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Friday, March 3

Webster vs. Milbank at Groton Area Arena, 7 p.m.

MS All State Band at Huron

State Debate at Mitchell

United Methodist: World Day of Prayer. 9:30 a.m. MOMS Group.

Saturday, March 4

MS All State Band in Huron

State Debate in Mitchell

Sunday, March 5

Catholic Parish: Mass at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church at 9 a.m., then at St. Joseph in Turton at 11 a.m.

United Methodist Parish: Worship in Conde at 9 a.m., coffee fellowship time at 10 a.m. and worship in Groton at 11 a.m.

Heaven Bound Ministries in Pierpont: Worship at 10 a.m.

Open Gym for JH-8 from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., and for grades 6-12 from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

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

Ferney, SD

57439



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**

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Midwest Masonry & concrete Pumping

Greg Heilman, owner

405 E 1st Ave., Groton

Greg: 253/929-9137

Mike: 605/492-7041

midwestmasonry1@yahoo.com



Gov. Daugaard Signs Bills Into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Gov. Dennis Daugaard signed the following bills into law on Thursday:

HB 1010 – An Act to authorize the Board of Regents to contract for the construction of the NSU Regional Science Education Center at Northern State University and to make an appropriation therefor.

HB 1013 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding the payment of tuition for members of the South Dakota National Guard and to declare an emergency.

HB 1056 – An Act to authorize law enforcement officers to issue certain citations not signed under oath.

HB 1061 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding consent for correspondence through electronic mail by enrolled customers of portable electronics.

HB 1066 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding permits for the sale of certain trailers, motorcycles, and other vehicles.

HB 1127 – An Act to revise the procedure for a deployed military service member to renew a concealed carry permit.

HB 1136 – An Act to revise certain election recount provisions.

HB 1161 – An Act to repeal the requirement for certain township, municipal, and school district fiscal reports to be submitted to county auditors.

SB 12 – An Act to revise certain provisions administered by the Department of Agriculture related to nursery stock, conservation, forestry, and farm mediation.

SB 13 – An Act to repeal certain provisions concerning potato grades and standards.

SB 21 – An Act to revise certain provisions related to public grain warehouses and grain buyers.

SB 39 – An Act to allow owners to affix vehicle identification numbers on certain trailers.

SB 40 – An Act to revise the start date of driver license suspension, revocation, and disqualification periods.

SB 41 – An Act to revise certain electronic driver license reinstatement requirements.

SB 42 – An Act to revise certain provisions regarding persons requesting an abstract of their own driver operating record.

SB 109 – An Act to provide certain criteria for meeting the ownership requirements for classifying dwellings as owner-occupied property.

THINKING ABOUT HEALTH

By Trudy Lieberman, Rural Health News Service

Readers Ask for Clarifications About Medicare

Over the past few months, these columns have raised plenty of questions about Medicare, present and future, and I've received many responses to those questions from readers. Today's column addresses some of readers' concerns about Medicare, a complicated program.

Q: Why do you refer to Social Security as social insurance? This continues to baffle me just as those who continually refer to SS as a handout. It's not a handout. That money has been taken out of every one of my paychecks since I was 16. This is my money. TF

A: Social insurance is group insurance. Workers pay premiums in exchange for insurance against the loss of wages as the result of disability death, or old age. Because the government manages the insurance, and it is nearly universal, it has historically been labeled social insurance. The writer is correct. Working and paying those insurance contributions entitles him to benefits. The benefits are not a government handout. Social Security is not a welfare program.

Q: I turn 65 this August and need to learn the basics to make informed choices. Is there a website or source you recommend that would give me the basics of Medicare? PH

A: You can start with your local SHIP program, the government funded State Health Insurance Assistance Program <https://www.shiptacenter.org/>, which provides one-on-one counseling and answers questions. Medicare Interactive <https://www.medicareinteractive.org/>, a website sponsored by the Medicare Rights Center, also is helpful as is Medicare's official website, Medicare.gov.

Q: Both Social Security and Medicare are run under FICA, the Federal Insurance Contributions Act, and are not part of the national debt. The government needs to raise premiums for people earning higher incomes. MR

A: Social Security and Medicare's hospital benefits are funded primarily through mandatory premiums known as insurance contributions. Neither Social Security nor Medicare hospital insurance adds a penny to the nation's deficit and debt. One solution for potential Social Security shortfalls is to eliminate the cap on earnings on which Social Security contributions are assessed. For this year the cap is \$127,200. Congress eliminated the cap for Medicare contributions in the early 1990s.

Q: The government has to stop using Medicare funds to pay hospital bills for illegal aliens. They are not covered under Medicare, and the millions and billions of dollars should not be taken from Medicare funds. BC

A: Medicare does not pay for healthcare for undocumented people. Community clinics may offer services. Hospitals may treat them under their charity and uncompensated care programs, but usually try to collect those debts.

Q: Do you have any advice for individuals who will be switching over from Covered California (the state's Obamacare marketplace) to Medicare in the next few months due to a disability? Are there any concerns someone would have before making the changeover? LP

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A: Anyone age 65 and older and first signing up for Part B (which pays for doctors' services and out-patient care) and in some states people with disabilities first signing up for Part B may be able to get a Medigap within the first six months of eligibility for Medicare. After that it depends on your state's rules. Check with your local SHIP program to learn what they are.

Q: I am very happy there's going to be Medicaid reform. I am a dental hygienist who worked in a practice that has seen has many Medicaid patients. Many of these people were illegal. Some couldn't even speak English. I am on the door of seniorhood but LOVE the idea of Medicaid reform. We can save millions, probably billions, by putting people to work who can work. CW

A: The column you refer to discussed Medicare, not Medicaid. The programs are not the same. Medicaid was not designed as a seniors' program, but 20 percent of Medicaid expenditures are for long-term care. The lack of such care for families has meant that Medicaid, a welfare program, has become a long-term care program by default for many middle-income seniors. Congress is considering cuts to both programs that could result in seniors paying a lot more out of pocket.

Q: My husband and I are hoping this administration doesn't ruin this program by making it private. It has worked very well for a long time and should be left alone. If this program is made too expensive for seniors, the doctors will be seeing far fewer patients. BC

A: It is well known that seniors are risk-averse, meaning they are afraid of big medical bills they can't afford. That explains the popularity of Medigap policies, especially the ones that cover the portion of a doctor's bill that Medicare doesn't pay, in effect giving seniors nearly full coverage. Many in Congress want to change that. Beginning in 2020, insurers will be prohibited from selling those kinds of Medigap policies to people new to the program. (Those who already have such a policy can keep it.) The idea is to make seniors have more skin in the game by paying more for their care as a way to save money for the government.

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Roncalli 62, Groton Area 36

Date: 3/2/2017 Arena: Webster
Time: 7:26 pm City, State: Groton, SD

VISITOR: Aberdeen Roncalli ()

NO	PLAYER	TOT-FG		3-PT		FT		FTA		REBOUNDS			PF	TP	A	TO	BK	S	MIN
		P	FG	FGA	FG	FGA	FT	FTA	OFF	DEF	TOT								
3	Reede,	*	8	15	4	10	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	20	3	1	0	1	24:00
5	Fiedler,	*	6	7	0	0	1	1	3	5	8	4	13	2	2	0	0	0	0:00
22	Cox,	*	2	6	2	4	2	2	0	7	7	3	8	1	1	0	1	1	16:00
32	Morgan,	*	2	6	2	5	1	1	1	3	4	3	7	0	2	0	1	1	16:00
44	Sommers,	*	2	6	1	2	0	1	1	3	4	3	5	6	1	0	0	0	24:00
10	Holzer,		0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8:00
20	Deutch,		3	8	0	0	1	4	4	0	4	2	7	0	2	0	1	1	24:00
24	Gunderson,		0	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8:00
33	Jeme,		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
50	Hammrich,		1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
TEAM REBOUNDS										3	6	9				1			
Team Totals			24	54	9	23	5	9	14	29	43	15	62	12	10	0	4		120

Total FG% - 1st: 13/29 0.448 2nd: 11/25 0.440 Game: 0.444 Deadball Rebounds (1,0)
3-PT FG% - 1st: 6/12 0.500 2nd: 3/11 0.273 Game: 0.391
Total FT% - 1st: 3/5 0.600 2nd: 2/4 0.500 Game: 0.556

HOME: Groton ()

NO	PLAYER	TOT-FG		3-PT		FT		FTA		REBOUNDS			PF	TP	A	TO	BK	S	MIN
		P	FG	FGA	FG	FGA	FT	FTA	OFF	DEF	TOT								
4	Shabazz, Bennett	*	2	10	1	6	0	1	2	2	4	4	5	1	3	0	2	2	16:00
5	Shabazz, Seric	*	3	11	1	7	3	4	1	1	2	0	10	0	0	0	1	1	24:00
12	Schuring, Sean	*	3	10	2	7	0	0	1	7	8	3	8	1	2	0	0	0	16:00
20	Keith, Brandon	*	2	6	1	5	3	4	3	4	7	2	8	1	2	0	0	0	16:00
30	Doeden, Jonny	*	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	8:00
3	Sippel, Anthony		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8:00
10	Lane, Marshall		2	5	0	2	1	4	0	3	3	2	5	0	1	0	0	0	24:00
11	Shabazz, Darien		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
14	Diegel, Treyton		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
22	Guthmiller, Cade		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
24	Wuestewald, Frankie		0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
34	Jones, Austin		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0:00
50	Thorson, Luke		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	8:00
TEAM REBOUNDS										0	1	1				0			
Team Totals			12	45	5	28	7	13	8	19	27	14	36	4	9	0	3		120

Total FG% - 1st: 7/23 0.304 2nd: 5/22 0.227 Game: 0.267 Deadball Rebounds (2,0)
3-PT FG% - 1st: 3/13 0.231 2nd: 2/15 0.133 Game: 0.179
Total FT% - 1st: 2/2 1.000 2nd: 5/11 0.455 Game: 0.538

Technical Fouls: AbR (0)
: groto (0)

OFFICIALS :
ATTENDANCE : 0

SCORE BY PERIODS	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	TOTAL
Aberdeen <u>Roncalli</u>	17	18	13	14	62
Groton	12	7	7	10	36

Last FG: Aberdeen Roncalli 4th-08:00, Groton 4th-08:00
Largest lead: Aberdeen Roncalli by 27 4th-08:00, Groton NONE
Score tied: 2 times, Lead changed: 0 times

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Football Schedule Released

The schedule listed is for 2017, sites will flip for 2018.

