washington, a senior White House official told reporters on Tuesday that Trump is eager to begin facilitating a peace deal between the two sides and hopes to bring them together soon.

But the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly on the meeting beforehand, said it will be up to the Israelis and Palestinians to determine what peace will entail — and that peace, not a two-state solution, is the goal.

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The Palestinians seek a state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, lands Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast War. The contours of a solution have emerged in previous U.S.-led negotiations, including a border that is based on the 1967 lines but would include mutual land swaps to accommodate some of the larger Jewish settlements close to Israel.

Support for a two-state solution was reaffirmed at an international conference in Paris last month, with representatives from more than 70 countries and organizations.

"The two-state solution is not something we just came up with," Husam Zomlot, an adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said Wednesday.

"We Palestinians are aligned with the international vision for peace, officially recognizing Israel in 1993, in the 1967 borders ... However, Israel never reciprocated and continues to undermine the prospects for a solution," he added.

Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian spokeswoman, said in a statement that in withdrawing support for a two-state solution, the Trump administration "would be destroying the chances for peace and undermining American interests, standing and credibility abroad."

It was not clear if the Trump White House had intended to declare a major policy shift during the hastily arranged briefing Tuesday night.

State Department officials expressed surprise at the comments and said they were not aware of any policy shift on the desirability of a two-state solution.

Netanyahu and Trump are to meet at the White House. They will hold a joint news conference before convening for meetings and a working lunch. The Israeli leader will then head to Capitol Hill for meetings with lawmakers on both sides of the aisle, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer.

Trump and Netanyahu are likely to discuss peace efforts, expanded Israeli settlements and Iran — as well as Trump's campaign pledge to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The embassy move would signal U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a move that would infuriate Palestinians. They claim the eastern sector of the city, captured by Israel in the 1967 war, as their capital.

Associated Press writers Mohammed Daraghmeh in Ramallah, West Bank, and Daniel Estrin in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

Fears remain after evacuation lifted for 200K Californians

By JONATHAN J. COOPER and PAUL ELIAS, Associated Press

OROVILLE, Calif. (AP) — The stress of evacuation and an uncertain future were enough for Donald Azevedo and his family to opt to stay a few more nights in an emergency shelter rather than risk having to do it all again.

The family was among the nearly 200,000 Californians who live downstream from the country's tallest dam who were told they could return home but warned they may have to flee again if repairs made to the battered Oroville Dam spillways don't hold.

The fixes could be put to their first test later this week with the first of a series of small storms forecast for the region expected to reach the area Wednesday night.

"There is the prospect that we could issue another evacuation order if the situation changes and the risk increases," Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said Tuesday, telling residents they could return home but to remain vigilant.

That's why Azevedo wasn't budging yet.

"My plan is to stay here," said Azevedo, who evacuated from Marysville with his wife, Tasha, their four Chihuahuas and more than 30 relatives. They spent two nights at the Nevada County Fairgrounds in Grass Valley, Calif. and he planned to wait out this week's upcoming storm before returning home. Many at the shelter said a drive that should have taken one hour took six hours on Sunday.

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"I'm not trying to risk traffic, being stuck in floods. I'm safe where I'm at," Azevedo said.

Many other evacuees, such as Oroville resident Margaret Johnston, couldn't wait to get back home.

"You don't appreciate home until it's taken away from you," said Johnston, 69, who spent the last two nights sheltering at a church in Chico, California. As she packed the blankets, pillows and clothing she had hastily thrown into a black garbage bag, she reflected on the mad rush to leave, the chaos, confusion and bottleneck traffic on the drive out. "It was just frustrating. Very frustrating."

Residents living below the Oroville Dam were suddenly ordered to evacuate Sunday afternoon after authorities had assured them for nearly a week that the dam was sound despite a gaping and growing hole found in the structure's main spillway. The order came after authorities feared an earthen emergency spillway used when the lake behind the dam overflows its capacity appeared ready to fail Sunday because of erosion.

Two days after issuing the evacuation order, officials lifted it Tuesday but uncertainty remained.

Over the weekend, the swollen lake spilled down the unpaved emergency spillway for nearly 40 hours, leaving it badly eroded. The problem occurred six days after engineers discovered a growing hole in the dam's main concrete spillway.

State and federal officials ignored calls in 2005 from environmental groups to armor the earthen spillway in concrete to prevent erosion. Federal regulators concluded the earthen spillway could handle a large amount of overflow after water agencies that would have had to pay for the upgrade argued it was unnecessary.

Others fear the real test is still to come in the weeks ahead when a record amount of snowfall melts in nearby mountains.

The California Department of Water Resources said Tuesday night the Oroville Dam's water levels continued to decrease but it didn't say by how much.

State water officials said earlier Tuesday the reservoir's water level had been reduced 15 feet by Tuesday afternoon. Officials hope to continue using a damaged main spillway to drain the lake another 37 feet in preparation for coming rain. They say they have drained enough water that the emergency spillway will not be needed to handle runoff from the approaching storm.

Forecasts call for 2-4 inches of rain and snow in the foothills and mountains starting Wednesday night. But the storm was looking colder than initially projected, meaning less rain and less runoff than last week's storms.

Dozens of construction crews were working around the clock dropping 1,200 tons of material on the earthen emergency spillway per hour using heavy equipment and helicopters and the area is being continually monitored with the help of drones carrying cameras, the state water agency said.

Preliminary estimates say permanently fixing the hole in the main spillway could cost \$100 million to \$200 million, Croyle said. Experts are drawing up plans for repairs that will begin after the spring runoff season ends.

Gov. Jerry Brown said late Tuesday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency approved his request for federal assistance with the Oroville dam situation.

State officials clearly were on the defensive about their decision to call for mass evacuations Sunday, just a few hours after saying the situation was stable, forcing families to rush to pack up and get out.

Honea, the county sheriff, said Tuesday that the call to order nearly 200,000 people to higher ground protected lives and bought time for water experts to address the problems.

But after two days away from home, tens of thousands of evacuees were growing weary. They welcomed the news they could return home but vowed to heed the sheriff's warning to remain vigilant.

Rod Remocal said he and his wife would now be ready to leave their Biggs home near the dam at a moment's notice after fleeing in a rush Sunday.

"We're all coming back and pack and be ready this time," Remocal said. "This time we're going to be on call like they said."

Elías reported from San Francisco.

Contributing to this report were Jocelyn Gecker, Olga R. Rodriguez and Kristin Bender in San Francisco; Don Thompson in Sacramento; Terry Chea in Grass Valley, California; Ellen Knickmeyer in Sonoma, California; and John Antczak and Justin Pritchard in Los Angeles.

Investigations into Russia to continue after Flynn's exit

By EILEEN SULLIVAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence agencies and Congress will continue to investigate Russia's involvement in the 2016 presidential election, even after President Donald Trump fired his national security adviser for providing inaccurate accounts of his contacts with the Russian ambassador last year.

Democrats said an independent investigation was the best way to answer questions about the Trump administration's ties to Russia. But Republican leaders continue to refuse to consider that option and said three congressional investigations underway were enough.

Trump's national security adviser, Michael Flynn, was fired late Monday. The White House said he misled Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with the Russian ambassador.

This isn't the first time Trump has distanced himself from an adviser in light of relationships with Moscow. In late August, Paul Manafort resigned as Trump's campaign chairman after disclosures by The Associated Press about his firm's covert lobbying on behalf of Ukraine's former pro-Russia governing political party. Trump has long held a friendly posture toward the long-time U.S. adversary and has been reluctant to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin, even for Putin's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014.

"This isn't simply about a change in policy toward Russia, as the administration would like to portray. It's what's behind that change in policy," said California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, one of the congressional bodies investigating.

Under the Obama administration, U.S. intelligence agencies said Russia interfered in the 2016 election with the goal of electing Trump. Trump has acknowledged that Russia hacked Democratic emails but denies it was to help him win.

The New York Times reported late Tuesday that members of Trump's campaign, including Manafort, had repeated contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the year before the election. The U.S. knew about these contacts through phone records and intercepted calls, the Times said.

Reached late Tuesday, Manafort told The Associated Press he has not been interviewed by the FBI about these alleged contacts.

"I have never knowingly spoken to Russian intelligence officers and I have never been involved with anything to do with the Russian government or the Putin administration or any other issues under investigation today," Manafort said.

Officials who spoke with the Times anonymously said they had not yet seen any evidence of the Trump campaign cooperating with the Russians on hacking or other attempts to influence the election.

The investigations and the unusual firing of the national security adviser just 24 days into his job have put Republicans in the awkward position of investigating the leader of their party. The congressional probes are ultimately in the hands of the Republican committee chairmen, and the executive branch's investigation is now overseen by Trump appointees.

Republican leaders focused on the idea that Flynn misled Pence about the nature of his contacts with the Russian ambassador — not on any questioning of the relationship between Flynn and the ambassador. Democrats said a key issue is whether Flynn broke diplomatic protocol and potentially the law by discussing U.S. sanctions with Moscow before Trump's inauguration. Virginia Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate intelligence committee, said the committee had not yet seen the transcripts of Flynn's calls.

The Justice Department had warned the White House late last month that Flynn could be at risk for blackmail because of contradictions between his public depictions of the calls with the Russian ambassador and what intelligence officials knew about the conversations.

"You cannot have a national security adviser misleading the vice president and others," said Republican

House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin.

California Rep. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House intelligence committee, said he was concerned Flynn's rights were violated in the interception of his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

"I'm just shocked that nobody's covering the real crime here," Nunes said. "You have an American citizen who had his phone call recorded and then leaked to the media."

The FBI has wide legal authority to eavesdrop on the conversations of foreign intelligence targets, including diplomats, inside the U.S.

Flynn did not concede any wrongdoing in his resignation letter, saying merely that he "inadvertently briefed the vice president elect and others with incomplete information regarding my phone calls with the Russian ambassador."

While North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, said much of the panel's investigation will occur behind closed doors, Oregon Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden said he planned to push to make the findings and hearings public.

White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Trump did not direct Flynn to discuss U.S. sanctions with the Russians. "No, absolutely not," Spicer said.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker, Erica Werner, Richard Lardner, Chad Day and Deb Riechmann contributed to this report.

Rumor the German shepherd wins best in show at Westminster

By BEN WALKER, AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Quite a rally for Rumor — a commanding comeback for German shepherds, too.

Rumor was crowned America's top dog Tuesday night when, a year after a near miss on the very same green carpet, she came out of retirement to win best in show at the Westminster Kennel Club.

Cheered loudly all around the ring by a packed crowd at Madison Square Garden, she's just the second German shepherd champion at the event that began in 1877.

"Unbelievable," handler and co-owner Kent Boyles said.

In a year that's seen lots of late, startling twists in sports — think Patriots, Cubs and Cavaliers — Rumor pulled something of a shocker. She'd been at home in Wisconsin for months, a house pet headed toward having puppies, when she suddenly jumped back into the show ring in January.

Boyles is a fan of the Packers and star quarterback Aaron Rodgers. Seeing a pet go from the couch to this top prize, heck, that's a dog world Hail Mary.

The 5-year-old Rumor beat out a Norwegian elkhound, a Pekingese, a miniature poodle, an Irish setter, a boxer and a Norwich terrier in the final ring. The Irish setter called Adrian finished second.

"The German shepherd standard talks about quality and nobility," judge Thomas Bradley III said. "When you recognize it, it hits you at home, and that's what it really is. She is just magnificent."

Rumor is named for the hit song "Rumor Has It" by Adele, a champion herself after sweeping the major categories at the Grammy Awards on Sunday.

This was the 104th career win for Rumor, and earlier in the day, Boyles said that this would definitely, for real, be her last major show.

"She's going to be relaxing for a while," Boyles said after the win, but ultimately, there are "puppies in her future."

Clearly the crowd favorite, Rumor came out flying into the best-of-seven final ring to fans whistling and calling her name.

Rumor raised up for a well-deserved treat right after the win. Moments later, as Boyles did post-show interviews, Rumor spotted him and ran toward the man who guided her to victory.

Rumor joined the fittingly named Manhattan in 1987 as the only German shepherds to go best in show at the Garden.

There were nearly 2,800 dogs entered in the 141st Westminster canine competition, spread across the

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202 eligible breeds and varieties.

The moment any German shepherd steps into the ring at the Garden, the crowd goes crazy.

New Yorkers just love `em.

Some say it's because rooting for a German shepherd is the same as putting on an NYPD or FDNY hat, standing up for a dog that stood tall at a time of the city's greatest need.

"My sentiments, exactly," Boyles said.

While German shepherds hadn't won a lot here, many of them were on the green carpet of the center ring in 2002 when Westminster honored search and rescue dogs for their tireless work at the World Trade Center and Pentagon following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. The solemn tribute is considered by many the most cherished memory ever at Westminster.

"They're loyal, dependable dogs that you can count on," Boyles said.

Rumor nearly won Westminster last year. She came to town as the nation's No. 1 show dog with more than 100 overall ribbons but was beaten in a surprise by a German shorthaired pointer named CJ.

In fact, when the judge began to announce his champion pick with "German sh...", Boyles took a step forward, anticipating the prize.

"I was thinking," Boyles said.

That was supposed to be Rumor's last show, and she was set to head home with Boyles to Edgerton, Wisconsin, to be a house pet and have puppies. She didn't conceive and late in the year, Boyles thought twice about Rumor's retirement.

"She liked to show and was in good shape, so we thought, why not?" he said.

Rumor went back on the circuit in January for 10 shows. She won the herding group Monday night at the Garden, beating top show favorite Preston the puli.

She topped that with the ultimate win at America's most prestigious dog show, rewarding the faith German shepherd fans always show in them.

"It's a recognizable dog, people have liked them for a long, long time," WKC President Sean McCarthy said earlier. "I think it goes back to Rin Tin Tin."

AP freelance writer Ginger Tidwell contributed to this report.

Rumors highlight the hidden lives of North Korean leaders

By ERIC TALMADGE, Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — The killing of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's estranged half-brother could be the best cloak-and-dagger thriller North Koreans will never get to hear. And if they did, they'd likely need some plot explainers — few know Kim Jong Un even had a half-brother.

While no country in the world has a cult of personality surrounding its leaders as intensive as North Korea's, the narrative is carefully groomed and highly selective, leaving even some of the most basic details unknown to the general public. Predictably enough, the existence of an elder half-brother — and particularly a somewhat rebellious, free-wheeling one — has never been part of the North's official leader narrative.

It is simpler to keep the line of succession and power as clear and direct as possible. For the most part, that means grandfather, father and son.

Ironically, or perhaps not, the swirling reports of the hit on half-brother Kim Jong Nam at a Malaysian airport come as the nation is gearing up for one of the biggest leader-reverence events of the year.

It's called the "Day of the Shining Star," the birth anniversary of the late leader Kim Jong Il, who was Kim Jong Un and Kim Jong Nam's father, though they had a different mother.

The only holiday that is more important is the "Day of the Sun," which marks the birthday of Kim Jong Un's grandfather, North Korea's founder and "eternal president" Kim Il Sung.

The barrage of Kim adulation in North Korea is constant. There are even flower festivals held each year that feature begonias and orchids named "Kimilsungia" and "Kimjongilia." On Wednesday, with no mention whatsoever of Kim Jong Nam's death in Malaysia in the state media, figure skating and synchronized swimming exhibitions were being held in the capital to mark the day.

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Beyond their frequent “on the spot guidance” trips and attendance at official events, details of the actual lives of North Korea’s leaders are generally scant. Other members of the Kim family tree are rarely if ever mentioned.

Kim Jong Un’s younger sister, Kim Yo Jong, is a powerful member of the ruling elite, but that would also come as a surprise to many people here. Her name does appear from time to time on official guest lists or party positions, but without further elaboration. His other brother, Kim Jong Chul, and older half-sister, Kim Sul Song, are believed to be party members in good standing.

Kim Jong Nam had long been much more problematic.

Before Kim Jong Un emerged as the clear heir to his father, Kim Jong Nam had been seen by some outside observers as the country’s likely next generation leader.

Others thought he was not in line, but anyways he is believed to have fallen out of favor after he was caught at a Japanese airport in 2001 trying to go to Tokyo Disneyland. He had lived outside of the North for years and has a son who studied in France, though few solid facts are available.

He had, however, made some sporadic comments in public suggesting that the North needed to reform in order to survive and questioning its hereditary rule, but also indicating he had no desire to switch places with his younger half-brother.

A motive for the killing is as yet just another of many, many mysteries.

And, of course, Kim Jong Un himself remains one of them.

Five years into his reign, he is firmly established a daily fixture on the front pages of the state-run newspapers, a constant presence on the television news and the object of tremendous praise on countless billboards and propaganda posters across the country. In something of a break with past practice, his wife has been often seen with him in public — though less so recently.