NEC	Out-of-state games are noted in Green. Bye weeks are noted in Yellow.
11B	2017 Dates are as follows:
Groton	
Ab Ronc.	Week 0 – Aug 18
@ Ellendale	Week 1 – Aug 25
Sisseton	Week 2 – Sept 1
@ Beresford	Week 3 – Sept 8
Chamberlain	Week 4 – Sept 15
Mo-Po	Week 5 – Sept 22
@ Milbank	Week 6 – Sept 29
d	Week 7 – Oct 6
@ Redfield	Week 8 – Oct 13 (FRI)
	Week 9/Round of 16 Playoffs – Oct 19 (THU)
	Quarterfinal Playoffs – Oct 26 (THU)
	SemiFinal Playoffs – Nov 3 (FRI)
	9-Man Championships: Nov 9 (THU)
	11B & 11AA Championships: Nov 10 (FRI)
	11A & 11AAA Championships: Nov 11 (SAT)

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Highway Patrol Looking for New Troopers

PIERRE, S.D. – Applications are now being accepted for the next trooper class of the South Dakota Highway Patrol.

Deadline to apply for entrance to Recruit Class 60 is March 24. Officials plan to hire a class of new recruits with training to begin later this year. Successful applicants are informed of where they will be stationed prior to accepting their appointment. Certified law enforcement officers are eligible for a hiring incentive.

It takes about a year from the initial application to graduation to become a state trooper. Once selected, recruits who are not currently certified as a law enforcement officer in South Dakota or another state must first attend the 13-week South Dakota Law Enforcement Training Academy in Pierre. The second part of the training is the 10-week South Dakota Highway Patrol Recruit Academy followed by a 10-week field training program.

Currently undergoing training is the 21-member Recruit Class 59. Those new troopers started basic training Nov. 27, 2016. Their graduation ceremony is scheduled for July 21, 2017 in the state Capitol Rotunda.

"This extensive selection process and training program are designed to help us find the best men and women possible," says Col. Craig Price, superintendent of the South Dakota Highway Patrol. "We want those who graduate from the Highway Patrol Recruit Academy to be prepared for any situation."

The trooper application can be found at <http://bhr.sd.gov/workforus/law/hp/default.aspx>. For more information on requirements and the application process, contact Lt. Randi Erickson, director of Training and Professional Standards Division, at 605-773-2231.

The Highway Patrol is part of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.



The advertisement is a composite image. On the left, there is a photograph of a white and black cable machine with a black seat. On the right, there is a photograph of a gym interior with several treadmills and elliptical machines. The background wall is orange. At the bottom center, there is a logo for 'GDI Living Fitness' featuring a red heart with a white ECG line. Below the logo, the address '25 Main St., Downtown Groton' is written in yellow. To the right of the images, there is a white box containing contact information.

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

GDI Living Fitness
25 Main St., Downtown Groton

Today in Weather History

March 3, 1994: The melting of a very high snowpack resulted in flooding along the James River, as well as other lowlands and farmland. Widespread problems included damaged roads, washed out culverts, and flood damage to homes, especially basement flooding.

1896: The temperature in downtown San Francisco, California fell to 33 degrees, which was the lowest ever for the city in March.

1966 - A tornado hit Jackson, MS, killing 54 persons. (David Ludlum)

1980 - A coastal storm produced 25 inches of snow at Elizabeth City, NC, and 30 inches at Cape Hatteras NC. At Miami FL the mercury dipped to 32 degrees. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1983 - The last of a series of storms to strike the California coast finally came to an end. Waves fifteen to twenty feet high pounded the coast for two days, and in a four day period up to 18 inches of rain drenched the Los Angeles and Santa Barbara area. On the morning of the first, thunderstorms spawned two tornadoes which moved through the Los Angeles area. (Storm Data)

1987 - A storm brought heavy rain and gale force winds to Washington and Oregon. Quillayute WA received 2.67 inches of rain in 24 hours, and winds gusted to 60 mph at Astoria OR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A small but intense low pressure system roared across west central Mississippi at 90 mph early in the morning. A tornado in southern Mississippi picked up an automobile, carried it 150 feet, and tossed it through the brick wall of an unoccupied retirement home. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Wintry weather prevailed from the southern Rockies to the Upper Great Lakes. Negaunee MI received 19 inches of snow, and up to 24 inches of snow blanketed Colorado. Blizzard conditions were reported in Minnesota. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An upper level weather disturbance produced snow in the Colorado Rockies, with eight inches reported at Winter Park, and a storm moving off the Pacific Ocean began to spread rain and snow across the western U.S. March continued to start off like a lamb elsewhere around the country. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2003 - It was a day of temperature extremes. Miami reached a high temperature of 90 degrees, the earliest observed 90 degree temperature since March 5, 1964. Meanwhile Marquette, MI, dropped to 30 degrees below zero, the lowest temperature ever recorded in the city in March.



livestream

Upcoming Event

Monday, March 6








7:00 p.m.

Groton City Council Meeting

gdilive.com

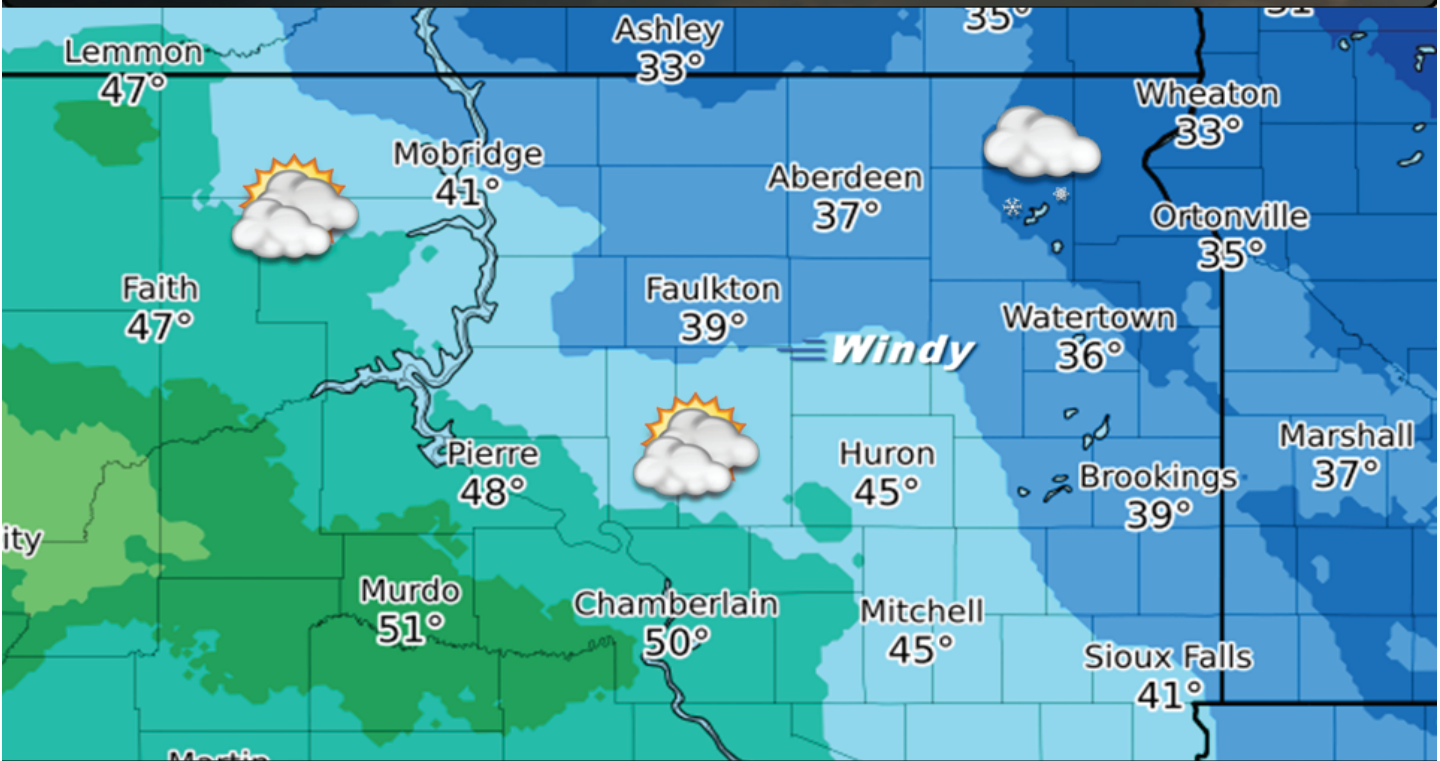
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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
						
Mostly Cloudy then Mostly Cloudy and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Partly Sunny then Chance Showers and Breezy
High: 37 °F	Low: 22 °F	High: 55 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 62 °F	Low: 39 °F	High: 52 °F



Temps Begin To Moderate Today – Winds Return As Well



National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD



weather.gov/Aberdeen



National Weather Service Aberdeen



@NWSAberdeen

Updated: 3/3/2017 5:41 AM Central

Published on: 03/03/2017 at 5:47AM

The warming trend will begin today as southerly winds increase and begin to bring in milder air. Highs will rise into the 30s and 40s, although winds will be rather gusty across eastern portions of the forecast area. The real warmth begins on Saturday, when widespread 50s and 60s fill the region. We will be watching for some light snow to possibly clip northeast South Dakota later today.

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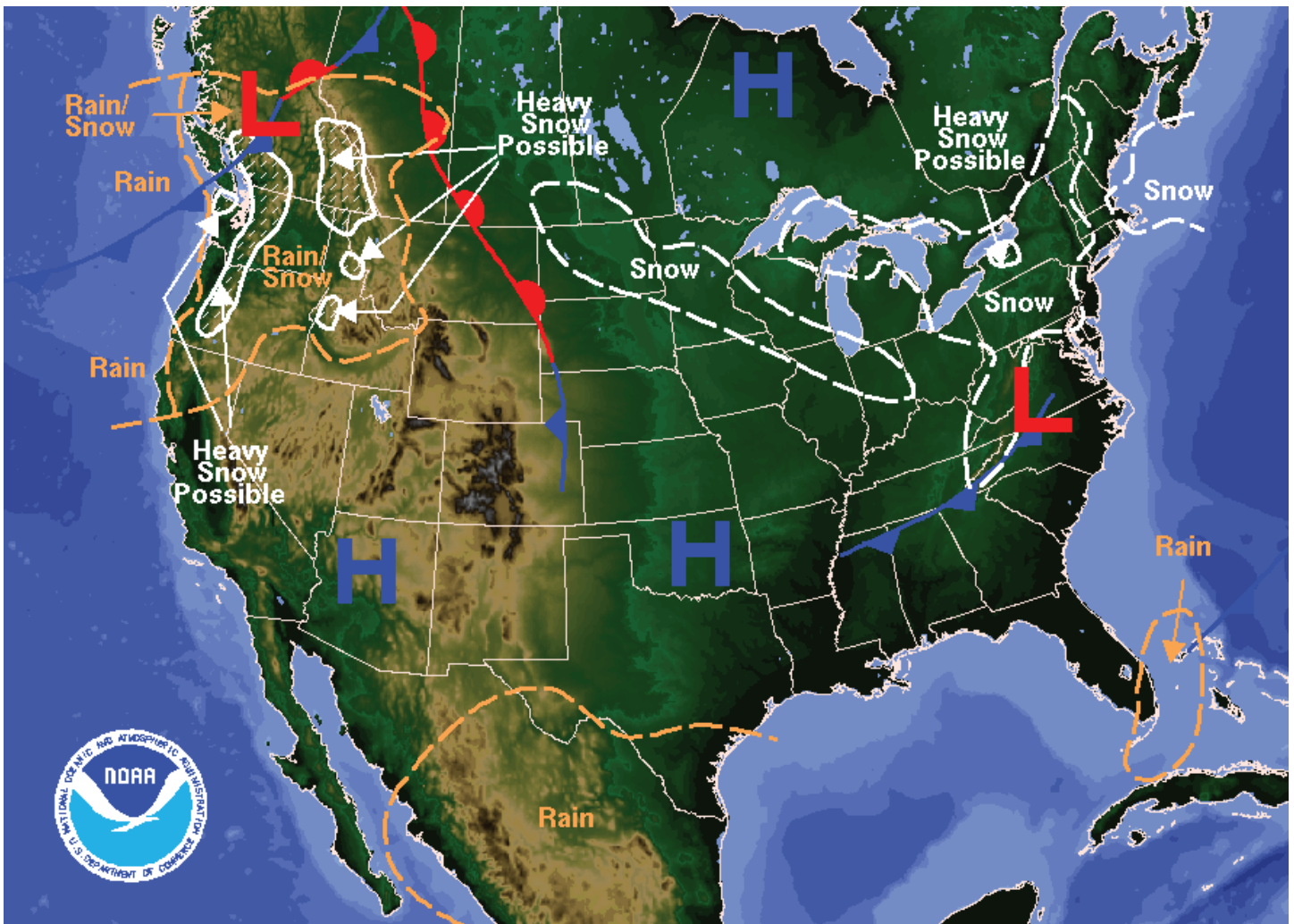
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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 26.4 F at 3:57 PM
Low Outside Temp: 10.3 F at 11:49 PM
High Gust: 13.0 Mph at 8:39 AM
Rain: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 73° in 1905
Record Low: -15 in 1916
Average High: 34°F
Average Low: 14°F
Average Precip in March.: 0.09
Precip to date in March.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.11
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 6:23 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:06 a.m.



Weather Forecast for Fri, Mar 03, 2017, issued 4:25 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McReynolds based on WPC, SPC and NHC forecasts

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WHEN DO WE START GETTING SMALLER?

When he was a child Little Tommy was fascinated as he stood in the back yard and watched airplanes get smaller as they disappeared over the horizon. He would stand motionless, sometimes even holding his breath, as he watched this amazing sight time after time.

Day after day he would beg his grandmother to "take me flying on one of those airplanes." Finally, the day came when his grandmother took him on his first flight. After he was buckled in his seat and the air craft sped down the runway and began to ascend into the clouds, a puzzled look came across his face. Anxiously, he turned to his grandmother and asked quietly, "Grandmother, when do we start getting smaller?"

This is an important question for all Christians!

John the Baptist played a most significant role in the ministry of Jesus. He realized that God gave Him an important work to do to introduce Jesus to the world. This was his main purpose in life. And he did it well. God, because of his faithfulness, made him an important person in the history of our faith.

But when Jesus appeared, John realized that his role in doing God's work changed. Not only does his willingness to decrease in importance describe an example of what humility is, but it prescribes clearly the role of every Christian today: We are to witness God's grace to others without drawing attention to ourselves.

Prayer: Lord, may we willingly step aside, as John did, as we present Your Son to the world. May we do what we do for You and You alone and only exalt Christ. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: John 3:30-36 He must increase, but I must decrease.

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News from the Associated Press

Thursday's Scores By The Associated Press

BOYS' BASKETBALL

Region 1A

Regional Final

Aberdeen Roncalli 62, Groton Area 36

Sisseton 51, Milbank Area 44

Region 2A

Regional Final

Clark/Willow Lake 68, Hamlin 63

Sioux Valley 97, Redfield/Doland 43

Region 3A

Regional Final

Madison 70, Flandreau 52

Sioux Falls Christian 71, Dell Rapids 54

Region 4A

Regional Final

Dakota Valley 65, Vermillion 62

Tea Area 71, Canton 55

Region 5A

Regional Final

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 68, West Central 51

Tri-Valley 69, Bon Homme 43

Region 6A

Regional Final

Chamberlain 69, Mobridge-Pollock 47

Crow Creek 64, Miller 56

Region 7A

Regional Final

Little Wound 81, Winner 54

Pine Ridge 77, St. Francis Indian 65

Region 8A

Regional Final

Hot Springs 66, Spearfish 61

St. Thomas More 72, Custer 50

District 1B

Championship

Florence/Henry 48, Waverly-South Shore 32

District 2B

Championship

Langford 43, Warner 32

District 5B

Semifinals

Arlington 48, DeSmet 31

Castlewood 54, Deubrook 38

District 6B

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Championship
Wolsey-Wessington 55, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 44
District 13B
Crazy Horse 53, Lyman 49
White River 68, Kadoka Area 39
District 14B
Wall 67, Oelrichs 64
GIRLS' BASKETBALL
District 1AA
Third Place
Watertown 42, Brookings 40
Championship
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 50, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 38
District 2AA
Third Place
Sioux Falls Lincoln 64, Sioux Falls Washington 58
Championship
Harrisburg 50, Brandon Valley 44
District 3AA
Third Place
Mitchell 66, Huron 62, OT
Championship
Aberdeen Central 67, Pierre 58
District 4AA
Third Place
Douglas 62, Sturgis Brown 56
Championship
Rapid City Stevens 52, Rapid City Central 45
Region 2B
Region Final
Sully Buttes 61, Herreid/Selby Area 46
Region 4B
Regional Final
Ethan 68, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 29
Region 5B
Regional Final
Parker 49, Irene-Wakonda 43
Region 6B
Regional Final
Avon 42, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 40
Region 8B
Regional Final
Timber Lake 38, Faith 28

House passes protections for religious adoption agencies

By JAMES NORD, Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House approved new legal protections Thursday for adoption agencies and foster groups that cite religious reasons for denying services, such as refusing to place children in the care of same-sex couples or single parents.

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Critics contend the measure, which says agencies can't be required to provide services that conflict with "sincerely-held" religious beliefs, would allow state-funded placement agencies to discriminate against some children or prospective parents.

The measure, which passed the chamber 43-20, had previously advanced through the Senate, but a House amendment means senators must consider the changes. Republican Gov. Dennis Daugaard said he will examine the bill if it reaches his desk.

Supporters say they want to guard agencies from losing state funds or licenses for not working with people of different religions or couples in a same-sex marriage. There have been concerns across the U.S. regarding local ordinances or state laws that have impacted child placement agencies, said Republican Rep. Steven Haugaard, the bill's main House sponsor.

Haugaard said that the bill is "proactive and pre-emptive" to recognize that religious agencies "can exercise their faith, and it's not going to impact or negatively affect the good work that they've done for decades."

The measure would stop the state from limiting someone's ability to perform child-placement services, imposing fines, canceling any benefit from a state program and blocking contracts or licenses, if a group declined to provide services because of religious beliefs.

Republican Sen. Alan Solano, the bill's main sponsor, said he wants the Senate to agree to the House changes. They include requiring an organization that declines to provide someone services to give the person a list of licensed child-placement agencies.

Jim Kinyon, executive director of Catholic Social Services in Rapid City, which provides adoption services, said the group relies on its religious traditions to help make some decisions on families to place on its infant adoption list. That includes requirements that an opposite-sex couple has been married for at least two years.

"I would prefer not to have Catholic organizations driven out of the practice of placing children for adoption," Kinyon said. "That's why we proposed the bill, and that's why we supported the bill."

Libby Skarin, policy director for the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, said in a statement that the bill is a "harmful and discriminatory piece of legislation that sets South Dakota backward."

"The hundreds of children who are awaiting forever families in our state deserve better than this," said Skarin, who said the group hopes Daugaard considers vetoing the bill.

Bovine tuberculosis found in South Dakota beef herd

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Officials confirm bovine tuberculosis has been found in a South Dakota beef herd. State Veterinarian Dustin Oedekoven says meat inspectors initially identified the suspect animals in February during routine slaughter inspection of otherwise healthy appearing cattle. The cattle were traced to a herd in Harding County. Testing of the herd revealed additional infected animals.

Oedekoven says his office is working with the herd owner and U.S. Department of Agriculture officials to evaluate the extent of the disease. He says adjacent herds will be tested, and that bovine TB is not a food threat, because of milk pasteurization and meat inspection programs.

Bovine TB is a respiratory disease of cattle. South Dakota has been recognized as free of the disease since 1982, although the last affected herd was identified in 2011.

North Dakota casino proposal risks angering tribes

By JAMES MacPHERSON, Associated Press

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — North Dakota's top House Republican is proposing six state-owned casinos, a move that risks angering American Indian tribes at a time relations have already been rubbed raw by the dispute over the Dakota Access oil pipeline.

The only casinos in North Dakota are on the state's five American Indian reservations, and those are central to the tribes' economies. Some lawmakers say Fargo Rep. Al Carlson's proposal to add six state-owned casinos is little more than a threat of payback for millions of dollars in law enforcement and other costs the state bore because of protests over the Dakota Access pipeline.

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"It's another direct consequence of the pipeline protests, no question," Rep. Pam Anderson, a Democrat from Fargo, said Thursday.

Carlson said his idea is not "anti-American Indian," but rather a way to establish casinos as "destination-oriented attractions" and use profits from them to lessen — or eliminate altogether — state sales tax and corporate income tax.

Many lawmakers believe the measure has little chance of passing, but they fear it's further damaged the state's relationship with its tribes.

While the state supported the four-state pipeline, some of its tribes led the protests against it and set up an encampment near the Standing Rock Sioux reservation that at times drew thousands of people from around the U.S. The Standing Rock Sioux and other tribes say the \$3.8 billion pipeline threatens their drinking water and cultural sites — claims the pipeline developer disputes.

Patrick Packineau, general manager of the Four Bears Casino on the Fort Berthold Reservation, would not comment on any political motivations behind Carlson's proposal, but he said North Dakota already has enough casinos.

"The state of North Dakota has a limited market, as far as gamblers," he said. "Additional casinos would only cannibalize the market even further."

The Fort Berthold Reservation also has oil that contributes to its economy, though Packineau said the casino is important to the reservation. About 20 percent of the 1 million barrels of oil produced daily in North Dakota come from the reservation, occupied by the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara tribes.

But North Dakota's other reservations don't have oil and rely heavily on casinos to provide jobs and revenue. Packineau's casino alone employs 300 people.

North Dakota's overwhelmingly male and nearly all-white Republican-led Legislature already has approved legislation aimed at pipeline protesters, including measures that make it a crime for adults to wear masks in most cases and that increase penalties for rioting and trespassing. Those were among the first bills signed by Republican Gov. Doug Burgum, who was elected in November and promised a "fresh start in our relations with all tribal nations who live with and among us" at his state-of-the-state address.

The Legislature has killed a handful of bills intended to heal some wounds from the protest activity, including one that would have required "cultural competency training" for lawmakers and another that would have allowed tribal flags from the state's five tribes to be on display in the Capitol.