But to outsiders, it can be surprising how narrow the official narrative is.

Purges, not surprisingly, aren’t normally reported, though the brief trial and execution of Kim Jong Un’s powerful uncle was prominently broadcast and signaled to many experts Kim Jong Un’s effort to solidify his powerbase. On a more mundane level, it has never been confirmed if Kim Jong Un has children (he is believed to have at least one daughter), what his age is (probably 32 or 33) or many other basic biographical details.

When asked about the gaps, officials regularly explain that it is because the still young Kim is too humble to want such attention for himself.

Talmadge has been the AP’s Pyongyang bureau chief since 2013.

Mystery of Etan Patz’s disappearance ends in conviction

By COLLEEN LONG and JENNIFER PELTZ, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — It was one of New York City’s most enduring mysteries: A sandy-haired, 6-year-old boy who vanished on his way to school. A fruitless search that scared a generation of parents. A family that fought for years to hold one man accountable, only to be told someone else was to blame.

Some questions remain in the 1979 disappearance of Etan Patz, but a jury decided Tuesday that it had enough evidence to convict a former convenience store clerk of luring the boy into a basement and killing him, after a first trial ended with a hung jury.

Pedro Hernandez confessed several years ago to choking Etan, but his lawyers said that admission was the false imagining of a troubled man whose mind blurred the boundary between reality and illusion.

During Hernandez’s first trial in 2015, that argument won over a lone juror, who wouldn’t budge and forced a mistrial. This second time around, the jury was unanimous, finding Hernandez guilty of murder and kidnapping after nine days of deliberations.

“We decided he has an illness ... but that didn’t make him delusional,” said juror Michael Castellon. “We think that he could tell right from wrong. He could tell fantasy from reality.”

Hernandez, 56, didn’t react visibly as the verdict was read. Sentencing was set for Feb. 28. His lawyers

said he planned to appeal.

"In the end, we don't believe this will resolve the story of what happened to Etan back in 1979," said lawyer Harvey Fishbein.

Etan's disappearance during his morning walk to the school bus helped end an era where parents felt comfortable letting their children roam.

He became one of the first missing children ever pictured on milk cartons. The anniversary of his disappearance has been designated National Missing Children's Day. His parents lent their voices to a campaign to make missing children a national cause, and it fueled laws that established a national hotline and made it easier for law enforcement agencies to share information about vanished youngsters.

For decades, though, the investigation into what happened to him went nowhere.

A body was never found. Unlike today's New York City, there was no network of security cameras to check for clues.

For years, some detectives and the Patz family thought the killer was Jose Ramos, a convicted Pennsylvania child molester who knew a woman who had sometimes walked Etan home from school.

Etan's parents even sued Ramos, winning a wrongful death judgment by default in 2005 when he stopped cooperating with the legal proceedings — though he continued to deny having anything to do with the crime.

Stan Patz sent Ramos annual messages saying, "What did you do to my little boy?"

Hernandez wasn't a suspect until 2012. Amid renewed news coverage of the investigation, a brother-in-law came forward and told police that, decades earlier, Hernandez had confessed to a prayer group that he'd killed a child in New York.

Authorities would later learn that Hernandez had made similar remarks to a friend and his ex-wife.

After police went to his home in Maple Shade, New Jersey, Hernandez confessed, saying he'd offered Etan a soda to get him into the store basement and then choked him.

"Something just took over me," Hernandez said in one of a series of recorded confessions to police and prosecutors. He said he'd wanted to tell someone, "but I didn't know how to do it. I felt so sorry."

Hernandez told authorities he'd shoved Etan's body, still living, in a trash bag, then put it in a box and dumped it with some garbage.

The boy's body was never found, nor was any trace of his clothing, nor the tote bag loaded with toys that he'd slung over his shoulder when he left his loft. And while prosecutors presented a theory that Hernandez had killed Etan after sexually abusing him, the suspect himself never gave an explanation.

In the end, the confessions were enough for the jury. And they were enough for the Patz family, too.

"We've finally found some measure of justice for our wonderful little boy, Etan," said Stanley Patz, choking up, after the verdict was announced. His wife Julie, who didn't attend the trial except to testify, cried when she heard the verdict.

"I am truly relieved," Stan Patz said. "And I'll tell you, it's about time. It's about time."

Associated Press writers Larry Neumeister and Karen Matthews contributed to this report.

Study: Most drivers, not just young, are taking risks

By DEE-ANN DURBIN, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Young drivers aren't alone in behaving badly on U.S. roads, a trend that could be contributing to a spike in highway deaths.

Well over half of drivers in every age group have texted behind the wheel, run a red light or driven faster than the speed limit in the last 30 days, according to a new study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

Younger drivers are the worst offenders. Eighty-eight percent of drivers ages 19 to 24 admitted to at least one of those behaviors. But even mature drivers skirted the rules more often researchers expected. For instance, 10 percent of drivers between 60 and 74 have texted or sent email from behind the wheel, while 37 percent of drivers over 75 said they'd driven through a light that had just turned red.

"It was a surprise that there were relatively high rates of these behaviors among the drivers we think of as safer," said Lindsay Arnold, a research associate with the AAA Foundation.

Arnold said the responses were similar to those in past years, indicating a troubling trend. In 2015, U.S. traffic deaths rose 7 percent to 35,092, the largest single-year increase in five decades. They're expected to rise again in 2016 when that data is finalized.

"It points to the need to improve driver behavior if we're going to reverse this alarming trend," Arnold said.

Teen driver education campaigns have had some success, foundation spokeswoman Tamra Johnson said. Now the organization is considering the best ways to reach drivers of other ages.

The study found broad agreement on some issues. Eighty-seven percent of drivers said they have never driven when they thought they were close to the legal alcohol limit. Ninety-five percent said they had never driven within an hour of using marijuana. Eighty-eight percent of drivers say it's unacceptable to drive without a seat belt, and 82 percent support laws requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets.

But drivers' behavior sometimes contradicted their own instincts. More than three-quarters of drivers say it's unacceptable to text or email while driving, but 31 percent had done so in the last month and 8 percent do so often. Ninety-six percent of drivers say drowsy driving is a serious safety threat, but 29 percent had recently driven when they were so tired they had trouble keeping their eyes open.

The study questioned 2,511 licensed drivers aged 16 and over. Among its findings:

— The youngest drivers — those ages 16 to 18 — were less likely to engage in speeding, running red lights or texting while driving than drivers in their 20s through 50s.

— Eighty-three percent of drivers — and 86.5 percent of drivers 75 or older — said they were more careful than other drivers on the road.

— Just over half of drivers feel seriously threatened by drivers talking on cell phones, but 68 percent made a call while driving in the last 30 days.

— Drivers ages 40-59 were the most likely to use a hands-free phone in the car. Drivers ages 16-18 and 75 or older were the most likely to hold their phones and talk while driving.

— Twenty-three percent of drivers — and 36 percent of those ages 19 to 24 — think it's acceptable to drive 15 mph over the speed limit on a freeway. Forty-six percent of drivers say they have driven that fast on a freeway in the last 30 days.

— Sixty percent of drivers say people who drive after using illegal drugs are a serious threat, but just 34 percent say the same about people who drive after using prescription drugs.

Clues scarce after half-brother of NKorea leader killed

By EILEEN NG, Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — The astonishing assassination of North Korea leader Kim Jong Un's half-brother rippled across Asia on Wednesday as Malaysian investigators scoured airport surveillance video for clues about the two female assailants and rival South Korea offered up a single, shaky motive: paranoia.

Kim Jong Nam, 46, was targeted Monday in a shopping concourse at Kuala Lumpur International Airport, said a senior Malaysian government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the case involves sensitive diplomacy. He had not yet gone through security.

Kim, who died on the way to a hospital, told medical workers before he died that he had been attacked with a chemical spray, the official said.

South Korea's spy service said Wednesday that North Korea had been trying for five years to kill Kim Jong Nam. But the National Intelligence Service did not definitely say that it was North Korea, just that it was presumed to be a North Korean operation, according to lawmakers who briefed reporters about the closed door meeting with the spy officials.

The NIS cited Kim Jong Un's alleged "paranoia" about his half-brother. Still, the NIS has a history of botching intelligence on the North and has long sought to portray the North's leaders as mentally unstable.

In Malaysia, police were searching for clues in the CCTV footage from the airport, said Selangor police

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chief Abdul Samah Mat. The airport is in Selangor near Kuala Lumpur.

Kim Jong Nam was estranged from his younger brother, the North Korean leader. Although he had been tipped by some outsiders as a possible successor to his dictator father, others thought that was unlikely because he lived outside the country, including recently in Macau, Singapore and Malaysia.

He reportedly fell further out of favor when he was caught trying to enter Japan on a false passport in 2001, saying he wanted to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

Multiple South Korean media reports, citing unidentified sources, said Kim Jong Nam was killed at the airport by two women believed to be North Korean agents. They fled in a taxi and were being sought by Malaysian police, the reports said.

A Malaysian police statement confirmed the death of a 46-year-old North Korean man whom it identified from his travel document as Kim Chol, born in Pyongyang on June 10, 1970. "Investigation is in progress and a post mortem examination request has been made to ascertain the cause of death," the statement said.

Ken Gause, at the CNA think tank in Washington who has studied North Korea's leadership for 30 years, said Kim Chol was a name that Kim Jong Nam has traveled under. He is believed to have been born May 10, 1971, although birthdays are always unclear for senior North Koreans, Gause said.

Mark Tokola, vice president of the Korea Economic Institute in Washington and a former deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul, said it would be surprising if Kim Jong Nam was not killed on the orders of his brother, given that North Korean agents have reportedly tried to assassinate Kim Jong Nam in the past.

"It seems probable that the motivation for the murder was a continuing sense of paranoia on the part of Kim Jong Un," Tokola wrote in a commentary Tuesday. Although there was scant evidence that Kim Jong Nam was plotting against the North Korean leader, he provided an alternative for North Koreans who would want to depose his brother.

The reported killing came as North Korea celebrated its latest missile launch, which foreign experts were analyzing for evidence of advancement in the country's missile capabilities. For the next several days, North Korea will be marking the birthday of its late leader Kim Jong Il, the brothers' father, though they have different mothers. The major holiday this Thursday is called the "Day of the Shining Star" and will be feted with figure skating and synchronized swimming exhibitions, fireworks and mass rallies.

Since taking power in late 2011, Kim Jong Un has executed or purged a slew of high-level government officials in what the South Korean government has described as a "reign of terror." The most spectacular was the 2013 execution by anti-aircraft fire of his uncle, Jang Song Thaek, once considered the country's second-most-powerful man, for what the North alleged was treason.

Gause said Kim Jong Nam had been forthright that he did not have political ambitions, although he was publicly critical of the North Korean regime and his brother's legitimacy in the past.

Kim Jong Nam had been less outspoken since 2011, when North Korean assassins reportedly tried to shoot him in Macau, Gause said, though the details of the attempted killing are murky. South Korea also reportedly jailed a North Korean spy in 2012 who admitted to trying to organize a hit-and-run accident targeting Kim Jong Nam in China in 2010.

Despite the attempts on his life, Kim Jong Nam had reportedly traveled to North Korea since then, so it was assumed he was no longer under threat. Kim Jong Nam may have become more vulnerable as his defender in the North Korean hierarchy, Kim Kyong Hui — Kim Jong Un's aunt and the wife of his executed uncle, Jang Song Thaek — appears to have fallen from favor or died. She has not been seen in public for more than three years, Gause said.

Kim Jong Il had at least three sons with two women, as well as a daughter by a third. Kim Jong Nam was the eldest, followed by Kim Jong Chul, who is a few years older than Kim Jong Un and is known as a playboy who reportedly attended Eric Clapton concerts in London in 2015. It's unclear what position he has in the North Korean government. A younger sister, Kim Yo Jong, was named a member of the Workers' Party of Korea's Central Committee during a North Korean party congress last May. She has a position in a propaganda and agitation department and is known as Kim Jong Un's gatekeeper, Gause said.

While the most likely explanation for the killing was that Kim Jong Un was removing a potential challenger

to North Korean leadership within his own family, he could also be sending a warning to North Korean officials to demonstrate the reach of the regime. It follows the defection last year of a senior diplomat from the North Korean Embassy in London who has spoken of his despair at Kim's purges.

Associated Press writers Hyung-jin Kim in Seoul, South Korea, and Matthew Pennington in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

Trump knew Flynn misled WH weeks before ouster: officials

By JULIE PACE and VIVIAN SALAMA, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just six days into his presidency, Donald Trump was informed his national security adviser had misled his vice president about contacts with Russia. Trump kept his No. 2 in the dark and waited nearly three weeks before ousting the aide, Michael Flynn, citing a slow but steady erosion of trust, White House officials said Tuesday.

Flynn was interviewed by the FBI about his telephone conversations with Russia's ambassador to the U.S., a sign his ties to Russia had caught the attention of law enforcement officials.

But in the White House's retelling of Flynn's stunning downfall, his error was not that he discussed U.S. sanctions with the Russian before the inauguration — a potential violation of a rarely enforced law — but the fact that he denied it for weeks, apparently misleading Vice President Mike Pence and other senior Trump aides about the nature of the conversations. White House officials said they conducted a thorough review of Flynn's interactions, including transcripts of calls secretly recorded by U.S. intelligence officials, but found nothing illegal.

Pence, who had vouched for Flynn in a televised interview, is said to have been angry and deeply frustrated.

"The evolving and eroding level of trust as a result of this situation and a series of other questionable incidents is what led the president to ask General Flynn for his resignation," White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Tuesday, one day after the president asked Flynn to leave.

Flynn, in an interview with The Daily Caller News Foundation, said Monday "there were no lines crossed" in his conversations with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

The explanation of the episode left many questions unanswered, including why Trump didn't alert Pence to the matter and why Trump allowed Flynn to keep accessing classified information and taking part in the president's discussions with world leaders up until the day he was fired.

White House officials also struggled to explain why Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway had declared the president retained "full confidence" in Flynn just hours before the adviser had to submit his letter of resignation.

Later Tuesday, The New York Times reported that U.S. agencies had intercepted phone calls last year between Russian intelligence officials and members of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign team. Current and former U.S. officials, who spoke to the Times anonymously, said they found no evidence that the Trump campaign was working with the Russians on hacking or other efforts to influence the election.

The White House shakeup, less than one month into Trump's tenure, marked another jarring setback for a new administration already dealing with tensions among top aides and a legal fight over the president's travel ban order. Flynn's firing also heightened questions about the president's friendly posture toward Russia. Democrats called for investigations into Flynn's contacts, and Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham said Congress needed to know whether he had been acting with direction from the president or others.

Trump initially thought Flynn could survive the controversy, according to a person with direct knowledge of the president's views, but a pair of explosive stories in The Washington Post in recent days made the situation untenable. As early as last week, he and aides began making contingency plans for Flynn's dismissal, a senior administration official said. While the president was said to be upset with Flynn, he also expressed anger with other aides for "losing control" of the story and making his young administration look bad.

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Pence spokesman Marc Lotter said Pence became aware that he had received "incomplete information" from Flynn only after the first Washington Post report Thursday night. Pence learned about the Justice Department warnings to the White House around the same time.

The officials and others with knowledge of the situation were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and requested anonymity.

Ahead of the Jan. 20 inauguration, Pence and other officials insisted publicly that Flynn had not discussed sanctions in his talks with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak. On Jan. 26, Acting Attorney General Sally Yates contacted White House counsel Don McGahn to raise concerns about discrepancies between the public accounting and what intelligence officials knew to be true about the contacts based on routine recordings of communications with foreign officials who are in the U.S.

The Justice Department warned the White House that the inconsistencies would leave the president's top national security aide vulnerable to blackmail from Russia, according to a person with knowledge of the discussion. The president was informed of the warnings the same day, Spicer said.

Flynn was interviewed by the FBI around the same time, according to a U.S. official was briefed on the investigation.

It was not immediately known what questions the FBI asked of Flynn or what he told law enforcement officials.

McGahn, along with chief of staff Reince Priebus and strategist Steve Bannon, also questioned Flynn multiple times in the ensuing weeks, a White House official said. Top aides also reviewed transcripts of Flynn's contacts with the ambassador, according to a person with knowledge of the review process.

At the same time, the official said Trump aides began taking steps to put some distance between the president and Flynn. CIA Director Mike Pompeo and retired Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, a top Flynn aide, started taking part in Trump's daily security briefings.

Top Trump advisers quietly met with Vice Admiral Robert Harward last week and spoke with the former Navy SEAL again Monday, the White House official said. Harward is seen as the top contender for the job, though former CIA Director David Petraeus and Kellogg, who has temporarily stepped into the role, are also under consideration.