Sen. Richard Marcellais, a Democrat from Belcourt and member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, sponsored the cultural competency training bill. Marcellais was visibly upset when Carlson's casino measure surfaced. He said it was clearly aimed at hurting casinos on Indian land.

"It's racist," Marcellais said. "I feel like going over there and knocking him through the window."

Carlson's resolution is a proposed constitutional amendment that would go to voters if lawmakers give the OK. It does not need the governor's approval, but Burgum issued a statement indicating he opposes the idea.

"The state should not be getting into the casino ownership business," Burgum said.

Sen. Lonnie Laffen was the original author of the proposal. The Grand Forks Republican said he held off introducing it this year because of tensions between the state and the tribes.

Instead, he said, "Carlson took it over."

House committee sends cannabidiol measure to full chamber

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A state House panel has approved a bill that would allow people in South Dakota with a prescription to use a non-intoxicating compound found in marijuana if it's approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The House Health and Human Services Committee voted 7-3 to approve the bill, which has passed through the Senate.

The legislation would exclude cannabidiol, if it receives FDA approval, from the definition of marijuana in state law and classify it as a Schedule IV controlled substance that could be prescribed.

Republican Sen. Blake Curd, the bill's main sponsor, says cannabidiol is an attempt to treat intractable

pediatric epilepsy.

London-based GW Pharmaceuticals' Epidiolex, a nearly pure extract of cannabidiol, is scheduled for review by the FDA this summer.

Grand jury subpoena withdrawn in violent pipeline clash

By **BLAKE NICHOLSON, Associated Press**

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Prosecutors have withdrawn a subpoena for a man who had been ordered to testify about a violent clash in November between police and people protesting construction of the Dakota Access pipeline in North Dakota.

A woman was left with a serious arm injury in the confrontation late Nov. 20 and early Nov. 21, when protesters tried to push past a blocked highway bridge near their main encampment in North Dakota. The protesters were turned back by authorities using tear gas, rubber bullets and water sprays. Police said protesters were throwing objects including rocks, asphalt and water bottles at officers.

It's unclear whether a grand jury is investigating the incident. U.S. Attorney Chris Myers didn't respond to a request for comment early Thursday. He's said in the past he can't comment on grand jury proceedings because they're secret.

Steve Martinez, 42, a pipeline opponent from Williston, was ordered to testify in January regarding an explosion that injured 21-year-old Sophia Wilansky of New York. Protesters maintain she was injured by a police grenade; authorities say she was hurt by a small propane tank that protesters rigged to explode.

Martinez said in January that he wouldn't cooperate and was willing to go to jail. About 40 of his supporters rallied outside the federal courthouse in Bismarck. Nevertheless, a judge refused to quash the subpoena.

Martinez had been scheduled to testify Wednesday. His attorney, Ralph Hurvitz, said prosecutors withdrew the subpoena on Monday without giving a reason. He didn't know if any other protesters were called to testify.

The Water Protector Legal Collective, a group of attorneys representing pipeline opponents facing criminal charges, said the grand jury is "one piece of a broader effort to criminalize water protectors and to unfairly target individuals in an effort to divide the movement."

Pipeline opponents who stayed at the now-defunct camp dubbed themselves water protectors because they believe the \$3.8 billion pipeline could leak oil into Lake Oahe, a Missouri River reservoir that supplies water to the Standing Rock Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux reservations. Pipeline developer Energy Transfer Partners disputes that and is finishing up construction, with an eye to having oil flowing from North Dakota to Illinois by the end of the month. The tribes are continuing to fight in court.

In a statement to The Associated Press, the Morton County Sheriff's Office rejected the collective's claim, saying "our priority has been and will always be to protect First Amendment rights while bringing to justice those who choose not to be peaceful and prayerful in their protests."

There have been about 750 arrests in the region since mid-August. The sheriff's office said "those who choose to engage in such behavior are the ones guilty of dividing the movement they claim to be a part of."

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

Pediatrician charges with sexually abusing children

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A pediatrician formerly with the Indian Health Service on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is facing federal charges of sexually abusing minors.

Sixty-eight-year-old Stanley Weber pleaded not guilty to charges Wednesday in U.S. District Court and has been released from custody.

The Rapid City Journal (<http://bit.ly/2mdc1oq>) reports Weber faces five counts of aggravated sexual abuse, one count of sexual abuse, and four counts of sexual abuse of a minor.

The charging document says the alleged abuse occurred between 1998 and 2011 and involved children younger than 16.

An assistant U.S. attorney argued Weber should not be released because he was a flight risk. But, the defense said Weber has strong ties to the community of Spearfish.

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

Russian ambassador in eye of storm over Trump campaign ties

By VIVIAN SALAMA and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration's back-to-back controversies over its Russian ties now have at least one thing in common: Ambassador Sergey Kislyak.

Moscow's top diplomat is a Washington fixture with a sprawling network, and he has emerged as the central figure in the investigations into Trump advisers' connections with Russia. In a matter of weeks, contact with Kislyak led to the firing of a top adviser to the president and, on Thursday, prompted calls for the Attorney General Jeff Sessions to resign.

Separately, a White House official confirmed that Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and ousted national security adviser Michael Flynn met with Kislyak at Trump Tower in December for what the official called a brief courtesy meeting. Flynn was pushed out of the White House last month after officials said he misled Vice President Mike Pence about whether he and the ambassador had discussed U.S. sanctions against Russia in a phone call.

At issue Thursday were two meetings between Sessions and Kislyak — one in July and another in September, at the height of concern over Russia's involvement in the hacking of Democratic officials' emails accounts. Intelligence officials have since concluded that Moscow ordered the hacks to tilt the election toward Trump. During his confirmation hearing, the Alabama Republican denied having had contact with any Russian officials, neglecting to mention the meetings with Kislyak, which were first reported by The Washington Post.

The Russian Embassy did not respond to a request for comment.

Although the White House dismissed the revelation as part of a political witch hunt, Sessions' former colleagues took the omission seriously. At the urging of some in his own party, Sessions recused himself from the Department of Justice's investigation. Still, Democrats called on him to step down.

Observers note Kislyak is a somewhat unlikely figure to cause controversy. Over the course of a long diplomatic career, he's led the life of a fairly typical global envoy, making himself a reliable presence on the circuit of receptions, teas and forums that make up the calendar of any ambassador.

Kislyak, who was appointed to his post in 2008, is regularly spotted walking around town, heading to and from meetings. Early in his tenure, he often opened the doors of the Russian Embassy, hosting dinners for foreign policy professionals, Pentagon officials, journalists and Capitol Hill staffers.

Those who have attended the events describe him as a gracious and amiable diplomat, although perhaps not as polished — or as confrontational — as his more famous boss, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

In 2015, when Kislyak invited a group of Washington-based journalists, including one from The Associated Press, to the Russian Embassy for tea, he used the meeting to push warmer relations between the two nations, despite the conflict over Russia's seizure of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine.

Kislyak framed U.S.-Russian relations as salvageable and said he hoped specifically to combat what he considered cartoonish, anti-Russian depictions of his government in the American news media.

Sessions, at a news conference where he recused himself from the investigation into the Trump campaign's ties with Russia, said he discussed a number of things with Kislyak, including counterterrorism. He said the meeting became confrontational when the talk turned to Ukraine.

Kislyak, 66, has bounced between the United States and Russia for most of his long career.

His first foreign posting was to New York where he worked at the Soviet delegation at the United Nations in the early 1980s. He spent the following years as the first secretary and then councilor at the Soviet Embassy in Washington before returning to Moscow in 1989, where he took a succession of senior jobs at the Foreign Ministry.

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He did a stint as Russian ambassador to Belgium and simultaneously served as Moscow's envoy at NATO. He then returned to Moscow to serve as a deputy foreign minister, overseeing relations with the United States and arms control issues before being sent to Washington.

Kislyak's contacts have sparked questions about his role or involvement in the hacking, questions that are difficult to answer.

The U.S. and Russia, along with many other countries, have made it a practice to separate their top diplomats from espionage activities, although it is not uncommon for an intelligence agent to operate under the cover of a senior-level diplomat job. Foreign diplomats to the United States likely expect that their activities will be monitored by U.S. authorities in the same manner that American diplomats are monitored in countries like Russia.

Russian ambassadors most likely are aware of the intelligence agents operating under diplomatic cover, but are not believed to part of the security services themselves.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Thursday ridiculed the claims of Kislyak's involvement in espionage as "total disinformation" and part of efforts to sway public opinion.

"I'll open a military secret for you: It's the diplomats' jobs to have contacts in the country they are posted to," she said, sarcastically. "It's their obligation to meet with officials and members of the political establishment."

Isachenkov reported from Moscow. Associated Press writers Bradley Klapper and Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

Yellen to speak after Fed officials hint rate hike is near

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER, AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — One by one, several Federal Reserve officials have signaled in recent days that the Fed is ready to resume raising interest rates as soon as this month. The question is whether the official who matters most — Chair Janet Yellen — will add her own voice to that impression.

When Yellen speaks Friday in Chicago on the topic of the Fed's economic outlook, investors will parse her words for any hint of how likely the central bank is to raise its key short-term rate after it next meets March 14-15. Already, though, traders in futures markets have put the probability of a rate hike at 75 percent, according to data tracked by the CME Group. Just last week, that probability had been pegged at well below 50 percent.

But that was before some Fed officials began suggesting that the strengthening U.S. economy, signs of higher inflation and a surging stock market had bolstered the case for a rate hike.

On Tuesday, William Dudley, president of the Fed's New York regional bank and a close Yellen ally, said the case for raising rates had "become a lot more compelling."

On Wednesday, Lael Brainard, a Fed board member and previously a leading advocate of delaying rate increases, said she thought the case for another hike was strengthening.

"Assuming continued progress, it will likely be appropriate soon to remove additional accommodation" by raising rates, Brainard said in a speech at Harvard University.

And Jerome Powell, another board member, was even more specific, saying in a CNBC interview Thursday, "I think the case for a rate increase in March has come together, and I do think it is on the table for discussion."

Earlier in the week, Robert Kaplan, head of the Dallas Fed, said he thought the Fed would likely raise rates "in the near future."

None of which means a rate increase this month is a certainty. Any unexpected wave of poor economic news or worrisome global developments could give the Fed pause. The government's jobs report for February, to be issued March 10, will be of particular interest. But the most recent data — notably on job growth, manufacturing and consumer confidence — along with surging stock prices have been broadly encouraging.

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In testimony to Congress last month, Yellen had pointed to the solid job market and overall improving economy to suggest that the Fed would likely resume raising rates within the next few months. Yellen noted that Fed officials themselves in December had predicted three rate increases in 2017. But she offered no specifics on when the next one might occur.

In December, the Fed raised its benchmark rate by a quarter-point to a range of 0.5 percent to 0.75 percent. It was its first increase since December 2015, when the Fed raised its key rate from a record low. In estimating three rate hikes for 2017, the Fed was indicating a quickened pace of increases.

On Thursday, Powell was asked whether the Fed might be inclined to accelerate the pace of increases to perhaps four this year. He replied that he thought three rate hikes in 2017 "still feels about right to me" but added that the direction of the economy would determine the proper number of increases.

Before Fed officials began speaking out this week, many Fed watchers and investors had been doubtful of a rate increase this month. The assumption was that Fed officials would want to assess President Donald Trump's proposed tax cuts and increased spending for the military and infrastructure projects, after the details of those projects and the likelihood of their congressional passage became clear. Many thought the Fed would likely want to wait until June to resume raising rates.

A major reason for the recent signals from Fed officials for a rate increase is the robust job market. On Thursday, for example, the government reported that first-time applications for unemployment benefits — a proxy for the pace of layoffs — fell last week to their lowest level in nearly 44 years.

The stock market, in the meantime, has been setting a string of record highs, fueled by confidence that Trump's plans for cutting taxes and boosting spending will win congressional approval.

And inflation, which had been lagging at chronically low levels, has been edging steadily up, reflecting in part a rebound in gasoline prices and higher wages. The Fed's preferred inflation gauge showed that prices rose 1.9 percent over the 12 months that ended in January. That was the largest 12-month gain in nearly five years and just below the Fed's 2 percent target for inflation.

Various Fed officials suggested that the rise in inflation and the low 4.8 unemployment rate were evidence that the central bank is now close to achieving its dual mandates of maximum employment and stable prices.

10 Things to Know for Today

By The Associated Press

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

1. WHY THE TRUMP-RUSSIA QUESTIONS WON'T FADE AWAY ANYTIME SOON

Attorney General Jeff Sessions is now the second high-ranking member of the Trump administration to take a hit over conversations with Russia's ambassador.

2. WHO USED A PRIVATE EMAIL ACCOUNT TO CONDUCT STATE BUSINESS

Vice President Mike Pence did as Indiana's governor. Pence's contacts were sent an email falsely claiming that the governor and his wife were stranded in the Philippines and needed money.

3. HOW RAILROAD THEFTS AND GUNS MAKE A DEADLY MIX IN CHICAGO

Chicago's biggest rail yards are on the gang- and homicide-plagued South and West sides where most of the city's 762 killings happened last year.

4. WHERE PEOPLE ARE SHOCKED BY TRUMP, BUT STILL LOOK UP TO AMERICA

Indonesians are flummoxed by Donald Trump's volatile presidency, but many in the world's most populous Muslim nation still see the U.S. as a beacon for values they hope will flourish in their own country.

5. ONE NORTH KOREAN FREED, ANOTHER SOUGHT IN NERVE-AGENT KILLING

Malaysian police are condemning the use of a banned nerve agent in the attack and vowing to bring the perpetrators to justice.

6. RIVAL GROUPS RACE FOR CONTROL OF SYRIA'S RAQQA

A major battle to liberate the city from Islamic State militants looms, as the U.S. looks to build on momentum from the battlefields in Mosul.

7. YELLEN TO SPEAK AFTER FED OFFICIALS HINT RATE HIKE IS NEAR

Several Federal Reserve officials are signaling that the central bank is ready to resume raising interest rates as soon as this month.

8. ATLANTA HISTORY TEACHES THE VIOLENT TOLL OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Amid a surge of bomb threats and vandalism at Jewish institutions nationwide, members of Atlanta's Jewish community have felt a familiar wave of apprehension.

9. <https://apnews.com/e03af6ababa94a078f73487641095735/Briles-says-he-didn't-cover-up-sexual-assaults-at-Baylor> FORMER BAYLOR FOOTBALL COACH BREAKS SILENCE/a

Art Briles says he could no longer "remain silent" and insists he did not cover up sexual violence by his players or try to obstruct any investigations tied to the assault scandal at the nation's largest Baptist university.

10. <https://apnews.com/38347b2815eb422c92ca7927177f8c44/The-Nintendo-Switch's-big-challenge-luring-casual-gamers> NINTENDO AIMS TO PULL A BIG SWITCH/a

The Nintendo Switch, a hybrid game machine that works as both a console at home and a portable tablet on the go, makes its debut on Friday.

One N. Korean freed, another sought in nerve-agent killing

By EILEEN NG, Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysian police on Friday released the only North Korean detained in the killing of the half brother of North Korea's leader, and later said an arrest warrant had been issued for another whose whereabouts are unknown.

Malaysia is looking for seven North Korean suspects in all, four of whom are believed to have left the country Feb. 13, the day Kim Jong Nam died. The only people in custody are two women — one Indonesian, one Vietnamese — accused of smearing his face with the banned nerve agent VX.

Ri Jong Chol, who had been detained since Feb. 17, was handed over to immigration officials for deportation. Police never said what they thought his role was in the attack, but national police chief Khalid Abu Bakar confirmed Friday that Ri was released due to a lack of evidence against him.

Malaysian Attorney General Mohamad Apandi Ali earlier said Ri would be deported because he lacked valid travel documents. Immigration director Mustafar Ali said Ri would be escorted by two representatives from the North Korean Embassy.

The women charged with murdering Kim at an airport terminal were caught on grainy surveillance video smearing what Malaysian authorities say was VX nerve agent on his face and eyes, though both reportedly say they were duped into thinking they were playing a harmless prank.

Four of the North Korean suspects police seek are believed to have left Malaysia the day Kim, the estranged half brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, was killed. One of the suspects believed to still be in Malaysia is an official at the North Korean Embassy.

Khalid said the arrest warrant issued Friday was for 37-year-old Kim Uk Il, who works for Air Koryo, North Korea's national carrier. Police say he arrived in Malaysia on Jan. 29, about two weeks before Kim Jong Nam was attacked.

Malaysian authorities have not said why they want to question Kim Uk Il, but they believe he also is still in Malaysia.

Kim's death has unleashed a diplomatic battle between Malaysia and North Korea. On Thursday, Malaysia announced it is scrapping visa-free entry for North Koreans.

A statement Friday from Malaysia's Foreign Ministry ramped up the pressure on North Korea, saying it was "greatly concerned" about the use of the nerve agent.

"Its use at a public place could have endangered the general public," the ministry said.

Malaysia has not directly accused North Korea of being behind the killing, but the statement came hours after a North Korean envoy rejected a Malaysian autopsy finding that VX nerve agent killed Kim, saying the man probably died of a heart attack because he suffered from heart disease, diabetes and high blood

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pressure.

Ri Tong Il, a former North Korean deputy ambassador to the United Nations, also said that if VX had been used, others besides Kim would have been killed or sickened.

Malaysian officials say the two female suspects smeared VX nerve agent on Kim's face as he waited for a flight at Kuala Lumpur's airport. Kim died within 20 minutes, authorities say. No bystanders reported falling ill.

Malaysia's finding that VX killed Kim boosted speculation that North Korea orchestrated the attack. Experts say the oily poison was almost certainly produced in a sophisticated state weapons laboratory, and North Korea is widely believed to possess large quantities of chemical weapons including VX.

North Korea is trying to retrieve Kim's body, but has not acknowledged that the victim is Kim Jong Un's half brother, as Malaysian government officials have confirmed.

North Korea refers to the victim as Kim Chol, the name on the diplomatic passport he was carrying when he died. Malaysian police are doing the same; they are seeking next-of-kin who could provide a DNA sample and make a positive identification, steps they say are needed for authorities to give up the body. Kim is believed to have two sons and a daughter with two women living in Beijing and Macau.

Khalid, the national police chief, brushed off the North Korean envoy's claim of a heart attack.

"We have our experts who are qualified to determine the cause of death of Kim Chol. Our investigations, supported by expert reports, confirmed that Kim Chol was murdered. North Korea can say what they like but the facts remain," Khalid told The Associated Press.

Malaysian police said the female suspects had been trained to go immediately to the bathroom and wash their hands after attacking Kim. The police said the four North Korean suspects who left the country the day of the killing put the VX liquid on the women's hands.

Police can't confirm whether the two women may have been given antidotes before the attack. An antidote, atropine, can be injected after exposure and is carried by medics in war zones where weapons of mass destruction are suspected.

North Korea has a long history of ordering killings of people it views as threats to its regime. Kim Jong Nam was not known to be seeking political power, but his position as eldest son of the family that has ruled North Korea since it was founded could have made him appear to be a danger.

Kim Jong Nam reportedly fell out of favor with his father, the late Kim Jong Il, in 2001, when he was caught trying to enter Japan on a false passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

AG's recusal portends continued pressure on Russia meddling

By ERIC TUCKER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General Jeff Sessions may not have been clear about his contacts with Russian officials during the 2016 election, but this much is: The controversy over any Kremlin involvement in American politics is not going to fade away anytime soon.

Sessions on Thursday became the second high-ranking member of the Trump administration to take a hit over conversations with Russia's envoy to the U.S., recusing himself from any probe that examines communications between Trump aides and Moscow but facing down calls for his resignation. An early backer and key adviser for Trump's campaign, Sessions said his staff recommended that he step aside from a probe.

"I feel I should not be involved in investigating a campaign I had a role in," he said.

Sessions' action followed revelations that he twice spoke with the Russian ambassador and didn't say so when pressed, under oath, by Congress. Though he rejected any suggestion that he tried to mislead anyone, he did allow that he should have been more careful in his testimony.

"I should have slowed down and said, 'But I did meet one Russian official a couple of times,'" he said.

The recusal, despite White House support for him, followed a chorus of demands that Sessions resolve the seeming contradiction between his two conversations with Moscow's U.S. envoy, Sergey Kislyak, and his statements to Congress in January that he had not communicated with Russians during the campaign. It carried echoes of a similar controversy involving retired Gen. Michael Flynn, who two weeks ago resigned

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as national security adviser after misleading White House officials about his own discussions with Kislyak.

Additional communication was revealed Thursday between Kislyak and Flynn and Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, at New York's Trump Tower. In addition, Carter Page, a former foreign policy adviser to Trump's presidential campaign, spoke with the ambassador last summer, according to a person with knowledge of the meeting.

In Moscow, the Russian Foreign Ministry called the story "media vandalism" and the Kremlin lamented the "emotional atmosphere" currently in Washington.

The recusal removes Sessions from any involvement in examining potential Russian meddling in the election, which has dogged the Trump administration from the outset and figures to be an extraordinarily consequential matter for the department Sessions leads.

It means the attorney general should not receive any briefings on it and have no information to provide to Congress or the public. But Sessions' decision to leave the matter in the hands of a top deputy may not cool demands that someone from outside the department provide a fully independent set of eyes.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer said a special prosecutor should be appointed to examine whether the federal investigation had been compromised by Sessions. House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who had accused Sessions of "lying under oath," repeated her call for his resignation after he recused himself and assailed his integrity.

"There must be an independent, bipartisan, outside commission to investigate the full extent of the Trump political, personal and financial connections to the Russians," she said.

Trump laid the controversy at the feet of Democrats, saying they were just trying to save face. "The Democrats are overplaying their hand," the president said in a statement. "They lost the election and now, they have lost their grip on reality. The real story is all of the illegal leaks of classified and other information. It is a total witch hunt!"