Spicer said other "questionable incidents" had contributed to Flynn's firing. According to one person with knowledge of the matter, those incidents included Flynn seeking a security clearance for his son during the transition.

At the time, it was Pence who was again put in the position of defending Flynn on television, saying he had not sought a clearance for the retired general's son.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press that Flynn was in frequent contact with Kislyak on the day the Obama administration slapped sanctions on Russia for election-related hacking, as well as at other times during the transition. Spicer said Flynn was not discussing sanctions at the president's behest.

Before he resigned Monday night, Flynn told the investigative news nonprofit affiliated with the website The Daily Caller that he and Kislyak spoke only generally about the Russian diplomats expelled by President Barack Obama as part of the previous administration's response to Moscow's interference in the U.S. presidential election.

"It wasn't about sanctions. It was about the 35 guys who were thrown out," Flynn said. "It was basically: 'Look, I know this happened. We'll review everything.' I never said anything such as, 'We're going to review sanctions,' or anything like that."

Associated Press writers Jonathan Lemire, Eric Tucker, Ken Thomas, Jill Colvin, Erica Werner and Catherine Lucey contributed to this report.

Online: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/3461508-Michael-Flynn-Resignation-Letter.html>
Follow Julie Pace at <http://twitter.com/jpaceDC> and Vivian Salama at <http://twitter.com/vmsalama>

Russia cloud over Trump not likely to fade with Flynn exit

By EILEEN SULLIVAN, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Questions about the Trump administration's ties to Russia are hardly going to disappear with the firing of national security adviser Michael Flynn. Investigations are underway, and more are likely by the new administration and on Capitol Hill.

U.S. agencies, including the FBI, have been probing Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. And three congressional committees are conducting their own investigations that include looking at contacts between Russian officials and members of the Trump campaign and administration.

This isn't the first time Trump has distanced himself from an adviser in light of a relationships with Moscow. In late August, Paul Manafort resigned as Trump's campaign chairman after disclosures by The Associated Press about his firm's covert lobbying on behalf of the former pro-Russian ruling political party in Ukraine.

The New York Times reported late Tuesday that members of Trump's campaign, including Manafort, had repeated contacts with Russian intelligence officials during the year before the election. The U.S. knew about these contacts through phone records and intercepted calls, the Times said.

Reached late Tuesday, Manafort told The Associated Press he has not been interviewed by the FBI about these alleged contacts.

"I have never knowingly spoken to Russian intelligence officers and I have never been involved with anything to do with the Russian government or the Putin administration or any other issues under investigation today," Manafort said.

Officials who spoke with the Times anonymously said they had not yet seen any evidence of the Trump campaign cooperating with the Russians on hacking or other attempts to influence the election.

Trump's own ties to Russia have been questioned in light of his friendly posture toward the long-time U.S. adversary and reluctance to criticize President Vladimir Putin, even for Putin's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014.

"This isn't simply about a change in policy toward Russia, as the administration would like to portray. It's what's behind that change in policy," said California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House intelligence committee, one of the congressional bodies investigating. Schiff said there are continuing questions about the Trump campaign's ties to Russia and whether anyone assisted Moscow in hacking.

"It's not just that an administration official was caught lying. It's that the national security adviser to the president was caught lying and on a matter of central importance. So this is big," Schiff said.

The Obama administration said Russia interfered in the 2016 election with the goal of electing Trump. Trump has acknowledged that Russia hacked Democratic emails but denies it was to help him win.

The investigations and the unusual firing of the national security adviser just 24 days into his job have put Republicans in the awkward position of investigating the leader of their party. Senior GOP lawmakers continue to deny Democrats' requests that an independent panel be established to carry out the Russia investigation. So the congressional probes are ultimately in the hands of the Republican chairmen, and the executive branch's investigation has been overseen ultimately by Trump appointees.

On Tuesday, Republican leaders focused on the idea that Flynn misled Vice President Mike Pence about the nature of his contacts with the Russian ambassador — not on any questioning of the relationship between Flynn and the ambassador. Democrats say a key issue is whether Flynn broke diplomatic protocol and potentially the law by discussing U.S. sanctions with Moscow before Trump's inauguration.

The Justice Department had warned the White House late last month that Flynn could be at risk for blackmail because of contradictions between his public depictions of the calls with the Russian ambassador and what intelligence officials knew about the conversations.

"You cannot have a national security adviser misleading the vice president and others," said Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan of Wisconsin.

Daniel Jones, a former lead investigator on the Senate intelligence committee, said it's important that Congress investigate Flynn's ties to Russia and make sure that doesn't get lost in a broader probe into Russia and the 2016 election.

"This is a checks-and-balances issue," Jones said. "This shouldn't be a political issue."

On the other hand, California Rep. Devin Nunes, chairman of the House intelligence committee, said

he was concerned Flynn's rights were violated in the interception of his conversations with the Russian ambassador.

"I'm just shocked that nobody's covering the real crime here," Nunes said. "You have an American citizen who had his phone call recorded and then leaked to the media."

Nunes said he intended to ask the FBI "what the hell's going on here."

The FBI has wide legal authority to eavesdrop on the conversations of foreign intelligence targets, including diplomats, inside the U.S.

Flynn did not concede any wrongdoing in his resignation letter, saying merely that he "inadvertently briefed the vice president elect and others with incomplete information regarding my phone calls with the Russian ambassador."

Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon, a member of the Senate intelligence committee which is already investigating Russia and the 2016 election, said Flynn's resignation raises more questions.

For example, he said, there are open questions about how many conversations Flynn actually had with the Russians and whether other people knew he was having them.

While North Carolina Sen. Richard Burr, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, said much of the panel's investigation will occur behind closed doors, Wyden said he planned to push to make the findings and hearings public.

Republican Lindsey Graham, who is leading a Senate judiciary subcommittee investigation into Russia's interference in the 2016 election, echoed Wyden's concerns about whether Flynn was acting alone and without direction in his contacts. White House spokesman Sean Spicer said Trump did not direct Flynn to discuss U.S. sanctions with the Russians. "No, absolutely not," Spicer said.

"I think most Americans have a right to know whether or not this was a General Flynn rogue maneuver, or was he basically speaking for somebody else in the White House," Graham told CNN Tuesday.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker, Erica Werner, Richard Lardner, Chad Day and Deb Riechmann contributed to this report.

High hopes as always in first spring training workouts

By NOAH TRISTER, AP Baseball Writer

LAKELAND, Fla. (AP) — Even for an accomplished veteran like Justin Verlander, the start of spring training can be special.

"I usually sleep pretty well. I woke up early today," the Detroit ace said Tuesday. "On one hand, you want to appreciate everything as much as you can. It's not such a whirlwind anymore — you kind of know what to expect. But in the same aspect, every day is pretty much the same thing I've done for 12 years, so it also starts going faster."

Verlander's Tigers were among 15 teams with their first scheduled workouts for pitchers and catchers Tuesday. As major leaguers took the field in Florida and Arizona, that familiar sound of balls popping into mitts served as a reminder that in baseball at least, winter is finally over.

While Verlander and the Tigers went through their routine at their newly renovated facility in Lakeland, the Boston Red Sox were about 115 miles to the south, holding their first workout of the post-Papi era. It's Boston's first season without David Ortiz since the Red Sox signed him in January 2003, but Big Papi's retirement may not be too big a blow to a team that added star left-hander Chris Sale.

Over in Arizona, the Cleveland Indians began preparing to defend their American League title. Cleveland won the AL Central comfortably last year and made it to the World Series before losing to the Chicago Cubs in seven games.

"This time of year, everyone is at glass half-full," Indians manager Terry Francona said. "We have good reason to be."

Hopes are always high at the start of spring training, but occasionally there's some injury news on the first day. Baltimore manager Buck Showalter said right-hander Chris Tillman had a platelet-rich plasma

injection on his right shoulder and won't start the season until April 7 at the earliest.

The Kansas City Royals said left-hander Brian Flynn broke a rib and had three minor vertebrae fractures in a bizarre offseason injury. Flynn is expected to miss two months after falling through a barn roof at his Oklahoma residence.

The Royals and Miami Marlins begin this season with heavy hearts following the deaths of pitchers Yordano Ventura last month and Jose Fernandez in September, and Tigers owner Mike Ilitch died Friday at age 87.

"I got to know him as best as an owner and player can know each other," said Detroit catcher Alex Avila, whose father Al is the team's general manager. "He was always a very gracious and generous person — very nice to myself, my family. ... Very loyal. I know as a family, we always felt we had to kind of reciprocate that loyalty because he's a tremendous man. They're a great family."

The Arizona Diamondbacks have also found themselves dealing with some sobering news. Their bench coach, former Minnesota Twins manager Ron Gardenhire, has prostate cancer and is set to have surgery. He said doctors believe they caught the cancer early.

The Diamondbacks went 69-93 last year and are one of a few National League teams that started workouts Tuesday amid tepid expectations. The Phillies, Reds and Rockies also finished well out of the postseason picture in 2016, but that doesn't mean they can't set goals for themselves.

Philadelphia manager Pete Mackanin said he wants his team to play .500 baseball deeper into the season after the Phillies lost 91 games last year.

For the first time since 2009, the Giants are entering an odd-numbered season without a World Series title to defend. After winning it all in 2010, 2012 and 2014, San Francisco made the playoffs last year as a wild card but lost in the Division Series to the Cubs.

The Giants look like contenders again in 2017, and manager Bruce Bochy had plenty of reasons to be upbeat Tuesday when his pitchers and catchers took the field.

"It's a day you look forward to, getting a chance to see everybody and hear the sound of the bat, watch these guys work out again," Bochy said. "So it's a good day."

AP Baseball Writer Janie McCauley in Scottsdale, Arizona, contributed to this report.

Follow Noah Trister at www.Twitter.com/noahtrister

Mattis' reassurance tour in Europe could include US requests

By **LOLITA C. BALDOR**, Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — For Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, the next few days will be a reassurance tour with a twist.

As much he'll tell allies the U.S. is committed to NATO, he also is expected to visit Europe with a hand out, hoping to secure bigger defense spending commitments and greater assistance in military campaigns in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Mattis also will field questions on national security adviser Michael Flynn's resignation over his pre-inauguration discussions with Russia, and what the change means for U.S. policy on Moscow.

Speaking to reporters on the way to a NATO defense ministers' meeting, Mattis said Flynn's departure "has no effect at all" on him.

"Frankly, this has no impact," he said. "I haven't changed what I'm heading there for. It doesn't change my message at all. Who is on the president's staff is who I will work with. And so, you know, it's full speed ahead."

Mattis also reinforced earlier comments he's made on NATO's importance.

Calling it "the most successful military alliance in history," he told reporters on the plane that "our commitment remains to NATO." But he said allies need to discuss increasing their military funding to the benchmark goal of 2 percent of gross domestic product.

After spending his first official trip telling America's Asian allies they wouldn't be abandoned, Mattis is on a similar journey in Brussels and Munich this week, where he will have to address the mixed messages

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from President Donald Trump on the value of NATO before and after he took office.

"I think there will be a lot of reassuring words spoken over the next week," said Derek Chollet, a former senior defense official who is now senior adviser at the German Marshall Fund.

Nations want Mattis to maintain the U.S. commitment to providing military support and troops to bolster Poland and the Baltics, who feel threatened by Russia, he said. While Mattis' words may provide some comfort, Chollet said: "It will leave the question: What does the president think? If anything, the sum total of all of this will just perpetuate the confusion."

Wednesday marks Mattis' first NATO meeting as defense secretary. During his Senate confirmation hearing last month, the retired Marine general said he wanted the U.S. to "maintain the strongest possible relationship with NATO."

With remarks such as those, Mattis has distanced himself from Trump's criticism of the military alliance and threats that the U.S. might not defend allies that don't fulfill their financial obligations as NATO members.

Mattis, however, is aligned with Trump's call for the 27 NATO members to meet the defense spending requirement. Only a few are currently hitting the 2 percent mark, while the U.S. spends more on its armed forces than all the others combined. Washington also foots more than 22 percent of NATO's commonly funded budget.

The U.S. also would like to see an increased NATO commitment in Afghanistan, where forces have been fighting the Taliban for more than 15 years, since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Washington wants more trainers in Afghanistan, where about 8,400 American troops are still deployed.

There also will be discussions about how to accelerate the newer, U.S.-led campaign to defeat the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria.

Europe's leaders will first be looking for clarity from Mattis. They're still rattled by Trump's declarations that NATO is "obsolete" and his repeated praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Such comments have triggered fears Trump will ease sanctions imposed on Moscow after it annexed Ukraine's Crimea region in 2014 and supported an insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Another concern: lessened U.S. military support for eastern European allies near Russia's border who worry about being the next target.

During his confirmation hearing, Mattis told senators that he has discussed NATO with the president and that Trump was "open" to changing his position. Among Mattis' first calls after Trump's inauguration was one to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

In recent weeks, Trump's public statements on NATO have softened somewhat.

After meeting Trump, British Prime Minister Theresa May told reporters that he assured her he was "100 percent" behind NATO. A joint statement issued after Trump and German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke by telephone said the two agreed on the "fundamental importance that the NATO alliance has for trans-Atlantic relations" and the need for all members to pay their fair share. Trump made similar comments in a call with French President Francois Hollande.

Only four countries other than the U.S. — Britain, Estonia, Greece and Poland — are meeting NATO's spending target. Many are increasing their budgets in response to Russia's actions.

10 Things to Know for Wednesday

By The Associated Press

Your daily look at late-breaking news, upcoming events and the stories that will be talked about Wednesday:

1. TOP AIDE'S DEPARTURE ADDS TO WHITE HOUSE TURMOIL

The ouster of national security adviser Michael Flynn, less than a month into Trump's tenure, marks another jarring setback for the new administration.

2. WHAT'S COMPLICATING US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Russia has deployed a cruise missile in violation of a Cold War-era arms control treaty, a Trump administration official says.

3. EVACUATION ORDER LIFTED IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

Authorities say nearly 200,000 residents can return to their homes because the risk of catastrophic collapse of the nation's tallest dam has been significantly reduced.

4. [a href='https://apnews.com/c2e892cc1885499ba1e80bf6be15dd8e/Police-looking-for-clues-in-death-of-NKorea-leader's-brother'](https://apnews.com/c2e892cc1885499ba1e80bf6be15dd8e/Police-looking-for-clues-in-death-of-NKorea-leader's-brother)HIT CARRIED OUT ON HALF-BROTHER OF KIM JONG UN/[a](#)

Kim Jong Nam, who was estranged from the North Korean leader, is assassinated at an airport in Malaysia, telling medical workers before he died that he had been attacked with a chemical spray.

5. [a href='https://apnews.com/d6b14e0b2a724519abeeaa9d3335a386/'It's-about-time':-Etan-Patz's-dad-finds-justice-in-verdict'](https://apnews.com/d6b14e0b2a724519abeeaa9d3335a386/'It's-about-time':-Etan-Patz's-dad-finds-justice-in-verdict)GUILTY VERDICT IN CASE THAT INFLUENCED AMERICAN PARENTING/[a](#)

Nearly four decades after Etan Patz vanished near his home in New York City, a former convenience store clerk is convicted of his murder. The 6-year-old became one of the first missing children ever pictured on a milk carton.

6. WHERE GENOME EDITING MIGHT LEAD

A major new ethics report leaves open the possibility that one day scientists might try to fight diseases by altering human heredity.

7. [a href='https://apnews.com/9a180be0311848c3b3cc74fe05499349/2-big-insurance-breakups-on-Valentine's-Day'](https://apnews.com/9a180be0311848c3b3cc74fe05499349/2-big-insurance-breakups-on-Valentine's-Day)TWO BIG INSURANCE BREAKUPS ON VALENTINE'S DAY/[a](#)

Aetna announces it is abandoning its planned \$34 billion purchase of Humana, while Cigna says it is suing Anthem to kill a \$48 billion acquisition bid.

8. [a href='https://apnews.com/8c2f70cefe88450fac9868d6ffa7f59a/Armyworm-invasion-threatening-southern-Africa's-crops'](https://apnews.com/8c2f70cefe88450fac9868d6ffa7f59a/Armyworm-invasion-threatening-southern-Africa's-crops)WHICH PEST IS CAUSING ALARM IN AFRICA/[a](#)

An invasion of armyworms is stripping southern Africa of key food crops and could spread to other parts of the continent, experts say.

9. SIGN OF SPRING: BASEBALL IS BACK

Fifteen major league teams hold their first workouts for pitchers and catchers.

10. WHO HAD SCARY MOMENT AT SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA AIRPORT

Actor Harrison Ford mistakenly lands his single-engine plane on a taxiway, passing over an airliner holding for takeoff.