Thursday's developments came on the heels of what had been the high point of Trump's young presidency: a well-received address to Congress Tuesday night that energized Republicans and appeared to wipe away some lawmakers' concerns about the administration's tumultuous start.

Trump has been trailed for months by questions about potential ties to Russia. He has vigorously denied being aware of any contacts his associates had with Russia during the campaign and has also insisted he has no financial ties to Russia.

The Justice Department acknowledged Sessions' contacts Wednesday night following a report in The Washington Post, but maintained there was nothing improper about them or his answers to Congress. Still, the emergence of the additional potential of Russian interference in American politics and the omission of the meetings caused more than a half-dozen Republican lawmakers, including some who consider themselves personally close to Sessions, to urge him to recuse himself.

Republican Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma, who said that though he found it impossible to believe that Sessions could have colluded with Russia, "if there is an investigation, he probably shouldn't be the person leading it."

Intelligence agencies have already concluded that the Kremlin interfered in the election with the goal of helping Trump win. The FBI and Justice Department are investigating, as are the House and Senate intelligence committees. The House committee said its probe would examine Russian cyber actions related to the campaign as well as links between Russia and individuals associated with the campaign.

While there is nothing necessarily nefarious or even unusual about a member of Congress meeting with a foreign ambassador, typically members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meet with foreign ambassadors, not Armed Services Committee lawmakers, whose responsibility is oversight of the military and the Pentagon. Congressional contact with Russian officials was limited after the invasion of Crimea and due to Moscow's close relationship with Syria, a pariah for much of the West.

The Justice Department acknowledged two separate Sessions interactions with Kislyak, both coming after cybersecurity firms had concluded that Russian intelligence agencies were behind cyber-hacking of the Democratic National Committee.

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The first occurred after a Heritage Foundation event during the Republican National Convention in July, when the department says a group of envoys — including the Russian ambassador — approached Sessions. The second was a September conversation, which the department likened to the more than 25 discussions Sessions had with foreign ambassadors last year as a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But Sessions did not disclose his discussions with Kislyak at his Senate confirmation hearing in January when asked by Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., what he would do if “anyone affiliated” with the campaign had been in contact with officials of the Russian government.

Sessions said, “I have been called a surrogate at a time or two in that campaign and I didn’t have, did not have communications with the Russians, and I’m unable to comment on it.”

In a separate written questionnaire, he answered “no” when asked about contacts regarding the election.

Associated Press writers Richard Lardner, Mary Clare Jalonick, Andrew Taylor and Stephen Ohlemacher contributed to this report.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Art of the parse: Politicians finely split rhetorical hairs

By NANCY BENAC, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Call it the art of the parse.

Everyone splits rhetorical hairs from time to time, but politicians are especially adept at trying to dance their way out of a bind with carefully crafted explanations.

Now, here comes Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who met with the Russian ambassador twice last year, maintaining that he was truthful when he told a Senate committee during his January confirmation hearing that he “did not have communications with the Russians.” He was an adviser to Donald Trump’s campaign at the time.

Sessions said at a news conference Thursday that his statement was “honest and correct as I understood it at the time” but that he’d be sending senators a clarification of his remarks.

He said his answer was truthful because the question had focused on Trump campaign contacts with the Russians, while he had met with the ambassador in his role as a senator, not as a Trump supporter.

“In retrospect, I should have slowed down and said, ‘But I did meet one Russian official a couple of times,’” Sessions added as he announced that he would recuse himself from any investigation related to the campaign. The announcement came after Democrats and Republicans had called for Session to recuse himself, and some Democrats pressed for his resignation.

“It definitely was extremely misleading to say the least,” said Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, one of those seeking Sessions’ resignation.

Former President Bill Clinton attracted the unwanted nickname of “Slick Willie” for his well-known abilities to talk himself out of a jam.

Clinton, who was impeached but not convicted over his relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, notably argued that he wasn’t lying when he claimed, “There is no relationship.”

He said it was the truth because their relationship was over by the time he spoke.

As Clinton explained it: “It depends upon what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.”

Rutgers professor David Greenberg, author of the book “Republic of Spin: An Inside History of the American Presidency,” thinks Sessions’ statements are a more serious matter than Clinton’s.

“Clinton was parsing; Sessions is retroactively trying to change what he said,” Greenberg said in an email. “The former is something that everyone does, especially but not only in politics. The latter is perhaps also a human instinct but is complicated by the oath to be truthful.”

The book “The Stupidest Things Ever Said by Politicians,” by Ross Petras and Kathryn Petras, offers

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plenty of other eyebrow-raising examples of hair splitting. Among them:

—David Dinkins, before he was New York mayor, answered accusations that he had failed to pay his taxes by saying: "I haven't committed a crime. What I did was fail to comply with the law."

—Richard Allen, national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan, offered this clarification about cash he was given by Japanese journalists for arranging an interview with Nancy Reagan: "I didn't accept it. I received it."

—Clinton administration Justice Department nominee Bill Lann Lee insisted the term "forced busing" was a misnomer because school districts "do not force children to ride a bus, but only to arrive on time at their assigned schools."

More recently, Republicans tied themselves in verbal knots last year trying to keep their distance from candidate Trump without completely abandoning their party's nominee.

New Hampshire Sen. Kelly Ayotte's solution: promise to vote for Trump and support him but not endorse him.

"There's actually a big distinction," Ayotte insisted. "Everyone gets a vote. I do, too. And an endorsement is when you are campaigning with someone."

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, a University of Pennsylvania professor specializing in political communication, says that where many politicians use highly precise words to protect themselves, Trump uses the opposite strategy of being "notoriously imprecise."

In both cases, though, the speakers may intend for listeners to hear something different from what they actually said.

Jamieson says people hold speakers to different standards, depending on their backgrounds and the setting. They may cut Trump some slack because he comes from the business world, she said, but not Sessions.

"You've been a lawyer, a prosecutor, a senator, you're in a hearing, speaking under oath, you speak with precision," she said. "When you engage in ambiguity, it's calculated."

Follow Nancy Benac on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/nbenac>

Pence used a private email account to conduct state business

By KEN THOMAS, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Mike Pence used a private email account to conduct public business as Indiana's governor, according to public records obtained by the Indianapolis Star.

The newspaper reported Thursday that emails provided through a public records request show that Pence communicated with advisers through his personal AOL account on homeland security matters and security at the governor's residence during his four years as governor.

The governor also faced email security issues. Pence's AOL account was subjected to a phishing scheme last spring, before he was chosen by Donald Trump to join the GOP presidential ticket. Pence's contacts were sent an email falsely claiming that the governor and his wife were stranded in the Philippines and needed money.

The governor moved to a different AOL account with additional security measures, Pence spokesman Marc Lotter said, but has since stopped using the new personal account since he was sworn-in as vice president.

Lotter said Pence "maintained a state email account and a personal email account" like previous governors in the state. At the end of his term Pence directed outside counsel to review all of his communications to ensure that state-related emails were transferred and properly archived by the state, the spokesman said.

As Trump's running mate, Pence frequently criticized rival Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server as President Barack Obama's secretary of state, accusing her of purposely keeping her emails out of public reach and shielding her from scrutiny.

Lotter said "the comparison is absurd" because Clinton had set up a private server in her home at the

start of her tenure at the State Department and, unlike Clinton, Pence did not handle any classified material as Indiana's governor.

The newspaper reported that the office of Pence's successor, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb, released more than 30 pages from Pence's AOL account, but declined to release an unspecified number of emails because they were considered confidential.

Public officials are not barred from using personal email accounts under Indiana law, but the law is interpreted to mean that any official business conducted on private email must be retained to comply with public record laws.

The state requires all records pertaining to state business to be retained and available for public information requests. Emails involving state email accounts are captured on the state's servers, but any emails that Pence may have sent from his AOL account to another private account would need to be retained.

At the end of his term, Pence hired the Indianapolis law firm of Barnes & Thornburg to conduct a review of all of his communications and that review is still ongoing, Lotter said. Any correspondence between Pence's AOL account and any aides using a state email account would have been automatically archived, he said.

Malaysia releases N. Korean held in deadly chemical attack

By EILEEN NG, Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Malaysian police on Friday released the only North Korean it had detained in the killing of the half brother of North Korea's leader, as it condemned the use of a banned nerve agent in the attack and vowed to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Ri Jong Chol, who had been detained since Feb. 17, four days after Kim Jong Nam's death, was handed over to immigration officials for deportation. Police never said what they had thought his role had been in the attack, but national police chief Khalid Abu Bakar confirmed Friday that Ri was released due to a lack of evidence against him.

Malaysian Attorney General Mohamad Apandi Ali has said that Ri would be deported because he didn't have any valid travel documents.

Two women — one Indonesian, one Vietnamese — have been charged with murdering Kim at an airport terminal Feb. 13. They were caught on grainy surveillance video smearing what Malaysian authorities say was VX nerve agent on his face and eyes, though both reportedly say they were duped into thinking they were playing a harmless prank.

Police are searching for seven North Korean suspects, including four believed to have left Malaysia the day Kim, the estranged half brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, was killed. One of the suspects believed to still be in Malaysia is an official at the North Korean Embassy.

A statement from Malaysia's Foreign Ministry ramped up the pressure on Pyongyang on Friday, saying it was "greatly concerned" with the use of the toxic chemical and condemning the use of such a chemical weapon under any circumstances.

"Its use at a public place could have endangered the general public," the foreign ministry said.

Malaysia has not directly accused North Korea of being behind the killing, but the statement came hours after a North Korean envoy rejected a Malaysian autopsy finding that VX nerve agent killed Kim, saying the man probably died of a heart attack because he suffered from heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Ri Tong Il, a former North Korean deputy ambassador to the United Nations, also said that if VX had been used, others besides Kim would have been killed or sickened.

Kim's death has unleashed a diplomatic battle between Malaysia and North Korea. On Thursday, Malaysia announced it is scrapping visa-free entry for North Koreans.

Malaysian officials say the two female suspects smeared VX nerve agent — a banned chemical weapon — on Kim's face as he waited for a flight at Kuala Lumpur's airport. Kim died within 20 minutes, authorities say. No bystanders reported falling ill.

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Malaysia's autopsy finding that VX nerve agent killed Kim boosted speculation that North Korea orchestrated the attack. Experts say the oily poison was almost certainly produced in a sophisticated state weapons laboratory, and North Korea is widely believed to possess large quantities of chemical weapons including VX.

North Korea is trying to retrieve Kim's body, but it has not acknowledged that the victim is Kim Jong Un's half brother, as Malaysian government officials have confirmed.

Pyongyang refers to the victim as Kim Chol, the name on the diplomatic passport he was carrying when he died. Malaysian police are doing the same; they are seeking next-of-kin who could provide a DNA sample and make a positive identification, steps they say are needed for authorities to give up the body. Kim is believed to have two sons and a daughter with two women living in Beijing and Macau.

Khalid, the national police chief, brushed off the North Korean envoy's claim of a heart attack.

"We have our experts who are qualified to determine the cause of death of Kim Chol. Our investigations, supported by expert reports, confirmed that Kim Chol was murdered. North Korea can say what they like but the facts remain," Khalid told The Associated Press.