'It's about time': Etan Patz's dad finds justice in verdict

By COLLEEN LONG and JENNIFER PELTZ, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Nearly four decades after 6-year-old Etan Patz vanished on the way to his school bus stop, a former convenience store clerk was convicted Tuesday of murder in a case that influenced American parenting and law enforcement.

The jury verdict against Pedro Hernandez gave Etan's relatives a resolution they had sought since May 1979 and gave prosecutors a conviction that eluded them when a 2015 jury deadlocked.

"The Patz family has waited a long time, but we've finally found some measure of justice for our wonderful little boy, Etan," said his father, Stanley Patz, choking up.

"I am truly relieved, and I'll tell you, it's about time. It's about time."

Hernandez, who once worked in a shop in Etan's neighborhood, had confessed, but his lawyers said his admissions were the false imaginings of a man whose mind blurred the boundary between reality and illusion.

On the earlier jury, the lone holdout against conviction cited the mental health issue as a major reason for his stance.

This time, the jury concluded Hernandez had a psychiatric disorder but hadn't imagined killing the boy, one member said.

"We decided he has an illness ... but that didn't make him delusional," said Michael Castellon, a construction company attorney. "We think that he could tell right from wrong. He could tell fantasy from reality."

Hernandez, 56, showed no reaction on hearing the verdict, but his lawyers said he planned to appeal. Sentencing is scheduled for Feb. 28.

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"In the end, we don't believe this will resolve the story of what happened to Etan back in 1979," said lawyer Harvey Fishbein.

Etan became one of the first missing children ever pictured on milk cartons, and the anniversary of his disappearance has been designated National Missing Children's Day.

His parents lent their voices to a campaign to make missing children a national cause, and it fueled laws that established a national hotline and made it easier for law enforcement agencies to share information about vanished youngsters.

And his disappearance helped tilt parenting to more protectiveness in a nation where many families had felt comfortable letting children play and roam alone. As Manhattan Assistant District Attorney Joan Illuzzi put it when the trial opened last fall, Etan "will forever symbolize the loss of that innocence."

The long-awaited verdict had one prosecutor quoting the Bible — "justice shall you pursue," Assistant District Attorney Joel Seidemann said — and Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. declaring that Hernandez' guilt had been "affirmed beyond all lasting doubt."

The verdict even spurred tears from some pro-conviction jurors from the first trial, who had attended the second one, though the lone holdout, Adam Sirois, said via text message that he hadn't changed his mind in feeling there wasn't enough evidence to convict.

Still, the Patz family — which focused for years on another suspect before Hernandez's 2012 arrest — may never know exactly what became of the boy.

Hernandez told authorities he'd left Etan's body, still living, in a box with some trash, but no trace of him has been found since he vanished in a then-edgy but neighborly part of lower Manhattan.

The decades-long investigation took investigators as far as Israel, but Hernandez wasn't a suspect until renewed news coverage of the case prompted a brother-in-law to tell police that Hernandez in 2012 had revealed to a prayer group decades earlier that he'd killed a child in New York.

Authorities would later learn that he'd made similar, if not entirely consistent, remarks to a friend and his ex-wife years earlier.

After police came to Hernandez's home in Maple Shade, New Jersey, he confessed, saying he'd offered Etan a soda to get him into the store basement and choked him.

"Something just took over me," Hernandez said in one of a series of recorded confessions to police and prosecutors. He said he'd wanted to tell someone, "but I didn't know how to do it. I felt so sorry."

Prosecutors cast his confession as the chillingly believable words of a man unburdening himself, and they argued it was buttressed by the less specific admissions he'd made earlier.

Defense lawyers and doctors portrayed Hernandez as man with psychological problems and intellectual limitations that made him imagine he'd killed Etan.

His daughter testified that he talked about seeing visions of angels and demons and once watered a dead tree branch, believing it would grow. Prosecutors suggested Hernandez faked or exaggerated his symptoms.

Defense lawyers also pointed to a different man who was long the prime suspect — a convicted Pennsylvania child molester who made incriminating remarks about Etan's case in the 1990s and who had dated a woman acquainted with the Patzes. The man was never charged and denies killing Etan.

"The defense threw a lot of theories out there," Castellon said, but they weren't convincing, though jurors deliberated for nine days.

Ultimately, members of the jury that voted to convict felt Hernandez's remarks to the prayer group were both reliable and corroborated by multiple people, Castellon said.

He said jurors also looked closely at the other suspect but concluded he was toying with authorities by making chilling statements but not confessing.

Deliberations were difficult, but "we had constructive conversations, based in logic, that were analytical and creative and adaptive, and compassionate," foreman Thomas Hoscheid said.

"And, ultimately, kind of heartbreaking."

Associated Press writers Larry Neumeister and Karen Matthews contributed to this report.

US official: Russia deployed missile in violation of treaty

By **ROBERT BURNS, AP National Security Writer**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russia has deployed a cruise missile in violation of a Cold War-era arms control treaty, a Trump administration official said Tuesday, a development that complicates the outlook for U.S.-Russia relations amid turmoil on the White House national security team.

The Obama administration three years ago accused the Russians of violating the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty by developing and testing the prohibited cruise missile, and officials had anticipated that Moscow eventually would deploy it. Russia denies that it has violated the INF treaty.

U.S. intelligence agencies have assessed that the missile became operational late last year, said an administration official, who wasn't authorized to publicly discuss the matter and demanded anonymity.

The deployment may not immediately change the security picture in Europe, but the alleged treaty violation may arise when Defense Secretary Jim Mattis attends his first NATO meeting in Brussels on Wednesday. It also has stirred concern on Capitol Hill, where Sen. John McCain, the Senate Armed Services Committee chairman, called on the Trump administration to ensure U.S. nuclear forces in Europe are ready.

"Russia's deployment of nuclear-tipped ground-launched cruise missiles in violation of the INF treaty is a significant military threat to U.S. forces in Europe and our NATO allies," McCain, R-Ariz., said in a statement Tuesday. He said Russian President Vladimir Putin was "testing" Trump.

Trump's White House is in a difficult moment, with no national security adviser following the forced resignation Monday night of Michael Flynn. He is accused of misleading Vice President Mike Pence about contacts with a Russian diplomat while President Barack Obama was still in office.

Meanwhile, a U.S. defense official said Tuesday that a Russian intelligence-collection ship has been operating off the U.S. east coast, in international waters. The official was not authorized to discuss an intelligence matter and so spoke on condition of anonymity. The ship had made a port call in Cuba prior to moving north, where it has been monitored off the coast of Delaware, the official said.

The New York Times, which was first to report the missile deployment, said the Russians have two battalions of the prohibited cruise missile. One is at a missile test site at Kapustin Yar and one was moved in December from the test site to an operational base elsewhere in the country.

The State Department wouldn't confirm the report. It noted that last year it reported Russia was in violation of its treaty obligations not to possess, produce or flight-test a ground-launched cruise missile with a range of between 500 and 5,500 kilometers, or to possess or produce launchers for such missiles.

"The administration is undertaking an extensive review of Russia's ongoing INF treaty violation in order to assess the potential security implications for the United States and its allies and partners," State Department spokesman Mark Toner said.

John Tierney, executive director of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, said strategic stability on the European continent is at stake.

"If true, Russia's deployment of an illegal ground-launched cruise missile represents a very troubling development and should be roundly condemned," Tierney said.

Sen. Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, sees little reason for the U.S. to continue adhering to the INF treaty, in light of Russia's violations. He has recommended building up U.S. nuclear forces in Europe, which currently include about 200 bombs that can be delivered by aircraft. The U.S. withdrew land-based nuclear-armed missiles from Europe as part of the INF deal.

The treaty has special significance in the recent history of arms control agreements. Signed in December 1987 by President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, it has been credited with helping accelerate an end to the Cold War and lessening the danger of nuclear confrontation. It stands as the only arms treaty to eliminate an entire class of U.S. and Russian weapons — nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles of intermediate range.

The Obama administration had argued for maintaining U.S. compliance with the treaty while urging the

Russians to halt violations. At the same time, the Pentagon developed options to counter Russian cruise missile moves, some of which would have involved bold military action.

At his Senate confirmation hearing in February 2014, Ash Carter, who headed the Pentagon until last month, said disregard for treaty limitations was a "two-way street," opening the way for the U.S. to respond in kind. He called Russia's violations consistent with its "strategy of relying on nuclear weapons to offset U.S. and NATO conventional superiority."

2 big insurance breakups on Valentine's Day

By TOM MURPHY, AP Health Writer

It was a rough day for the already-roiled U.S. health insurance market: One giant merger was abandoned, another is threatened by infighting, and a major insurer announced it will stop selling coverage on public exchanges in 11 states.

Both merger deals had already been rejected by federal regulators and judges, but the companies were considering appeals to those decisions. Now they both appear to be off.

Aetna said it was abandoning its planned \$34 billion purchase of Medicare Advantage provider Humana early Tuesday. Then, later in the day, Cigna said it is suing Anthem to kill a \$48 billion acquisition bid.

The deals were conceived as a way to help the insurers increase their enrollment and cut down on expenses in part so they could improve their performances on the Affordable Care Act's public insurance exchanges. Big insurers have been hit with substantial losses from the exchanges, even though they represent a relatively small part of their overall business. Many have already cut back their offerings, and that has slashed customer choices in markets around the country.

The collapse of one deal and the uncertain future of the other could hurt shoppers on the exchanges next year by leaving them with even fewer options and potentially higher prices. Humana told investors late Tuesday that it was abandoning its exchanges in all 11 of its states as of the beginning of next year.

Humana, based in Louisville, Kentucky, was the only insurer on exchanges in 16 Tennessee counties, according to data compiled at the start of the 2017 open enrollment period by the Associated Press and health care consulting firm Avalere. That means customers in those counties may have no way to buy coverage with help from government tax credits next year unless another insurer decides to enter those markets.

Every exchange in the U.S. had at least one insurer selling coverage on it for 2017, according to Larry Levitt of the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation, which studies health care issues.

Morningstar insurance analyst Vishnu Lekraj said it's possible all the four insurers involved in the deals could leave the exchanges.

Aetna Chairman and CEO Mark Bertolini raised that possibility months ago. He said that if his company's planned, was blocked, "we believe it is very likely that we would need to leave the public exchange business entirely," according to court documents filed in that case.

Aetna, based in Hartford, Connecticut, says it lost \$450 million last year on ACA-compliant coverage, while the company booked an overall profit of \$2.27 billion. Its loss on ACA-compliant business was \$100 million more than it expected.

Bertolini said recently that his company would announce by April 1 whether it will remain in any of its exchanges. "We're looking at everything," he said.

Government and industry officials have said President Donald Trump's administration and congressional Republicans are weighing measures to stabilize the wobbly exchanges. Insurers have been pushing them to act soon.

"The clock is definitely ticking for the Trump administration to provide some clarity around what the rules will be," Levitt said.

In suing to end its tie-up, Cigna, based in Bloomfield, Connecticut, said it wants more than \$13 billion in damages from its onetime-companion Anthem, the Blue Cross-Blue Shield insurer, which is based in Indianapolis.

Cigna says it is seeking a \$1.85 billion termination fee from Anthem and billions more in damages for what it says were Anthem's breaches of the merger agreement.

The insurer says the damages include the amount Cigna shareholders would have received if the merger had not failed. It noted that Anthem assumed full responsibility for litigation strategy and getting the necessary regulatory approvals, suggesting that it was Anthem's responsibility to push the deal through.

"Cigna fulfilled all of its contractual obligations and fully cooperated with Anthem throughout the approval process," the insurer said in a statement.

An Anthem spokeswoman says Cigna has no right to end the deal, and it remains committed to closing the transaction. The insurer had just filed on Monday paperwork to appeal the federal court ruling.

Anthem and Aetna put their acquisition bids together in 2015 and touted them as a way to grow enrollment and reap savings that they would then pass on to consumers.

The deal would have given Aetna the opportunity to significantly expand its presence in Medicare Advantage coverage, which involves privately run versions of the federal Medicare program for people who are over 65 or disabled.

But the Department of Justice had sued last summer to stop the deals, due to concerns about how they may affect prices and consumer choices. Federal judges then rejected the acquisitions in separate rulings filed earlier this year.

The deals would have combined four of the nations' five largest insurers. UnitedHealth Group is the largest.

AP Data Journalist Meghan Hoyer contributed to this report from Washington, D.C.

AP FACT CHECK: Democrats cite fake tweet to condemn Flynn

By **STEPHEN OHLEMACHER, Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fake Michael Flynn Twitter account has fooled two top House Democrats who cited a series of tweets in condemning President Donald Trump's former national security adviser.

Flynn was forced to resign Monday over discussions he had with Russian officials before Trump took office.

At a news conference Tuesday, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., complained that Republicans in Congress were not adequately investigating Flynn's actions. In doing so, they cited a tweet purportedly from Flynn that said, "I feel it is unfair that I have been made the sole scapegoat for what happened."

CUMMINGS: "Madam leader, just this morning, Flynn tweeted, and this is a quote, 'scapegoat,' end of quote. Scapegoat. He basically described himself as a scapegoat."

PELOSI: "I have a tweet, I'm going to make, I'm telling my staff right now — It's not scapegoat, its stonewall, and that's exactly what the Republicans in Congress are doing."

THE FACTS: That wasn't Flynn tweeting.

Flynn had a different verified Twitter account during the campaign, but it is no longer active, and his own son, Michael Flynn Jr., tweeted in his account that the purported tweet from his father was fake.

Cummings mentioned the tweets at the news conference and Pelosi picked up on the theme.

Both offices later acknowledged the mistake. Pelosi spokesman Drew Hammill acknowledged that Pelosi inadvertently cited tweets from a fake account. Cummings issued his correction on Twitter: "Yes, sorry, to correct the record — just learned like many others that the Flynn tweet this morning was fake."

The New York Times cited tweets from the unverified account in a story about Flynn's resignation. Later, the newspaper removed the references and corrected its story.

Find all AP Fact Checks here: <http://apne.ws/2kx8bd>

Follow Stephen Ohlemacher on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/stephenatap>

Venezuela's VP shrugs off drug sanctions as US weighs policy

By **FABIOLA SANCHEZ** and **JOSHUA GOODMAN**, Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuela's government condemned U.S. sanctions on the country's vice president, saying Tuesday that the Trump administration's designation of Tareck El Aissami as a major drug trafficker represented an unprecedented and "highly dangerous" infringement on the South American nation's sovereignty.

In a series of defiant messages posted on social media, El Aissami said the "miserable and defamatory aggression" only deepens his commitment to revolution started by the late Hugo Chavez and won't distract him from his job of rescuing Venezuela's crashing economy from what he called sabotage by its conservative opponents.

"They'll never be able to defeat our unbreakable resolution to be free forever," El Aissami said.

On Monday, the Trump administration froze El Aissami's U.S. assets and banned him from entering the U.S. for his alleged role facilitating cocaine shipments from Venezuela. El Aissami is the highest-ranking Venezuelan official to ever be sanctioned by the U.S. and his designation as a drug kingpin is bound to ratchet up tensions between the two countries, who have not exchanged ambassadors since 2010.

But whether the action signals a hardening U.S. stance toward President Nicolas Maduro's socialist government, or is just a carry-over of policies set in motion by the Obama administration, remains to be seen, analysts said. Under Obama, the U.S. was careful not to call for the unpopular Maduro's removal, as the opposition has been seeking, choosing instead to support a Vatican-sponsored dialogue aimed at avoiding bloodshed.

"Patience has worn out," said Chris Sabatini, editor of Latin America Goes Global, a website that tracks U.S. policy toward the region. "There's a mounting sense of frustration, even in the State Department and on the Hill, that the dialogue is going nowhere."

For now, no additional actions against Venezuela are in the works, said a White House official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss policy. It's also not clear whether Trump personally signed off on the sanctions, although in conversations over the weekend with the presidents of Peru and Colombia he raised concerns about Venezuela's deteriorating humanitarian situation.

Trump's newly confirmed Treasury secretary, Steve Mnuchin, told reporters on Tuesday the sanctions "demonstrate the president's seriousness about fighting the scourge of drugs in the United States." Trump, he said, also wanted to "to send a clear message to the people of Venezuela that America stands with them."

In remarks carried on state television Tuesday, Maduro accused the U.S. government of committing a "grave error" and said Venezuela would deliver a "note of protest" to the U.S. Embassy in Caracas demanding the accusations against El Aissami be retracted.

Maduro pledged his full support of El Aissami and said he hoped the new U.S. administration would not go down "the same path of defeat and failure" as the previous two U.S. presidential administrations in relations with Venezuela. "Bandits," he said. "They are the bandits."

Unlike previous sanctions, issued under legislation allowing Obama to go after Venezuelan officials accused of human rights abuses, the latest asset seizure was carried out by the Treasury Department under two-decade-old drug kingpin legislation that in theory is driven by law enforcement investigations. The U.S. Embassy in Caracas, in announcing the sanctions, made no mention of El Aissami's position inside Venezuela's government.

El Aissami, 42, has been the target of U.S. law enforcement investigations for years, stemming from his days as interior minister when dozens of fraudulent Venezuelan passports ended up in the hands of people from the Middle East, including alleged members of Hezbollah.

Before he was extradited from Colombia in 2011, Venezuela's top convicted drug trafficker, Walid Makled, told authorities he paid bribes through El Aissami's brother to Venezuelan authorities so they would turn a blind eye to cocaine shipments that have proliferated in the country's ports and airports during the past two decades of socialist rule.

The action Monday made no mention of any ties to Hezbollah but said El Aissami had worked with

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prominent drug traffickers in Mexico and Colombia to oversee multiple U.S.-bound cocaine shipments from Venezuela. Also sanctioned was Samark Lopez, a Venezuelan businessman the U.S. described as El Aissami's primary front man, who is accused of laundering proceeds from the drug trade through a network of companies and luxury real estate properties in the U.S., Panama, British Virgin Islands and Venezuela.

Venezuela's foreign minister, Delcy Rodriguez, in a statement praised El Aissami as a prominent criminology expert who as interior minister fought Colombian cartels operating on Venezuelan soil and extracted 21 drug traffickers wanted by the U.S. She also criticized the head of the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela — the countries haven't exchanged ambassadors since 2010 — of trying to subvert Venezuela's constitutional order and boost the opposition's campaign to carry out a "political coup."

"It's sad, and highly dangerous, that the U.S. bureaucracy, in coordination with violent criminal groups and extremists in the Venezuelan opposition, are encouraging the new administration to continue the historical mistakes committed by President Obama against Venezuela," the statement read.

Trump mentioned Venezuela only briefly during the presidential campaign and his entreaties to Russia — a close ally of Maduro — had led some to speculate he wasn't interested in shaking things up with the oil-rich nation.

But as hopes fade for a dialogue between the Venezuelan government and opposition, and an economy plagued by triple-digit inflation and widespread food shortages edges closer to the abyss, the time for restraint may have passed. Authorities last October canceled an opposition-led recall referendum seeking Maduro's removal and this month all political parties are being required to re-register under strict rules that many see as an attempt to disqualify the opposition from competing in long-overdue regional elections they are favored to win by a landslide.

Certainly members of Trump's party want him to exert more pressure.

"This is just the tip of the corruption iceberg in Venezuela," Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, a Republican from Miami, said in remarks Tuesday on the House floor.

She cited a recent Associated Press investigation detailing how top Venezuelan government officials pocketed bribes from fraudulent food imports — a report referenced in a bipartisan letter to Trump last week urging sanctions — in calling for additional measures.

"While these announced sanctions were a critical first step, it pales in comparison to the dire humanitarian situation that Maduro and his cronies have created for the people of Venezuela," said Ros-Lehtinen, who discussed Venezuela on Monday in a meeting with Vice President Mike Pence.

Still, it's not clear what other policy tools the U.S. has at its disposal given Maduro's unwillingness to yield power.

Tensions between the U.S. and Venezuela have been on the rise for years. The rush by the Bush administration to embrace Chavez's brief ouster during a 2002 coup is also an object lesson on how an aggressive U.S. stance can backfire unless it has multilateral support. Tellingly no Latin American leader has yet to express support for the U.S. sanctions, mindful perhaps of past U.S. meddling, sometimes militarily, in political conflicts during the Cold War — a scenario that nobody wants to see return.

"Open calls for regime change would play directly into Maduro's hands and undermine efforts to marshal a multilateral coalition to pressure Caracas," said Michael McCarthy, a research fellow focused on Venezuela at American University.

Goodman reported from Bogota, Colombia. Associated Press reporters Vivian Salama in Washington and Christine Armario in Bogota contributed to this report.

No designer babies, but gene editing to avoid disease? Maybe

By LAURAN NEERGAARD, AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Don't expect designer babies any time soon — but a major new ethics report leaves open the possibility of one day altering human heredity to fight genetic diseases, with stringent oversight, using new tools that precisely edit genes inside living cells.

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What's called genome editing already is transforming biological research, and being used to develop treatments for patients struggling with a range of diseases.

The science is nowhere near ready for a huge next step that raises ethical questions — altering sperm, eggs or embryos so that babies don't inherit a disease that runs in the family, says a report Tuesday from the National Academy of Sciences and National Academy of Medicine.

But if scientists learn how to safely pass alterations of the genetic code to future generations, the panel said "germline" editing could be attempted under strict criteria, including that it targets a serious disease with no reasonable alternative and is conducted under rigorous oversight.

"Caution is absolutely needed, but being cautious does not mean prohibition," said bioethicist R. Alta Charo of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"This committee is not saying we will or should do germline — heritable — editing. What we are saying is that we can identify a set of strict conditions under which it would be permissible to do it," Charo added. "But we are far, far away from being ready to try."

Genome editing should not go beyond healing the sick and enhance traits such as physical strength, what's commonly called "designer babies," the panel stressed.

But the public should get involved in these debates now, to say what might one day be acceptable.

The long-awaited report offers advice — the prestigious academies cannot set policy. But it is considered a step toward creating international norms for responsible development of this powerful technology. The U.S. National Academies and its counterparts in Britain and China have been holding international meetings with the hope of doing just that.

"Genome editing is a new tool for gene therapy and it has tremendous promise," Charo said. But, she added, it has to be pursued in a way that promotes well-being and is responsible, respectful and fair.

Genome editing is essentially a biological version of cut-and-paste software, allowing scientists to turn genes on or off, repair or modify them inside living cells. There are a few older methods but one with the wonky name CRISPR-Cas9 is so much faster, cheaper and simpler to use that it has spurred an explosion of research.

Under development are ways to treat a range of diseases from sickle cell and hemophilia to cancer. In lab experiments using human cells or animals engineered with humanlike disorders, scientists are unraveling how gene defects fuel disease — and are even trying to grow transplantable human organs inside pigs.

That kind of research is very promising, is adequately regulated today and should continue at full speed, the National Academies panel concluded.

When it comes to the more sci fi-sounding uses, it's quite possible scientists will learn how to perform germline editing in five to 10 years, said panel co-chair Richard Hynes of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Safety is one reason for caution, he said, as scientists will have to learn whether editing one gene has unwanted downstream effects.

Some critics argue that families plagued by inherited diseases already have other alternatives — adopt, use donated eggs, or undergo in vitro fertilization and discard resulting embryos that inherit the bad gene. But Charo noted that sometimes parents carry two copies of a lethal gene, guaranteeing any children inherit it. Others oppose the discarding of embryos for religious reasons.

For some families, "you can see there would be strong arguments for doing it" if the other criteria are met, said Robin Lovell-Badge of Britain's Francis Crick Institute.

Some countries prohibit any germline editing research. Others, such as Britain, allow laboratory research with genome editing in embryos, not for pregnancy but to understand human development.

In the U.S., scientists can perform laboratory embryo research only with private, not government, funding. Any attempt at pregnancy would require permission from the Food and Drug Administration, which is currently prohibited from using federal funds to review any such request.

"The bottom line is there is no planetary government with enforcement power," Charo noted Tuesday.

Yellen: Expect Fed to resume raising rates in coming months

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER, AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen pointed Tuesday to a solid U.S. job market and economy and said the Fed will likely resume raising interest rates in the next few months. But with uncertainties surrounding President Donald Trump's proposals, Yellen said the Fed still wants to keep assessing the economy.

Testifying to a Senate committee, Yellen noted that Fed officials forecast in December that they would raise rates three times in 2017. That would mark an acceleration from 2015 and 2016, when they boosted rates once each year.

"Precisely when we would take an action, whether it is March, or May or June ... I can't tell you which meeting it would be," Yellen said in response to a question. "I would say that every meeting is live."

Though Yellen didn't rule out a rate hike at the Fed's next meeting in mid-March, most economists and investors think the next one will occur in June.

Until then, the details of Trump's ambitious proposals — for tax cuts for individuals and businesses, greater spending on infrastructure projects, changes to trade deals and a relaxation of regulations — could remain hazy.

"With the uncertainty over fiscal policy likely to last for at least another few months, that means the Fed will probably be on hold until June," said Paul Ashworth, chief U.S. economist at Capital Economics.

Other analysts say they think that while three Fed rate hikes will occur in 2017, all of them may happen in the second half of the year.

In her first congressional appearance since Trump took office, Yellen avoided making critical observations of the president's economic ideas. During the campaign, Trump was at times harshly dismissive of Yellen. At one point, he had declared that she should be "ashamed of herself" for, in his view, keeping rates low to favor Democrats.

In her remarks, Yellen did caution that any economic initiatives that significantly swell long-term budget deficits would likely slow growth. But she offered support for part of Trump's agenda: His efforts to make it easier for smaller banks to lend, in part by liberating them from some rules imposed by the Dodd-Frank financial overhaul law. She said the Fed has been trying to ease the regulatory burden on community banks and is open to doing more.

Yellen said the Fed's interest rate policies would evolve, in part, from how spending and tax changes enacted by Congress affect economic growth. Right now, she said, "it's too early to know what policy changes will be put in place or how their economic effects will unfold."

Trump has argued that his economic initiatives can achieve his goal of doubling annual economic growth to 4 percent, up from the tepid 2 percent pace that's prevailed since the Great Recession ended in 2009. Most economists say 4 percent annual growth is unrealistic given the nation's slow-growing population and weak worker productivity growth.

Trump's new Treasury secretary, Steven Mnuchin, told reporters Tuesday that "there is a tradition of the secretary of the Treasury having ongoing meetings with the head of the Federal Reserve, and I look forward to that now that I am in office, doing that and spending time with her."

In her testimony Tuesday — the first of two days marking her semiannual report to Congress on interest rate policy — Yellen reiterated that she plans to serve the final year of her four-year term as Fed chair, which ends next February. She will testify to the House Financial Services Committee on Wednesday.

Trump has the opportunity to fill three vacancies on the Fed's seven-member policymaking board after Daniel Tarullo, a board member who was guiding the Fed's regulatory efforts, announced Friday that he would resign this spring.

Yellen told senators that she looked forward to working with new members of the Fed board. She said Fed officials still think rate hikes can occur at a gradual pace. But she cautioned, as she has in the past, that "waiting too long to remove accommodation would be unwise, potentially requiring the (Fed) to eventually raise rates rapidly, which could risk disrupting financial markets and pushing the economy into recession."

After Flynn resigns, Dems ask what did Trump know and when

By RICHARD LARDNER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The resignation of National Security Adviser Michael Flynn elicited a simple but persistent question Tuesday from congressional Democrats: What did President Donald Trump know and when did he know it?

But many Republicans brushed past this echo of Watergate and another Republican president, Richard Nixon, to maintain that no special investigation was warranted and the existing Republican-led committees will handle the probe, mostly in private.

After Flynn stepped down late Monday following reports he misled Vice President Mike Pence about contacts with a Russian diplomat, Democrats demanded the formation of an independent, bipartisan panel to examine possible links between the Trump administration and Russia, including when the president learned Flynn had discussed U.S. sanctions with a Russian diplomat.

This latest push builds on an earlier call by Democrats for an independent inquiry into Moscow's meddling in the 2016 election to help Trump beat Democrat Hillary Clinton.

"The American people deserve to know the full extent of Russia's financial, personal and political grip on President Trump and what that means for our national security," House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi said in a statement.

At issue is whether Flynn broke diplomatic protocol and potentially the law by discussing U.S. sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the U.S., Sergey Kislyak, before Trump's inauguration. The sanctions were imposed in December by former President Barack Obama after U.S. intelligence reported that Russia had interfered in the presidential election.

"Who knew about this and when? Did the president know and when did he know it? Did others at Trump transition team authorize conversations about sanctions?" asked Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., the No. 2 House Democrat. "After the White House was informed, who made the decision to allow Flynn to continue to serve despite the fact he misled the administration?"

Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri, the top Democrat on the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said the Trump administration ought to want a "public airing" of Flynn's actions and the Russian government's attempts to influence the American political system.

"The questions are so numerous and it's really hard to get past them and begin to look infrastructure or tax reform or even confirming a Supreme Court nominee," McCaskill said.

House Speaker Paul Ryan said Flynn made the right decision to step down. But Ryan sidestepped questions about whether an inquiry is warranted.

"I'm not going to prejudge any of the circumstances surrounding this until we have all of the information," the Wisconsin Republican said.

Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah, the Republican chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee, said "the situation has taken care of itself" when asked by reporters if his panel would investigate Flynn's actions.

"Sounds like he did the right thing, he didn't want to be a distraction," Chaffetz said of Flynn. "And it was getting to be a distraction."

Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Calif., the chairman of the House Intelligence committee, said he intended to ask the FBI how details from Flynn's conversation with Kislyak were disclosed to reporters.

"I'm just shocked that nobody's covering the real crime here," Nunes said. "You have an American citizen who had his phone call recorded and then leaked to the media."

Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., the Senate Intelligence Committee chairman, said his panel will "continue to do aggressive oversight" behind closed doors. "We don't do that in public," he said.

But Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, the Republican chairman of Foreign Relations Committee, said Congress needs to do "whatever it takes" to resolve questions about "Russia's relationship" to the 2016 presidential election.

"This is going to go on forever if we don't address it," Corker said.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said he wants to know if Flynn initiated the conversations with Kislyak or if he was directed to make contact with the ambassador. He said Republicans would be "pretty upset" if after being elected former President Barack Obama had reached out to Iran or Iraq to change Bush administration policies.

"The one-president-at-a-time policy I think has served the country well," Graham said. "The idea that (Flynn) did this on his own without any direction is a good question to ask."

Republican Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Flynn's resignation "is a troubling indication of the dysfunction of the current national security apparatus."

"General Flynn's resignation also raises further questions about the Trump administration's intentions toward Vladimir Putin's Russia, including statements by the president suggesting moral equivalence between the United States and Russia despite its invasion of Ukraine, annexation of Crimea, threats to our NATO allies, and attempted interference in American elections," McCain said in a statement.

Associated Press writers Alan Fram and Erica Werner contributed to this report.

Follow Richard Lardner on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/rplardner>

Flynn, fired once by a president, now removed by another

By STEPHEN BRAUN and ROBERT BURNS, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fired by one American commander in chief for insubordination, Michael Flynn has now been removed by another.

The White House said Tuesday that President Donald Trump asked for the resignation of his national security adviser, a hard-charging, feather-ruffling retired lieutenant general who just three weeks into the new administration had put himself in the center of a controversy. Flynn resigned late Monday.

At issue was Flynn's contact with Moscow's ambassador to the United States. Flynn and Ambassador Sergey Kislyak appear to have discussed U.S. sanctions late last year, raising questions about whether he was freelancing on foreign policy while President Barack Obama was still in office and whether he misled Trump officials about the calls.

The center of a storm is a familiar place for Flynn. His military career ended when Obama dismissed him as defense intelligence chief. Flynn claimed he was pushed out for holding tougher views than the Obama administration about Islamic extremism. But a former senior U.S. official who worked with Flynn said the firing was for insubordination, after the Army lieutenant general failed to follow guidance from superiors.

Once out of government, he disappeared into the murky world of mid-level defense contractors and international influence peddlers. He shocked his former colleagues a little more than a year later by appearing at a Moscow banquet headlined by Russian President Vladimir Putin. Given a second chance by Trump, Flynn, a lifelong if apolitical Democrat, became a trusted and eager confidant of the Republican candidate, joining anti-Hillary Clinton campaign chants of "Lock Her Up" and tweeting that "Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL."

As national security adviser, Flynn required no Senate confirmation vote or public vetting of his record, and his tenure was brief but turbulent.

The Washington Post and other U.S. newspapers, citing current and former U.S. officials, reported last week that Flynn made explicit references to U.S. sanctions on Russia in conversations with Kislyak. One of the calls took place on Dec. 29, the day Obama announced new penalties against Russia's top intelligence agencies over allegations they meddled in the U.S. election process to help Trump win.

While it's not unusual for incoming administrations to have discussions with foreign governments before taking office, the repeated contacts just as the U.S. was pulling the trigger on sanctions suggests Trump's team might have helped shape Russia's response. They also contradicted denials about such discussions of the sanctions by several Trump administration officials, including Vice President Mike Pence.

Flynn later backed off his adamant denials. On Friday, he said he "no recollection" of discussing sanc-

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tions policy but "can't be certain," according to an official, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly on the matter and demanded anonymity.

He apologized to Pence, who, apparently relying on Flynn's denials, vouched for him on television. In his resignation letter, Flynn said he held numerous calls with the Russian ambassador to the U.S. during the transition and gave "incomplete information" about those discussions to Pence.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer said Tuesday that Trump requested Flynn's resignation because of an erosion of trust.