Malaysian police said the female suspects had been trained to go immediately to the bathroom and wash their hands after attacking Kim. The police said the four North Korean suspects who left the country the day of the killing put the VX liquid on the women's hands.

Police can't confirm whether the two women may have been given antidotes before the attack. An antidote, atropine, can be injected after exposure and is carried by medics in war zones where weapons of mass destruction are suspected.

North Korea has a long history of ordering killings of people it views as threats to its regime. Kim Jong Nam was not known to be seeking political power, but his position as eldest son of the family that has ruled North Korea since it was founded could have made him appear to be a danger.

Kim Jong Nam reportedly fell out of favor with his father, the late Kim Jong Il, in 2001, when he was caught trying to enter Japan on a false passport to visit Tokyo Disneyland.

Sessions steps aside from Russia probe under pressure

By ERIC TUCKER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Under intensifying pressure, Attorney General Jeff Sessions abruptly agreed Thursday to recuse himself from any investigation into Russian meddling in America's 2016 presidential election. He acted after revelations he twice spoke with the Russian ambassador during the campaign and failed to say so when pressed by Congress.

Sessions rejected any suggestion that he had tried to mislead anyone about his contacts with the Russian, saying, "That is not my intent. That is not correct."

But he did allow that he should have been more careful in his testimony during his confirmation hearing, saying, "I should have slowed down and said, 'But I did meet one Russian official a couple of times.'"

The White House has stood by Sessions in the latest controversy to dog President Donald Trump's young administration, though officials say they first learned about his contacts with the ambassador from a reporter Wednesday night. Trump himself said Thursday he had "total" confidence in Sessions and didn't think he needed to recuse himself — not long before he did.

Trump later laid the controversy at the feet of Democrats, saying they are trying to save face. "The Democrats are overplaying their hand," he said in a statement Thursday night. "They lost the election and now, they have lost their grip on reality. The real story is all of the illegal leaks of classified and other information. It is a total witch hunt!"

One of Sessions' conversations with Ambassador Sergey Kislyak occurred at a July event on the sidelines of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. At that same event, the ambassador also spoke with Carter Page, who briefly advised Trump's campaign on foreign policy, according to a person with knowledge of the discussion.

Separately, a White House official said Thursday that Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and ousted

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national security adviser Michael Flynn met with Kislyak at Trump Tower in New York in December. The official described that sit-down as a brief courtesy meeting.

Flynn was fired last month for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his contacts with Kislyak.

The Trump team's account of Flynn's contacts with the ambassador has changed several times. The White House did not disclose the in-person meeting, or Kushner's involvement, until Thursday.

Both the White House official and the person with knowledge of Page's discussion insisted on anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly disclose the meetings.

Trump has been trailed for months by questions about potential ties to Russia, and allegations of Russian efforts to interfere in the U.S. election to help him defeat Hillary Clinton. The new president and his campaign officials have blamed such contentions on Democratic sore losers and have heatedly denied any contact with Russians concerning the election.

While there is nothing necessarily nefarious or even unusual about a member of Congress meeting with a foreign ambassador, typically members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meet with foreign ambassadors, not Armed Services Committee lawmakers, such as Sessions, whose responsibility is oversight of the military and the Pentagon.

The latest development comes on the heels of what had been the high point of Trump's young presidency: a well-received address to Congress Tuesday night that energized Republicans and appeared to wipe away some lawmakers' concerns about the administration's tumultuous start.

But Sessions faced a rising chorus of demands that he resolve the seeming contradiction between his two conversations in the summer and fall with Kislyak and his sworn statements to Congress in January, when he said he had not had communications with Russians during the campaign.

The Justice Department said he met with Kislyak in his role as a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, not in his role as a Trump adviser with the campaign, and that led to his answers.

The attorney general, an early backer and key adviser for Trump's campaign, said he decided to recuse himself for investigations that are underway and others to come after his staff recommended he do so. Acting Deputy Attorney General Dana Boente will handle such matters for now.

Sessions added that his announcement "should not be interpreted as confirmation of the existence of any investigation."

Some Democrats called for Sessions not only to recuse himself but to resign.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who had accused Sessions of "lying under oath," repeated her call for his resignation after he recused himself. Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said a special prosecutor should be appointed to examine whether the federal investigation into Kremlin meddling — and into possible contacts between Trump associates and Russians — had been compromised by Sessions. Democrats also sought a criminal perjury investigation.

More than a half dozen Republican lawmakers, including some who consider themselves personally close to Sessions, had urged him to recuse himself from the probe. Sen. Tom Cole of Oklahoma said he didn't believe Sessions could have colluded with Russia, but "If there is an investigation, he probably shouldn't be the person leading it."

The Justice Department acknowledged two separate Sessions interactions with Kislyak, both coming after cybersecurity firms had concluded that Russian intelligence agencies were behind cyber-hacking of the Democratic National Committee.

The first occurred after a Heritage Foundation event during the Republican National Convention in July, when the department says a group of envoys — including the Russian ambassador — approached Sessions. The second was a September conversation, which the department likened to the more than 25 discussions Sessions had with foreign ambassadors last year as a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But Sessions did not disclose his discussions with Kislyak at his Senate confirmation hearing in January when asked what he would do if "anyone affiliated" with the campaign had been in contact with officials of the Russian government.

Sessions said he knew of no such contacts. He added, "I have been called a surrogate at a time or two

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in that campaign and I didn't have, did not have communications with the Russians, and I'm unable to comment on it."

He answered "no" in a written questionnaire when asked about contacts regarding the election.

Dmitry Peskov, the spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin, said it was normal for Russian diplomats to meet with U.S. lawmakers. A spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, told AP that meetings with American political figures were part of the embassy's "everyday business."

Revelations of the contacts, first reported by The Washington Post, came amid a disclosure by three administration officials that White House lawyers have instructed aides to Trump to preserve materials that could be connected to Russian meddling in the American political process.

Sessions is not the first attorney general to disengage, or take a reduced role, in a high-profile matter. Attorney General Loretta Lynch last summer agreed to accept the recommendation of the FBI in the Hillary Clinton email matter after an impromptu meeting with Bill Clinton on her airplane.

AP Writers Julie Pace, Richard Lardner, Mary Clare Jalonick, Andrew Taylor and Stephen Ohlemacher contributed.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

'Stay classy, USC:' Ferrell to speak at school's graduation

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Stay classy, Trojans."

That twist on Will Ferrell's catchphrase from "Anchorman" could come in handy when the comic actor gives an address at this year's commencement at the University of Southern California.

USC announced Ferrell's role Thursday, saying in a statement that he'll be the featured speaker at the May 12 ceremony.

The "Saturday Night Live" alum is also a USC grad, and one of its most famous fans and biggest boosters.

He graduated from the Los Angeles school with a degree in sports information in 1990 and is often seen walking the sidelines of Trojans football games.

USC gave no indication of what Ferrell will talk about, but his best-known line from "Talledega Nights" may work just fine, especially for the class's valedictorian: "If you ain't first, you're last."

Trump slump? Signs of drop in international tourism to US

By BETH J. HARPAZ, AP Travel Editor

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. Travel Association on Thursday said the Trump administration's immigration policies are hurting tourism.

The nonprofit industry organization said in a statement that there are "mounting signs" of "a broad chilling effect on demand for international travel to the United States."

White House spokeswoman Lindsay Walters disputed the contention, saying: "It takes several months for each month's international arrival statistics to be processed and released to the public. To claim the executive order has had an impact on travel would be premature."

But the U.S. Travel Association's statement added to a growing chorus of concern from the travel industry over the impact of Trump administration policies on tourism.

Earlier this week, the tourism agency NYC & Company revised its 2017 forecast to predict a drop in inbound international travel to New York City, with 300,000 fewer visitors compared to 2016. It would be the first drop in visitation to New York since the start of the recession in 2008.

The Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau told the Philadelphia Inquirer this week that it had lost out on an international meeting with 3,000 attendees that decided to go to Canada or Mexico instead.

And ForwardKeys, which tracks travel bookings, reported in February that international trends in bookings to the U.S. are down 6.5 percent compared with the equivalent period the year before.

"It's known as the Trump Slump," travel guru Arthur Frommer wrote last month on Frommers.com. He

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called it "an unintended consequence of the Trump-led efforts to stop many Muslims from coming to the U.S.," resulting in "a sharp drop in foreign tourism to our nation that imperils jobs and touristic income."

U.S. Travel Association President and CEO Roger Dow said there's concern that many international travelers have interpreted Trump's policies as "wanting to discourage international visitors generally, not just those who pose a security risk."

Trump's initial ban on travelers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen was suspended following a court order, but a revised executive order on visas and immigration is expected soon.

The U.S. Travel Association urged the administration to make clear in any revised order "that the U.S. welcomes and values legitimate international business and leisure travelers."

Tourism is an enormous sector of the U.S. economy, generating \$2.1 trillion in economic output and supporting 15.1 million jobs, with international visitors a key component, according to data from the U.S. Travel Association.

"Security is a top priority for the U.S. travel community, but it's critical to balance both sides of the ledger: make clear who is not welcome, but also who remains welcome," Dow said.

A Jan. 30 op-ed piece in the Toronto Star newspaper encouraged Canadians to "boycott vacations to the U.S." until Trump is no longer president.

NYC & Company is launching a new campaign called "New York City — Welcoming the World" to try to counteract the expected downturn. The agency said in a press release that the campaign is intended to reassure international travelers who may feel deterred about traveling to the U.S. that they are welcome in New York.

But Alexandre de Juniac, head of the International Air Transport Association, said Thursday that industry leaders are not worried about a downturn, saying air travel to the U.S. "still looks positive in 2017."

George Aguel, president and CEO of Visit Orlando on Disney's Florida turf, also said "it would be premature to determine if there is a potential decline in overall international visitation to our region, and if any such decline can specifically be attributed to the administration's executive orders."

Another factor in a potential downturn could be the strong U.S. dollar, which has made it more expensive for international visitors to vacation here.

Last year, the U.S. Commerce Department predicted a record 78.6 million international visitors would come to the U.S. in 2017. That forecast is usually updated in May.

AP reporter Joan Lowy in Washington contributed to this story.

Caterpillar offices raided in probe related to Swiss unit

By DON BABWIN, Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Federal law enforcement officials raided three central Illinois facilities of manufacturer Caterpillar on Thursday as part of an investigation the company said may be related to business with its Swiss subsidiary CSARL.

Officials from three federal agencies, some wearing jackets that said "police, federal agent", searched the Peoria, Illinois, headquarters of Caterpillar, one of the world's largest makers of construction and other heavy equipment. Facilities in East Peoria and Morton, Illinois, also were raided under a federal warrant, U.S. Attorney's office spokeswoman Sharon Paul said.

"We believe the execution of this search warrant is regarding, among other things, export filings that relate to the CSARL matter," Caterpillar said in a statement later on Thursday, referring to its Swiss subsidiary.

Caterpillar spokeswoman Corrie Heck Scott said in an email that the company was cooperating with law enforcement.