INSUBORDINATION:

Flynn's sparkling military resume had included key assignments at home and abroad, and high praise from superiors.

The son of an Army veteran of World War II and the Korean war, Flynn was commissioned as a second lieutenant in May 1981 after graduating from the University of Rhode Island. He started in intelligence, eventually commanding military intelligence units at the battalion and then brigade level. In the early years of the Iraq war, he was intelligence chief for Joint Special Operations Command, the organization in charge of secret commando units like SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force. He then led intelligence efforts for all U.S. military operations in the Middle East and then took up the top intelligence post on the Joint Staff in the Pentagon.

Ian McCulloh, a Johns Hopkins data science specialist, became an admirer of Flynn while working as an Army lieutenant colonel in Afghanistan in 2009. At the time, Flynn ran intelligence for the U.S.-led international coalition in Kabul and was pushing for more creative approaches to targeting Taliban networks, including use of data mining and social network analysis, according to McCulloh.

"He was pushing for us to think out of the box and try to leverage technology better and innovate," McCulloh said, crediting Flynn for improving the effectiveness of U.S. targeting. "A lot of people didn't like it because it was different."

It was typical of the determined, though divisive, approach Flynn would adopt at the Defense Intelligence Agency, which provides military intelligence to commanders and defense policymakers. There, he quickly acquired a reputation as a disruptive force. While some applauded Flynn with forcing a tradition-bound bureaucracy to abandon old habits and seek out new, more effective ways of collecting and analyzing intelligence useful in the fight against extremist groups, others saw his efforts as erratic and his style as prone to grandstanding.

In the spring of 2014, after less than two years on the job, he was told to pack his bags.

According to Flynn's telling, it was his no-nonsense approach to fighting Islamic extremist groups that caused the rift.

A former senior Obama administration official who was consulted during the deliberations disputed that account. Flynn was relieved of his post for insubordination after failing to follow guidance from superiors, including James Clapper, Obama's director of national intelligence, said the official, who asked for anonymity to discuss personnel matters.

CIVILIAN LIFE:

Plunged into civilian life for the first time in 33 years, Flynn moved quickly to capitalize on his military and intelligence world connections and experience. He did so in an unorthodox way.

"I didn't walk out like a lot of guys and go to big jobs in Northrup Grumman or Booz Allen or some of these other big companies," Flynn told Foreign Policy magazine in 2015.

Instead, he opened his own consulting firm, Flynn Intelligence Group, in Alexandria, Va. He brought in his son, Michael G. Flynn as a top aide, and began assembling a crew of former armed forces veterans with expertise in cyber, logistics and surveillance, and sought out ties with lesser-known figures and companies trying to expand their profiles as contractors in the military and intelligence spheres.

One "team" member listed on the firm's site was James Woolsey, President Bill Clinton's former CIA director. Woolsey briefly joined Flynn on Trump's transition team as a senior adviser, but quit in January.

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Another was lobbyist Robert Kelley.

Kelley proved a central player in the Flynn Group's decision to help a Turkish businessman tied to Turkey's government. At the same time that Flynn was advising Trump on national security matters, Kelley was lobbying legislators on behalf of businessman Ekim Alptekin's firm between mid-September and December last year, lobbying documents show.

It was an odd match. Flynn has stirred controversy with dire warnings about Islam, calling it a "political ideology" that "definitely hides behind being a religion" and accusing Obama of preventing the U.S. from "discrediting" radical Islam. But his alarms apparently didn't extend to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government as it cracked down on dissent and jailed thousands of opponents after a failed coup last summer. Erdogan's power base is among Turkey's conservative Muslim voters and many affected by his crackdown are secularists.

Shortly before Trump's election, Flynn wrote an op-ed saying Turkey needed U.S. support and echoing Erdogan's warnings that a "shady" Turkish Muslim cleric living in Pennsylvania should not be protected by the United States. Erdogan accuses the cleric, Fethullah Gulen, of orchestrating the coup attempt and has requested extradition. Obama officials widely described Turkey's evidence of Gulen's wrongdoing as insufficient.

Alptekin, the businessman, told The Associated Press he met Flynn several times starting last summer. He wouldn't detail their conversations. Alptekin said he met mostly with Kelley, a former chief counsel to a congressional subcommittee, who registered with Congress as a lobbyist for Inovo BV, a company Alptekin established in the Netherlands in 2005. Alptekin also is a member of a Turkish economic relations board run by an Erdogan appointee, though he says he has no official relationship with Turkey's government.

Kelley said Flynn's consulting firm could help "do something about improving the relations between Turkey and the United States," Alptekin told the AP. He said he didn't consider any need for his firm or Kelley to register with the Justice Department as a "foreign agent in this context" because his firm was "not a government entity."

FOREIGN AGENT?

Kelley also was a registered foreign agent for the National Mobilization Force, a Turkish-backed militia fighting the Islamic State group in Syria. Documents filed with the Justice Department show Kelley was paid \$90,000 to "convey the views" of the armed group to Congress, federal officials and the media.

The Justice records do not cite any Kelley affiliation with the Flynn Group. But a December letter from Democratic senators Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., and Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., to top federal intelligence officials raised questions about whether Kelley inappropriately represented the militia on behalf of Flynn's firm, which they said raises "the potential for pressure, coercion, and exploitation by foreign agents."

Several ethics experts also said Flynn's firm should have registered with the Justice Department. "If a foreign entity is lobbying Congress on influencing U.S. policy, they need to file under the foreign agent act," said Lydia Dennett, an investigator with the Project on Government Oversight, a Washington good government group.

Alptekin said Inovo BV paid Flynn's firm "tens of thousands of dollars." Kelley said Flynn's firm made less than \$5,000 for its three months of work on behalf of Alptekin's company when he filed a lobbying termination notice to Congress on Dec. 1.

Kelley and Flynn Intel Group have not responded to multiple calls and emails from the AP. Flynn said in a statement that Kelley provided to Yahoo News in mid-November that "if I return to government service, my relationship with my company will be severed."

The Flynn Intel Group's website no longer operates and AP visits to three northern Virginia locations associated with the firm no longer showed any company activity or identification. Several Flynn Intel Group staffers who worked for the firm and its cyber and flight subsidiaries, FIG Cyber Inc. and FIG Aviation, departed around the November election.

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BLIMP IN A BOX

Flynn had other nontraditional business engagements.

In early 2015, he signed on with the cybersecurity firm Palo Alto Networks as a member of its Public Sector Advisory Council comprising retired military officers working as a "sounding board" to answer "the technology needs of the world's governments."

He advised Conversion Capital, a venture capital firm specializing in tech-oriented investments. He was briefly listed as a board director of GreenZone Systems, a technology firm headed by another Flynn Intel Group partner, Iranian-American investor Bijan Kian.

And then there was Drone Aviation, a firm that makes tethered surveillance drones. Flynn was named vice chairman and a board member in May 2016, and said he would promote the firm's "blimp in a box" concept for military and government use and expand "the role of persistent aerial solutions in the marketplace."

The company later won a \$400,000 Defense Department contract. Drone Aviation paid Flynn a \$36,000 annual salary and awarded him 100,000 shares of restricted stock. He was re-elected to the board after Trump's election but stepped down from the board after being offered his job at the White House.

Another venture was Brainwave Science, a Boston company publicizing its use of "brain fingerprinting," scans that the firm claims can be used to assess a person's honesty. Flynn briefly joined the advisory board in February 2016. The firm's concept is disputed by critics and one adviser left the board after media reports surfaced that he pleaded guilty in 1996 to selling stolen biotech material to Russia's spy agency.

MEETING PUTIN

Like many former military officials, Flynn boosted his profile by appearing on television news and talk shows, including several networks connected to foreign governments. They include Qatar-backed Al Jazeera and RT, the news network aligned with the Russian government. He has said he wasn't paid for the appearances.

But a December 2015 trip to RT's 10th anniversary celebration would put Flynn in some unique company. An RT video from the Moscow event showed Flynn seated next to Putin and rising during a standing ovation following the Russian leader's address.

Flynn has acknowledged being paid for the appearance, but hasn't said who wrote the check or for how much. Flynn's webpage at All American Speakers shows a standard lecture circuit fee in the \$30,000-\$50,000 range.

According to another attendee at the event, Jill Stein, the former Green Party presidential candidate who won 1 percent of the popular vote last November, RT paid for the Moscow event.

Stein told the AP she turned down the network's offer to pay for her transportation and stay at Moscow's Hotel Metropol, where the event was held. "I didn't think it was appropriate for a presidential candidate to take money from a foreign government," she said.

Before dinner, Flynn was interviewed on international issues by an RT personality. He then joined Stein and others at a front table, seated with Putin and an entourage of aides. Stein said she didn't see Flynn and Putin talk privately at the table.

Flynn later told the Post that he had only a brief introduction with Putin. Flynn shrugged off the meeting as "boring."

Still, several Democratic House members have asked if Flynn accepted payment from RT and if that is a violation of the federal Emoluments Clause, which prohibits even retired military officers from accepting direct or indirect payments from foreign governments. The Army said Tuesday it hasn't investigated.

Flynn was both hopeful and skeptical about Russia relations before joining Trump's administration. In his 2016 book "The Field of Fight," Flynn warned that Russia had joined an "enemy alliance" with Iran. But he also talked publicly of Russia as a possible ally with the U.S. in confronting radical Islam.

Lady Gaga, Jimmy Kimmel condemn Texas 'bathroom bill'

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Musicians Lady Gaga and Alicia Keys along with Oscar winner Jennifer Lawrence are among more than 140 artists and celebrities condemning a Texas "bathroom bill" targeting transgender people.

Britney Spears and late-night host Jimmy Kimmel also signed a letter Tuesday criticizing the Republican-backed efforts as a "denial of basic human dignity." The bill would require people to use bathrooms that correspond to the sex on their birth certificate.

It's similar to a North Carolina law that prompted rockers Pearl Jam and Bruce Springsteen to cancel concerts in that state last year.

The Texas bill has yet to receive even a preliminary vote but public pressure is ratcheting up. Last week, the NFL suggested that Texas could be passed over for future Super Bowl sites if the proposal became law.

This story has been corrected to show that the Oscar winner's name is Jennifer Lawrence, not Jessica.

Conservative criticism of pope sparks rally of support

By NICOLE WINFIELD, Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis' top advisers are rallying to his defense amid an unprecedented wave of conservative criticism that represents the biggest challenge to his mercy-over-morals papacy.

In an unusual gesture, the nine cardinals from around the world who advise Francis on running the church made a public show of support for the pope and his teachings this week after posters featuring a scowling Francis appeared around Rome. The posters referenced some perceived heavy-handed moves against conservatives and asked "Where's your mercy?"

And on Tuesday, the Vatican published a book by the Holy See's top canon lawyer fully endorsing Francis' controversial opening to divorced and civilly remarried Catholics — the main bone of contention between the pope and conservative and traditionalist Catholics.

The book's author, Cardinal Francesco Coccopalmerio, said the Vatican bureaucracy and cardinals exist to help and serve the pope. "He knows we love him and we are with him," Coccopalmerio said in an interview with The Associated Press.

He called the anti-pope posters "odious" and "from the point of view of civility and manners, not nice and not condonable."

Conservatives and traditionalists have been wary of Francis ever since he emerged on the loggia of St. Peter's Basilica after his 2013 election without the red velvet cape of his predecessors. More recently, they have been alarmed by his takeover of the Knights of Malta sovereign religious order and the public sidelining of its conservative patron, Cardinal Raymond Burke.

But the conservatives' greatest complaint concerns Francis' 2016 document "The Joy of Love," in which he seemed to open the door to letting divorced and civilly remarried Catholics receive Communion. This sparked heated debate and division within the Catholic Church and led to different interpretations from one parish to the next.

Four conservative cardinals, led by Burke, formally asked Francis to clarify certain questions, or "dubia," raised by the document, but Francis hasn't responded.

Coccopalmerio penned his 51-page book to help explain the text, though he said his was neither a formal response to his four fellow cardinals, nor an official document of the Vatican's legal office. However, his book was published by the Vatican's publishing house at the height of two years of tension over the issue, and was presented Tuesday at a press conference at Vatican Radio.

Church teaching holds that unless divorced and civilly remarried Catholics receive an annulment, or a church decree that their first marriage was invalid, they cannot receive Communion if they are sexually active. Citing Jesus' teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, some conservatives have insisted the teaching is fixed in the Gospel and that the only way these Catholics can receive Communion is to abstain from sex. Progressives have sought wiggle room to balance doctrine with mercy and look at each couple

on a case-by-case basis.

In the book, Coccopalmerio repeats church doctrine and says Francis' text falls squarely within Catholic tradition. But he says sometimes these couples find abstaining from sex "impossible," even if they want to, and should not be denied the sacraments as a result.

"The church therefore, must admit to confession and the Eucharist those faithful who find themselves in illegitimate unions, as long as there are two essential conditions: they want to change their situation, but they cannot act on their desire," he wrote.

Those conditions, he stressed, must be verified by priests and bishops, suggesting that arriving at that decision in one's own conscience isn't enough.

The Rev. Robert Gahl, a moral theologian at the Pontifical Holy Cross University, said Coccopalmerio "has a very broad reading of impossibility" as far as abstaining from sex is concerned. And Gahl said the book, while contributing an authoritative legal voice to the debate, certainly doesn't answer the ambiguities in the pope's document, known by its Latin title "Amoris Laetitia."

"The developing debate will tell, but it seems that Coccopalmerio is advancing an open contradiction for how to read Amoris Laetitia," Gahl said. "And it's to resolve that contradiction that the four cardinals wrote the dubia."

American canon lawyer Edward Peters, an adviser to the Vatican's high court, was more direct. In a blog post, Peters said Coccopalmerio's book represented "more blows upon a swollen bruise" caused by the pope's original document and subsequent liberal interpretations by Maltese and German bishops.

Follow Nicole Winfield at www.twitter.com/nwinfield

Senate confirms former wrestling exec McMahon to lead SBA

By KEVIN FREKING, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a rare display of bipartisanship, the Senate on Tuesday confirmed former wrestling entertainment executive Linda McMahon to lead the Small Business Administration as part of President Donald Trump's cabinet.

The Senate voted 81-19 to confirm McMahon, who helped start and grow World Wrestling Entertainment Inc.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said McMahon will "prioritize growing jobs over growing government bureaucracy."

"In so many states, including mine, that's a welcome change from Washington," McConnell said.

McMahon served as the chief executive officer at WWE before stepping down in 2009 to run for the Senate. She helped WWE grow from about a dozen employees into an enterprise with more than 800.

She lost races in 2010 and 2012, spending nearly \$100 million of her own money on the campaigns, but both of her Democratic opponents from Connecticut — Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy — endorsed her nomination to lead the Small Business Administration.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., said she has opposed several of Trump's Cabinet nominees, but she supported McMahon because she understands the agency plays a vital role in the economy through loans, disaster assistance and educational services. She said McMahon also assured her that it was important to keep the SBA as a separate agency rather than merge it with the Commerce Department, a concept she had once endorsed when running for the Senate.

The Senate has been split mostly along party lines on most of Trump's Cabinet choices. But McMahon breezed through her confirmation hearing, and a Senate panel moved her nomination to the full Senate with a vote of 18-1.

Leading up to the vote for McMahon, the Senate on Monday narrowly approved Steven Mnuchin to serve as the next secretary of the Treasury Department despite strong Democratic objections over a banker they dubbed the "foreclosure king." Later Monday, the Senate also approved David Shulkin to serve as the next secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The McMahon confirmation likely represents a lull before more hotly contested confirmation battles ensue,

most notably that of Andrew Puzder to serve as the next labor secretary. Four Republicans on the Senate panel considering his nomination aren't saying publicly whether they will vote for him.

The SBA is best known for the small business loans it makes and the disaster aid it provides to companies and entrepreneurs. The agency is also tasked with monitoring government officials' compliance with contract laws. Its budget is generally under \$1 billion.

Kremlin, Russian lawmakers play down Flynn's resignation

By NATALIYA VASILYEVA, Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The Kremlin on Tuesday played down the resignation of U.S. National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, a sign that Russia is already looking ahead to talks with the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to improve the nations' strained ties.

Flynn was often perceived as Donald Trump's key contact with Moscow. In 2015, Flynn appeared at a gala dinner for Russia Today, a Kremlin-funded television station, and even sat next to President Vladimir Putin at the event.

Flynn resigned Monday night after conceding that he gave "incomplete information" about his calls with Russia's ambassador to U.S. officials.

A U.S. official told The Associated Press that Flynn was in frequent contact with Russian Ambassador Sergey Kislyak on the day that the Obama administration imposed sanctions on Russia after U.S. intelligence reported that Russia had interfered with last year's American election. The Kremlin has confirmed that Flynn has been in contact with Kislyak but denied that they talked about lifting sanctions.

The Russian establishment has not harbored any illusions about the Trump administration's pro-Russia stance for some time now, said Alexei Makarkin at the Moscow-based Center for Political Technologies.

"This infatuation with Trump in Russia is over, and Flynn as a person who has contributed to this infatuation stopped being perceived as a figure who can have a real impact on the U.S. foreign policy," Makarkin said.

The nomination of Tillerson, former chief executive at ExxonMobil, showed the Russians that he, not Flynn, would be doing the negotiating, Makarkin said.

Ties between Moscow and Washington plummeted to post-Cold War lows after Russia annexed Crimea and threw its weight behind separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine in 2014. The United States responded with economic sanctions and visa bans.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refused to comment on Flynn's resignation, saying it's an internal matter for Trump's administration and "none of our business." Asked if Moscow still hopes for its relations with the U.S. to improve, he said it is "too early to say" since "Trump's team has not been shaped yet."

The Kremlin earlier said it was not expecting a breakthrough before the two presidents meet in person. Putin has suggested that could take place in Slovenia, the home nation of Trump's wife, Melania, but added that it will be up to Trump to determine the time and place.

Russia's visibly muted reaction to Flynn's departure comes as Tillerson is set to hold his first meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov later this week. Tillerson, who has sealed multiple deals in Russia and was even decorated with the Russian "Order of Friendship" award, is widely described as a tough negotiator who will not make promises to Russia that he cannot keep.

Still, several senior Russian lawmakers expressed their disappointment over Flynn's resignation on social media.

Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the foreign affairs committee at the Federation Council, said in a Facebook post that firing a national security adviser for his contacts with Russia is "not just paranoia but something even worse."

Kosachev also expressed frustration with the Trump administration. "Either Trump hasn't found the necessary independence and he's been driven into a corner... or Russophobia has permeated the new administration from top to bottom," he wrote.

Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the information committee at the Federation Council, tweeted shortly after the resignation announcement that "it was not Flynn who was targeted but relations with Russia."

By early afternoon, some lawmakers began to retract their original indignant comments, in line with the restrained tone taken by the Kremlin.

Leonid Slutsky, chairman of the foreign affairs committee at the State Duma, first described Flynn's departure as a "negative signal" for Russia-U.S. relations, but two hours later switched to more moderate language, stressing that it "cannot fundamentally influence Russia-U.S. ties."

Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policies, a group of Russian foreign policy experts, told the RIA Novosti news agency that it's not yet clear what impact Flynn's resignation may have.

"There's nothing to influence yet, there are no relations as such. Our countries have relations shaped by the former administration, which were awful, and Trump was going to change that," he said.

Yet Trump's first telephone call with Putin last month demonstrated that Trump did not have anything to offer to Russia immediately, Makarkin said.

"It has led to a realization that if Flynn wanted to promote better ties with Russia, he would not have the real chance to," he said.

[—]This story corrects the title of Alexei Pushkov to chairman of the information committee at the Federation Council.

Voters await economic revival in a part of pro-Trump America

By **CLAIRE GALOFARO, Associated Press**

PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, Wis. (AP) — She tugged 13 envelopes from a cabinet above the stove, each one labeled with a different debt: the house payment, the student loans, the vacuum cleaner she bought on credit.

Lydia Holt and her husband tuck money into these envelopes with each paycheck to whittle away at what they owe. They both earn about \$10 an hour and, with two kids, there are usually some they can't fill. She did the math; at this rate, they'll be paying these same bills for 87 years.

In 2012, Holt voted for Barack Obama because he promised her change, but she feels that change hasn't reached her here. So last year she chose a presidential candidate unlike any she'd ever seen, the billionaire businessman who promised to help America, and people like her, win again.

Many of her neighbors did, too — so many that for the first time in more than 30 years, Crawford County, Wisconsin, a sturdy brick in the once-mighty Big Blue Wall, abandoned the Democratic Party and that wall crumbled. The rural county lent Donald Trump 3,844 votes toward his win. More came from formerly blue counties to the north and to the south, and on and on. Some 50 counties stretching 300 miles down the Mississippi River — through Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois — transformed in one election season into Trump Country.

They voted for Trump for an array of reasons, and the list of grievances they hope he now corrects is long and exacting: stagnant wages, the cost of health care, a hard-to-define feeling that things are not getting better, at least not for people like them.

Here in Crawford County, residents often recite two facts about their hometown, the first one proudly: It is the second-oldest community in the state. The next is that it's also one of the poorest.

There are no rusted-out factories to embody this discontent. The main street of Prairie du Chien butts up to the Mississippi River and bustles with tourists come summer. Pickup trucks crowd parking lots at the 3M plant and Cabela's distribution center where hundreds work. Just a few vacant storefronts hint at the seething resentment that life still seems harder here than it should.

In this place that astonished America when it helped hand Trump the White House, many of those who chose him greeted the frenetic opening acts of his presidency with a shrug. Immigration is not their top concern, and so they watched with some trepidation as Trump signed orders to build a wall on the Mexican border and bar immigrants from seven Muslim countries, sowing chaos around the world.

Among them is a woman who works for \$10.50 an hour in a sewing factory, who still admires Obama, bristles at Trump's bluster, but can't afford health insurance. And the dairy farmer who thinks Trump is a jerk — "somebody needs to get some Gorilla Glue and glue his lips shut" — but has watched his profits plummet and was willing to take the risk.

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There's a man who owns an engine repair shop and struggles to keep the lights on, and a bartender who cringes when he sees "Made in China" printed on American goods.

There's also Holt, who makes \$400 a week as a lawyer's assistant and whose husband doesn't do much better at a car parts store. She is enthusiastic that Trump started quickly doing the things he said he would, because she worries that by the time their sons grow up there will be nothing left for them here.

In this corner of middle America, in this one, small slice of the nation that sent Trump to Washington, they are watching and they are waiting, their hopes pinned on his promised economic renaissance. And if four years from now the change he pledged hasn't found them here, the people of Crawford County said they might change again to someone else.

Katherine Cramer, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, coined a name for what's happened in her state's rural pockets: the politics of resentment.

She spent years traveling to small towns and talking to people at diners and gas stations. And when she asked which political party best represented them, their answers almost always sounded something like, "Are you crazy lady? Neither party is representing people around here."

"People have been looking for a politician who is going to change that, going to listen to them, do it differently," she said. "People a lot of times don't have specifics about what that means. They just know that however government is operating currently is not working for them."

In Crawford County, with just 16,000 residents, that dissatisfaction stems from feeling left behind as other places prospered.

There are plenty of jobs in retail or on factory floors, but it's hard to find one that pays more than \$12 an hour. Ambitious young people leave and don't come back. Rural schools are dwindling, and with them a sense of pride and purpose.

Still, much of the economic anxiety is based not on measurable decay, but rather a perception that life is decaying, said Jim Bowman, director of the county's Economic Development Corporation.

There are higher-paying jobs — in welding, for example — but companies can't find enough workers with the right training, Bowman said. The county's \$44,000-a-year median household income is \$9,000 less than the state's, but the cost of living is lower, too.

Just 15 percent of adults have college degrees, half the national average, and yet the ratio of people living in poverty is below the country as a whole.

Crawford County and all the other places in the county cluster along the Mississippi River that switched from Obama to Trump rank roughly in the middle on a scale of American comfort in one economic think tank's county-by-county appraisal of community distress.

Yet for many here, it doesn't feel that way.

"If you ask anybody here, we'll all tell you the same thing: We're tired of living like this. We've been railroaded, run over by the politicians and run over by laws," said Mark Berns, leaning through the service window in the small-engine repair shop downtown that he can barely keep open anymore. He drives a 14-year-old truck with 207,000 miles on it because he doesn't make enough profit to buy a new one.

Berns watched Trump's first days in office half-hopeful, half-frightened.

"He jumps on every bandwagon there is. It's a mess," he said, bemoaning what he described as a quantity-over-quality, "sign, sign, sign" approach to governing. "I just hope we get the jobs back and the economy on its feet, so everybody can get a decent job and make a decent living, and have that chance at the American dream that's gone away over the past eight or 10 years.

"I'm still optimistic," he said, sighing. "I hope I'm not wrong."

Marlene Kramer gets to work before the sun comes up and spends her days sitting at a sewing machine, stitching sports uniforms for \$10.50 an hour.

Kramer, who voted twice for Obama, used to watch Trump on "Celebrity Apprentice." "I said to myself, 'Ugh, I can't stand him.'" When he announced his candidacy, she thought it was a joke. "Then my husband

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said to me, 'Just think, everything he touches seems to turn to money.'" And she changed her mind.

She's 54, and she's worked since she was 14, all hard jobs: feeding cows, pulling weeds, standing all day on factory floors. Now it's the sewing shop, where she's happy and gets to sit. But there's no health insurance.

Her bosses, brothers Todd and Scott Yeomans, opened the factory 12 years ago. They said they're trying to do the right thing by making sportswear with American-made fabrics and American labor. But they compete against factories overseas.

They'd like to offer insurance. The other day, a trusted worker quit for a job with benefits. But they've run the numbers and it would cost \$200,000 a year — far more than they can spend.

Kramer said she's glad the Affordable Care Act has helped millions get insurance, but it hasn't helped her.

She and her husband were stunned to find premiums over \$1,000 a month. Her daughter recently moved into their house with her five children, so there's no money to spare. They opted to pay the penalty of \$2,000, and pray they don't get sick until Trump, she hopes, keeps his promise to replace the law with something better.

Kramer thinks Obama did as good a job as he could in the time he had. She admires him, still, but went with Trump. That doesn't seem incongruous to her, just a simple calculation of results.

"His things aren't going the way we want them here," she said, "so we needed to go in another direction."

Across town, Robbo Coleman leaned over the bar he tends and described a similar political about-face. He held up an ink pen, wrapped in plastic stamped "Made in China."

"I don't see why we can't make pens in Prairie du Chien or in Louisville, Kentucky, or in Alabama or wherever," said Coleman. "Trump brought something to the table that I haven't heard or seen before. And if it doesn't turn out, then, hey, at least we tried."

Coleman doesn't love Trump's moves to build a wall or ban certain immigrants — all Americans descended from immigrants, he said, including his own relatives, who migrated from Germany too many generations ago to count. But he's frustrated that other politicians stopped listening to working people like him.

"We've got to give him some time," he said of Trump. "He's not Houdini."

Even some rural Wisconsin Democrats agreed with Coleman's assessment, and think their party's leaders are among those who stopped paying attention to those just trying to get by. On the same day that Trump took the oath of office, a group of them huddled in the back room of a tavern, still trying to grasp how the election went awry.

Bob Welsh met Hillary Clinton at a rope line in Iowa and asked her to visit Wisconsin. But she didn't come a single time during her campaign against Trump, and Welsh thinks that confirmed in the minds of many that Democrats are disinterested in white working people.

Welsh wears flannel shirts and suspenders. He grew up on a farm, worked as a herdsman, and drove a school bus until he was 76 years old. He's 78 now, and knows his neighbors as kind, hard-working people, and could barely believe they voted for a man he finds reprehensible. But the left-right, blue-red vitriol that has cleaved apart the country has not left the same scars here, where wives reported not knowing how their own husbands voted and husbands said they never asked their wives.

Welsh said he hopes Trump finds a way to keep his promise to build his friends better lives.

"If he does that then he'll change my mind," he said. "And I'll be the first to admit it."

Bernard Moravits hosed the mud and cow dung off the boots pulled up over his jeans and headed for his truck, to drive to town to talk to a banker about keeping his farm afloat.

Moravits — everyone calls him Tinker — works on his farm outside of town at least 12 hours every day, and usually a lot longer. He diversified to minimize risk and has dairy and beef cows, and acre after acre of corn, beans, alfalfa.

"You don't hit a home run that way, but you don't get your ass kicked either," he said. "But this year could be the ass-kicking year."

The price of milk and agricultural goods has plummeted, and it's hard to keep things running.

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Change is what he looked to Obama for and now expects from Trump. He wants the president to reduce red tape and renegotiate trade deals to benefit American farmers. And he hopes people make more money and spend more money, which eventually trickles down to him.

"I think he's a shrewd businessman," he said. "He's been broke several times. He keeps bouncing back, and he knows how big business works."

He has several choice words for Trump's move to build "his stupid wall." Moravits employs Hispanic workers who have been with him 15 years. He built them apartments. He trusts them to do a dirty, difficult job that he says white people aren't willing to do.

"A lot of people don't treat them like people," he grumbled.

Unlike many transfixed by Trump's presidency, Moravits doesn't stay up-to-the-minute on the news. In the morning, he checks the agriculture prices and the weather. As protests over Trump's immigration ban raged for days, Moravits wasn't paying attention.

"The play-by-play don't mean bullshit," he said. "It's like watching the Super Bowl. What counts is how it ends."

He took over this farm at 18 years old, when his father died of an aneurysm while milking cows. He said he plans to die here, too. He'll retire when "they close the casket lid."

But if nothing changes and changes soon he might have to borrow against his equity.

Moravits isn't sure Trump is going to "Make America Great Again" for farmers. But he feels he had to take the gamble.

"He might have us in a war in two weeks," he said. "We'll come back here in six months, drink a 30-pack of Busch Light and talk, because no one knows now what's gonna happen."

He laughed, then shrugged and pantomimed rolling the dice.

AP data journalist Angeliki Kastanis contributed to this report.

Boeing vote tells next chapter in Southern unionization

By MEG KINNARD, Associated Press

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C. (AP) — Nearly 3,000 production workers at Boeing's South Carolina plant are deciding whether they want to unionize, writing the next chapter in efforts to organize labor in large manufacturing plants across the South.

The first round of voting began early Wednesday. A second round of voting was set for Wednesday afternoon to accommodate all the employees.

If successful, the balloting on whether employees should join the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers would send a significant message to politicians both in the region and Washington that workers here are demanding the same protections and benefits as their colleagues in other areas. And, to the leaders trying to recruit businesses by promoting their states' lack of union presence, it'd make their jobs more difficult.

But this most recent test of Southern acceptance of collective bargaining movements is an uphill battle for the union and its backers. The global aviation giant, which came to South Carolina in part because of the state's minuscule union presence, did so with the aid of millions of dollars in state assistance made possible by officials who spoke out frequently and glowingly with anti-union messages.

"It is an economic development tool," Gov. Nikki Haley, now President Donald Trump's ambassador to the United Nations, said in a 2012 address of how she sold companies on why they should come to the state. "We'll make the unions understand full well that they are not needed, not wanted and not welcome in the state of South Carolina."

At least that part of the tactic has worked. While some South Carolina workers have representation — just more than 1,900, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' 2016 figures — most don't. Other major manufacturers in the state, including BMW and Michelin, aren't unionized or haven't experienced major campaigns to do so. The Machinists initially petitioned for a vote at Boeing in 2015 but withdrew

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the request because of what the union called a toxic atmosphere and political interference.

Southern states for decades have recruited manufacturers by promising freedom from the influences of labor unions, which except for some textile mills have been historically rejected by workers as collective action culturally foreign to a South built around family farms, said Jeffrey Hirsch, a law professor who specializes in labor relations at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A successful union vote at Boeing would have a greater impact on the general view of labor in the South than efforts by autoworkers to unionize Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee, as a foothold for organizing other Southern car plants. Anti-union advocates could always cite VW as an aberration since representatives of one of its key unions in Germany hold seats on the company's board of directors, Hirsch said.

"Boeing is very, very different," Hirsch said. "No one will ever accuse Boeing of being pro-union."

A "yes" vote would be meaningful throughout the region, said Daniel Cornfield, sociology professor and labor expert at Vanderbilt University. "Given the dynamism of industrialization in the Southern region now, especially the development ... of the U.S. automotive industry, any type of heavy-industry union victory would certainly inspire other workers in related industrial sectors in the South to think about unionizing."

What strikes Cornfield about the Boeing case is the company's silence over consequences for workers.

"The company has not been threatening to relocate its operations in the event of a unionization," he said. "It is often the case that companies try to relocate outside of the United States to find cheaper labor and avoid U.S. unions altogether."

Boeing already may have abstained from those kinds of threats because of its huge South Carolina plant investment and billions of dollars in federal defense contracts. Threatening to move manufacturing would come after Trump blasted Boeing for its cost of building a new presidential Air Force One for future presidents.

"Costs are out of control," Trump tweeted in early December. "Cancel order!"

Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg met with Trump two weeks later.

"Given the recent pronouncements of President Trump about keeping manufacturing in the United States," Cornfield said, "it would be interesting and an ironic twist that President Trump is possibly defanging large corporations in their efforts to resist unionization by encouraging companies to stay in the United States, giving workers a leg up and unions a leg up in the campaign period."

Catherine Templeton, South Carolina's former labor director and successful anti-union lawyer, is no stranger to this fight. When Haley picked Templeton to lead South Carolina's labor department, the governor played up Templeton's union-fighting background and saying she needed her help to "fight the unions" at Boeing.

"They cannot legally deliver higher wages, better benefits or a different working environment. Even if they are promising it, they certainly can't deliver it," Templeton said.

On Monday, in a final gathering before the vote, several hundred Boeing employees gathered in a hotel ballroom just a mile from the Boeing plant, hearing from activists and members of other unions urging them to vote "yes" on Wednesday.

"Suppressing working people is the old way of doing business in South Carolina," Machinists organizer Mike Evans said, to cheers from the crowd. "It's not going to be this way anymore."

Associated Press writer Emery P. Dalesio in Raleigh, North Carolina, contributed to this report.

Kinnard can be reached at <http://twitter.com/MegKinnardAP> . Read more of her work at <http://bigstory.ap.org/content/meg-kinnard/> .

Greek soccer hero helps refugees win battle against boredom

By **THANASSIS STAVRAKIS** and **DEREK GATOPOULOS**, Associated Press

SKARAMANGAS, Greece (AP) — Soccer fans of a certain age may still remember Antonis Nikopolidis for his resemblance to American actor George Clooney and as the goalkeeper who helped Greece become surprise European Champions in 2004.

Now the country's national youth team coach, Nikopolidis is helping refugees stranded in Greece regain

a sense of purpose. The soccer team he helped build, named Hope (Elpida in Greek), is made up of players who fled warzones in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Most of Hope's players live in Skaramangas, an industrial zone west of Athens where metal containers have been turned into shoebox-shaped homes. They compete in an amateur league on Sundays, facing teams made up of lawyers, telecom workers and accountants.

Nikopolidis, a soft-spoken 46-year-old whose hair has turned silver in retirement, says team practices and matches provide a welcome distraction for young men facing uncertain futures in the European Union's slow-moving relocation program.

"We're helping people who are at a difficult moment in their lives," he said. "They are guests in our country, and we are trying with this team to give them a few hours of happiness."

Soccer is the main source of entertainment for many of the 60,000 refugees and economic migrants living in camps around Greece while they wait for asylum applications to be processed and a possible move elsewhere in Europe.

"You have to spend your time (doing something) because it's very boring," Hozafa Hajdepo, 23, a Hope player from Syria, said. "If you stay in your home and you don't have work, you will be like — you will die."

The Union of European Football Associations, the governing body for soccer in Europe, has awarded grants to assist refugees in 15 countries. Some of the money that went to Greece is being used to sponsor Nikopolidis' team, together with a Greek charity called Organization Earth .

Nearly 9,000 refugees have been moved from Greece to other European Union countries, and the coach already has lost several players. But with the pace of relocations still at just over half the target rate, most of the team expects to be in Greece for a while.

"It's a joy for me to do this," Nikopolidis said. "The main thing is that they enjoy it, that they have fun ... We have created a group of friends, with bonds of friendship, a family."

Theodora Tongas and Srdjan Nedeljkovic in Athens contributed. Follow Stavrakis at <http://www.twitter.com/TStavrak> and Gatopoulos at <http://www.twitter.com/dgatopoulos>

New Zealand wildfires prompt hundreds of evacuations

By NICK PERRY, Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Hundreds of people in New Zealand's second-largest city were evacuated from their homes Wednesday as wildfires burned down several houses and threatened to encroach further into some suburbs.

A helicopter pilot who was a decorated soldier died in a crash while fighting the blaze on Tuesday.

The mayors of Christchurch City and the adjacent Selwyn District declared a state of emergency. Selwyn Mayor Sam Broughton said changing winds had made the fires unpredictable.

He said the region had been unusually dry for three years and the grass in the hills had turned brown over the Southern Hemisphere summer.

Smoke and ash were being blown across Christchurch. Broughton said displaced residents were staying at evacuation centers or with relatives.

"They need to look after one another, and make sure they have a place to go to tonight," he said.

Phil Claude told Radio New Zealand he and his family ran down a grass track to escape the fire, which destroyed their home.

"I could see that the smoke and the flames were being blown right up toward our house," he said. "And I just yelled 'Get out. Get out!'"

The Christchurch City Council reported that two or three homes were destroyed Wednesday evening after authorities said a few others were destroyed earlier.

New Zealand's military has been deployed to provide water tankers and engineering equipment as well as firefighters and other personnel.

The helicopter pilot who died while fighting the fire, Cpl. David Steven Askin, won one of the country's

top awards for bravery for his actions in Afghanistan.

Askin was a member of the elite Special Air Service and his identity was kept secret when he won the Gallantry Star medal in 2014. He was cited for efforts that included helping save guests during the 2011 siege of the luxury Inter-Continental Hotel in Kabul that left at least 20 people dead.

"Corporal Askin was wounded by grenade and rifle fire, yet carried on his mission and rescued guests from the hotel as fire broke out," the Defence Force said in a statement.

Column: Silver helps make it a weekend to celebrate for NBA

By TIM DAHLBERG, AP Sports Columnist

The first signal that Adam Silver was more enlightened than the average commissioner came just months into his reign when he broke ranks with other sports leagues by calling for the legalization of sports betting.

Not only that, the NBA commissioner suggested later, but the league wouldn't mind joining in the profits that nationwide legalized betting might bring.

Bold stuff, considering the NBA had for decades been in lockstep with Major League Baseball and the NFL in the belief that sports betting could destroy their empires. While baseball is now coming in line with a new way of thinking, Roger Goodell notably continues to rant about the evils of sports betting.

That Silver is not afraid to tackle social issues is also reflected in the decision to move this weekend's All-Star Game out of Charlotte because of the North Carolina law limiting protections for lesbian, gay and transgender people. Agree with him or not, it's hard to imagine the NFL taking such a stand — especially when it might lose some money because of it.

Three years into his tenure, Silver is on a roll. The NBA Finals last year were the most watched in nearly 20 years, the league has a new national television deal that is ridiculously lucrative, and there is a new agreement with players that guarantees labor peace for at least six years.

Owners are happily counting their growing profits. Players are ecstatic over contracts that could pay them more than \$40 million a year.

To top it off, Silver even managed — at least temporarily — to keep Knicks owner James Dolan from making even more of a fool of himself than he has already in his dustup with former player Charles Oakley.

Good times indeed, as the best players in the league prepare to gather in New Orleans for the All-Star Game that was taken from Charlotte. There's a lot to celebrate for both players and owners in a league that is not only healthy but thriving.

Some of that came about because both players and owners realized only they can kill the golden goose that continues to provide well for both. The new labor agreement signed a few weeks ago ensures that players will continue to get about half of each team's basketball revenue in salaries, while the owners will see their franchises go up in value.

Assuming it runs for the full seven-year length, the NBA will go for at least 13 years without any real labor issues. Revenues keep going up, and both owners and players seem to be satisfied with their share of a pie that keeps getting bigger.

Meanwhile, the NBA is not haunted by concussions like the NFL. It's not tainted by steroids, like baseball. And the entertainment value on the court is at a level probably not seen since Magic Johnson and Larry Bird squared off against each other three decades ago.

Yes, there are still issues to address. Officiating is one of them, in a league where it's difficult to know just what a foul is despite efforts to be more transparent about calls late in games.

Too many teams have no shot year after year at making the playoffs, which themselves have become somewhat predictable. Ticket prices are scary high, and it remains to be seen whether the \$2.6 billion a year television package is sustainable in an era of cord cutting.

It's also hard to give Silver a pat on the back for changing the name of the development league to the NBA Gatorade League and for allowing ads to creep onto uniform fronts. And while Silver wants to be out front on the sports betting issue, there is still no one outside of Nevada legally betting on NBA games and no indication that will happen anytime soon.

But the NBA seems to be in good hands in a commissioner who learned a lot working under his predecessor, David Stern. That was evident on Monday when Silver moved quickly to get Oakley and Dolan in his office and, with an assist from Hall of Famer Michael Jordan, thrashed out a detente of sorts between the former player and the Knicks owner.

As NBA problems go, the spat between Oakley and Dolan was more of a sideshow than anything. Both bear some blame for the altercation, though it was Dolan who escalated it by issuing a ban on Oakley attending Knicks games and suggesting that he had anger issues or alcohol problems.

It could have been another distraction at the All-Star Game that no one wanted. But Silver moved quickly to make sure it wasn't, just as he moved quickly to move the game from Charlotte when it became clear the law was not going to be changed.

This weekend, the focus will be on the best players in the world, as it should always be.

But forgive the commissioner if he's called to take a little bow, too.

Tim Dahlberg is a national sports columnist for The Associated Press. Write to him at tdahlberg@ap.org or <http://twitter.com/timdahlberg>

Most Asian markets higher after new Wall Street high

By **JOE McDONALD, AP Business Writer**

BEIJING (AP) — Most Asian stock markets rose Tuesday after U.S. stock indexes hit a new high and the American central bank chief said it could raise interest rates as early as next month.

KEEPING SCORE: Tokyo's Nikkei 225 index rose 1.2 percent to 19,473.50 and the Shanghai Composite Index advanced 0.3 percent to 3,228.00. Hong Kong's Hang Seng gained 0.9 percent to 23,919.83 and Sydney's S&P-ASX 200 rose 0.9 percent to 5,809.50. Seoul's Kospi added 0.4 percent to 2,093.64. Benchmarks in New Zealand, Taiwan and most Southeast Asian markets rose, while Malaysia retreated.

WALL STREET: U.S. stock indexes hit new highs, boosted by bank stocks on hopes of bigger profits ahead. General Motors jumped 4.8 percent following news that France's PSA Group, maker of Peugeot and Citroen cars, is exploring a deal to buy Opel, GM's money-losing European business. Cynosure, which makes devices used in laser body contouring, hair removal and skin care, soared after agreeing to be bought by medical device maker Hologic for \$1.57 billion. The Standard & Poor's 500 index rose 0.4 percent to 2,337.58 for its sixth straight day of gains. The Dow Jones industrial average rose 0.5 percent to 20,504.41. The Nasdaq composite rose 0.3 percent to 5,782.57.

FED WATCH: Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen told a Senate committee the central bank could raise interest rates as soon as next month. Bond yields jumped and fed through to shares of banks, which can benefit from higher rates by charging more for loans. Yellen said little to alter most investors' expectations. The Fed raised interest rates in December for just the second time in a decade, and Yellen said the strengthening job market and a modest move higher in inflation should warrant continued, gradual increases.

ANALYST'S TAKE: Yellen's comments were "the main catalyst for overnight markets, evidently surprising on the hawkish side," said Jingyi Pan of IG in a report. "While the market had expected a strong rhetoric on improving economic conditions, the push to hasten the next rate hike had been unexpected." Based on history, markets put the likelihood of a policy change out of the Fed's March meeting at 34 percent, Pan said, "but that had not stopped the U.S. dollar and equity markets from ticking up."

CHINA INFLATION: Chinese consumer and wholesale inflation ticked higher, fueling concern the central bank might hike rates or tighten access to credit. Analysts said they saw no sign the People's Bank of China would change course but money market rates should be elevated this year. Policymakers have indicated a "tightening bias" for policy since late last year but December and January data on credit "clearly show that there has been no meaningful monetary and credit tightening at the macro level," said UBS economists in a report.

CURRENCY: The dollar gained to 114.33 yen from Tuesday's 114.31 yen. The euro edged up to \$1.0581

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from \$1.0571.

ENERGY: Benchmark U.S. crude sank 32 cents to \$52.87 per barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The contract gained 27 cents on Tuesday to \$53.20. Brent crude, used to price international oils, lost 29 cents to \$55.68 in London. It advanced 38 cents the previous session to \$55.97.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 15, the 46th day of 2017. There are 319 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 15, 1867, "On the Beautiful Blue Danube," a waltz by Johann Strauss (the Younger), was publicly performed for the first time by the Vienna Men's Choral Society, garnering a polite, if decidedly less than enthusiastic, audience response. (A revised orchestral version proved much more successful.)

On this date:

In 1764, the site of present-day St. Louis was established by Pierre Laclede and Auguste Chouteau.

In 1898, the U.S. battleship Maine mysteriously blew up in Havana Harbor, killing more than 260 crew members and bringing the United States closer to war with Spain.

In 1933, President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt escaped an assassination attempt in Miami that mortally wounded Chicago Mayor Anton J. Cermak; gunman Giuseppe Zangara was executed more than four weeks later.

In 1942, the British colony Singapore surrendered to Japanese forces during World War II.

In 1952, a funeral was held at Windsor Castle for Britain's King George VI, who had died nine days earlier.

In 1961, 73 people, including an 18-member U.S. figure skating team en route to the World Championships in Czechoslovakia, were killed in the crash of a Sabena Airlines Boeing 707 in Belgium.

In 1967, the rock band Chicago was founded by Walter Parazaider, Terry Kath, Danny Seraphine, Lee Loughnane (LOK'-nayn), James Pankow and Robert Lamm; the group originally called itself The Big Thing.

In 1971, Britain and Ireland "decimalised" their currencies, making one pound equal to 100 new pence instead of 240 pence.

In 1982, 84 men were killed when a huge oil-drilling rig, the Ocean Ranger, sank off the coast of Newfoundland during a fierce storm.

In 1989, the Soviet Union announced that the last of its troops had left Afghanistan, after more than nine years of military intervention.

In 1992, a Milwaukee jury found that Jeffrey Dahmer was sane when he killed and mutilated 15 men and boys. (The decision meant that Dahmer, who had already pleaded guilty to the murders, would receive a mandatory life sentence for each count; Dahmer was beaten to death in prison in 1994.)

In 2002, a private funeral was held at Windsor Castle for Britain's Princess Margaret, who had died six days earlier at age 71.

Ten years ago: National Guardsmen in Humvees ferried food, fuel and baby supplies to hundreds of motorists stranded for nearly a day on a 50-mile stretch of Interstate 78 in eastern Pennsylvania because of a monster storm. The U.S. Mint unveiled the new presidential \$1 coin. Oscar-winning songwriter Ray Evans died in Los Angeles at age 92.

Five years ago: Congressional negotiators sealed an agreement on legislation to renew a payroll tax cut for 160 million workers and jobless benefits for millions more. In defiant swipes at its foes, Iran said it was dramatically closer to mastering the production of nuclear fuel even as the U.S. weighed tougher pressure on the Tehran government.

One year ago: President Barack Obama opened a meeting in Rancho Mirage, California, of leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, calling the landmark gathering on U.S. soil a reflection of his personal commitment to an enduring partnership with the diverse group of countries. Taylor Swift's "1989" brought the singer her second Grammy Award win for album of the year; Mark Ronson and Bruno Mars

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earned top record for "Uptown Funk," while Ed Sheeran won song of the year for "Thinking Out Loud." Vanity, a Prince protege who renounced her sexy stage persona to become a Christian minister, died in Fremont, California at age 57. Her real name was Denise Matthews.

Today's Birthdays: Former Illinois Congressman John Anderson is 95. Actress Claire Bloom is 86. Author Susan Brownmiller is 82. Songwriter Brian Holland is 76. Rock musician Mick Avory (The Kinks) is 73. Jazz musician Henry Threadgill is 73. Actress-model Marisa Berenson is 70. Actress Jane Seymour is 66. Singer Melissa Manchester is 66. Actress Lynn Whitfield is 64. "Simpsons" creator Matt Groening (GREE'ning) is 63. Model Janice Dickinson is 62. Actor Christopher McDonald is 62. Reggae singer Ali Campbell is 58. Actor Joseph R. Gannascoli is 58. Musician Mikey Craig (Culture Club) is 57. College and Pro Football Hall of Famer Darrell Green is 57. Actor/comedian Steven Michael Quezada (TV: "Breaking Bad") is 54. Country singer Michael Reynolds (Pinmonkey) is 53. Actor Michael Easton is 50. Rock musician Stevie Benton (Drowning Pool) is 46. Actress Renee O'Connor is 46. Actress Sarah Wynter is 44. Olympic gold medal swimmer Amy Van Dyken-Rouen is 44. Actress-director Miranda July is 43. Rock singer Brandon Boyd (Incubus) is 41. Rock musician Ronnie Vannucci (The Killers) is 41. Singer-songwriter-musician Conor Oberst (Bright Eyes) is 37. Actress Ashley Lyn Cafagna is 34. Blues-rock musician Gary Clark Jr. is 33. Actress Natalie Morales is 32. Actress Amber Riley is 31.

Thought for Today: "Nothing is mine, I have only nothing but it is enough, it is beautiful and it is all mine." — Katherine Anne Porter, American author (1894-1980).