Paul said the agencies involved included the Internal Revenue Service's criminal investigation unit, the U.S. Department of Commerce Office of Export Enforcement and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp.'s office of inspector general. She declined to comment further on the details of the investigation.

The exact reason for the raid was unclear, but Caterpillar told the Securities and Exchange Commission

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in a filing last month that the IRS had notified the company it owed \$2 billion more in taxes for the years 2010 to 2012 because of profits from its Swiss unit. Caterpillar said it would "vigorously contest" the tax bill.

"We believe that the relevant transactions complied with applicable tax laws and did not violate judicial doctrines," Caterpillar said.

Two years ago the SEC notified Caterpillar that it was conducting an "informal investigation" relating to CSARL and asked the company to preserve relevant documents.

SEC spokesmen in Washington declined to comment Thursday.

A 2014 report by U.S. Senate Democratic staff said that Caterpillar had avoided paying \$2.4 billion in U.S. taxes since 2000 by shifting profits to the affiliate in Switzerland.

The report said Caterpillar paid PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP \$55 million to develop the tax strategy. Under the strategy, Caterpillar transferred the rights to profits from its parts business to a wholly controlled Swiss affiliate called CSARL, even though no employees or business activities were moved to Switzerland, the report said.

In exchange, CSARL paid a small royalty, and the income was taxed at a special rate of 4 to 6 percent that Caterpillar negotiated with the Swiss government, the report said.

Before the arrangement, 85 percent of the profits from the parts business were taxed in the U.S., the report said. Afterward, only 15 percent of the profits were taxed in the U.S. The rest was taxed at the special rate in Switzerland, the report said.

Last month, Caterpillar said in a filing with the SEC that it was "vigorously contesting" a notice from the IRS that it owed \$2 billion more in U.S. taxes for the years 2010 to 2012 from profits earned by the Swiss unit CSARL.

"We believe that the relevant transactions complied with applicable tax laws and did not violate judicial doctrines," Caterpillar said.

Shares of Caterpillar, which have risen 35 percent over the past year, went into steep decline just before noon as word of the raid on company headquarters and other facilities began to spread, falling almost 5 percent before recovering slightly to close at \$94.36.

The case could have a substantial impact on Caterpillar, especially if the government were to secure a criminal conviction.

"There are collateral consequences that can be as significant, if not more significant, than the fines themselves" that companies must pay in such cases, said Thomas Cooke, professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business.

One potential consequence that could be huge, Cooke noted: The company could be stripped of its ability to bid for federal contracts. If that happened, it would come just as President Donald Trump's \$1 trillion plan to shore up the nation's roads, bridges and airports — and create jobs — is being put forward.

Caterpillar would normally be a major player in a national infrastructure plan. The company's chairman and former CEO, Doug Oberhelman, was among two dozen manufacturing CEOs who met with Trump at the White House last week, committing to restoring factory jobs lost to foreign competition.

In January, Caterpillar announced it plans to move its global headquarters and about 300 top jobs to the Chicago area after decades in Peoria. Caterpillar also scrapped plans to build a new headquarters in downtown Peoria, which is located about 175 miles southwest of Chicago.

AP Business Writers Matthew Ott and Marcy Gordon in Washington, D.C., contributed to this report.

Drivers rebel against Uber's price-cutting quest for growth

By TOM KRISHER and SARAH SKIDMORE SELL, AP Business Writers

DETROIT (AP) — The face-off between Uber CEO Travis Kalanick and driver Fawzi Kamel illustrated a conflict between Uber, with its effort to grow by cutting prices to beat competitors, and drivers who have seen their pay reduced.

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The video of the argument — caught on dashcam and now viewed more than 3 million times on YouTube — includes yelling and profanity, and ends with a combative Kalanick dismissing an agitated Fawzi's claims that sharp reductions in fares forced the driver into bankruptcy.

Harry Campbell, who drives for Uber in California, says driver pay has gone down while Uber's corporate valuation has grown to over \$60 billion. "I think a lot of drivers feel that Uber always looked out for themselves first and foremost and relegated drivers to a second tier," he says.

"What we're looking at in that video is 21st-century mobility technology and 19th-century labor relations," said Harley Shaiken, a labor expert and professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

The video exchange comes after a month of trouble for the ride-hailing behemoth including sexual harassment allegations from a female engineer, a lawsuit alleging technology theft, and a social media campaign encouraging riders to delete Uber's app over claims that the company tried to capitalize when New York taxi drivers protested against President Trump's immigration order.

Uber's rivals claim that drivers have been defecting since Uber's problems started piling up. Business experts expect more defections among Uber's 400,000 drivers, and even some riders, after the Kalanick video, despite his public apology. Some rivals boast of better pay for drivers, and some allow tips through their apps, unlike Uber. Still, drivers say they get more business with Uber because of its greater size and reach.

In the dashcam video obtained by Bloomberg News, Kalanick and Kamel are seen discussing Uber's business model. The driver for Uber's luxury service, Uber Black, argues that Kalanick is lowering fares, costing him money.

Kalanick denied that Black fares had been cut, but conceded that prices were reduced for Uber's general service, UberX, due to competition. "Otherwise you go out of business," he says.

The 40-year-old CEO begins shouting as Kamel claims again the Uber Black prices were reduced. Kamel claims to have lost \$97,000. "I'm bankrupt because of you."

"Bull----!" Kalanick shouted. "Some people don't like to take responsibility for their own s---. They blame everything in their life on somebody else. Good luck," he says, slamming the door.

Campbell, the California driver, says most drivers aren't surprised by Kalanick's behavior. "We always knew that the CEO was pretty ruthless when it comes to drivers."

Campbell, like a number of drivers, works for both Uber and its biggest rival, Lyft. He won't stop driving for Uber, but may shift more business to Lyft.

Lyft said its ridership and driver applications have grown significantly since the first of the year, while Fasten, a smaller ride-hailing competitor in Boston and Austin, Texas, said its business has boomed since the "Delete Uber" campaign started in late January. Fasten said its ridership rose 25 percent in Boston the first week of the campaign. New riders are up 10 percent.

Amelia Serafine, a Ph.D candidate in Chicago, says she had been driving for both Uber and Lyft for about a year before deleting her Uber driver app in February after the sexual harassment allegations became public.

She was tempted to return to Uber for money to supplement her university stipend but decided against it when the Kalanick video surfaced.

"The people (drivers) that I talk to already think that Uber treats them like garbage," Serafine said. "That's why the driver confronted the CEO."

Shaiken, the University of California professor, says Uber is squeezing its drivers on prices, refusing to recognize them as employees and dictating terms such as pricing without their input.

Uber declined comment on the controversies but points to a survey showing that 73 percent of its drivers don't want to be employees. More than 60 percent drive fewer than 10 hours per week, the company says.

Uber says on its website that drivers are paid based on distance and time it takes to transport someone. In Los Angeles, for instance, that's 15 cents per minute and 90 cents per mile during off-peak times. There's also a \$1.65 booking fee. A 9-mile trip from West Hollywood to Downtown would cost \$15. Uber says it takes roughly one-quarter of a fare.

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Lyft would not answer specific questions about the same Los Angeles trip. The company says it takes 20 to 25 percent of the fare. Each company also has incentives for drivers to carry more passengers.

Uber says drivers make around \$19 per hour in the top 20 U.S. markets. But experts say the take is much lower when gasoline, insurance and the cost of a car including interest on loans are figured in.

Fasten CEO Kirill Evdakov says Fasten charges drivers a 99-cent flat fee per ride.

Lyft pays better in Chicago and allows tipping through its app, but Uber gets a driver more business, Serafine said. Most drivers will pick Lyft over Uber given the choice, she says. Uber recently allowed tipping, but it has to be done in cash.

Sell reported from Portland, Oregon. Dee-Ann Durbin in Detroit contributed.

The bump isn't just Trump: What's driving the stock rally

By STAN CHOE, AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The stock market is hitting new heights, and yes, excitement about President Trump's policies is part of the reason for it. But it's not the only one, analysts say.

Even if Donald Trump had lost the election, many professional investors and analysts say they still would have expected stocks to rise, just perhaps not to the same degree. The Standard & Poor's index has leapt 11.3 percent since Election Day, packing more gains into four months than it's had in four of the last six full years. It dipped a bit Thursday, but it's still close to its record set a day earlier.

Here's a look at some of the factors behind the strong run for stocks:

— The Trump bump.

The first reaction for markets to Trump's win of the White House was confusion. Many investors had been expecting a victory for Hillary Clinton, and markets around the world tumbled on election night as the result became apparent. But they reversed course within hours. The reason: Investors are expecting the Trump White House to push through tax cuts for businesses and to loosen regulations on them.

Lower tax bills for companies should lead to an immediate rise in earnings, and stock prices tend to track profits over the long term. Easier regulations should also help businesses, the thinking goes, particularly big banks and other financials that have been under restrictions imposed following the financial crisis.

Financial stocks have been the best-performing sector by far of the 11 that make up the S&P 500 since the election. Besides the hope for looser regulations, analysts are also excited about the prospect for bigger profits given recent gains in interest rates, which will make lending money more profitable.

— The economy is getting better.

Growth has been frustratingly slow since the end of the Great Recession, but the job market is picking up steam. The unemployment rate in January was 4.8 percent, and economists see the economy as close to full employment. A report on Thursday showed that the fewest number of workers applied for unemployment benefits last week since Richard Nixon was in the White House.

Improvement was underway before Trump entered the White House, but his election has spurred things along. Optimism among small businesses, for example, spiked higher after the election and is now at its highest level since 2004, according to surveys from the National Federation of Independent Business.

Confidence also jumped for regular households following the election, and consumer confidence is at its highest level since the summer of 2001. If that translates into more purchases at stores and elsewhere, it should drive even more economic growth.

Other economies around the world are also improving, raising expectations for profits of big U.S. companies, which do a lot of their business overseas.

— Higher confidence all around.

Confidence has spread even to regular investors.

After years of hiding out in bonds and other safer investments, retail investors began creeping back into stock mutual funds and exchange-traded funds following the election. Investors plugged \$20.7 billion into U.S. stock funds in November, the biggest month in nearly two years. They've followed that up with more

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purchases. That buying has helped to bid up stocks even more.

— Corporate profits are getting better.

Big businesses are finally earning bigger profits again.

Earnings per share for companies in the S&P 500 were nearly 6 percent higher last quarter than a year earlier, with nearly all of the companies reporting, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence. It's a sharp turnaround from a year ago, when low oil prices and other factors were pulling down profits for S&P 500 companies. Profit growth was particularly strong for technology and financial companies. Microsoft's earnings rose on stronger sales of business software, for example, and investment banks reported a strong quarter for their trading operations.

But just as each of these pillars has helped to lift stocks in recent months, a weakening of any of them could remove some support. If tax cuts come later than expected, or if they end up being only minor ones, it could mean a drop for stocks.

Critics also worry that that stock prices have run up at a time when they were already looking overpriced relative to their earnings. One popular way to measure whether the stock market is expensive or not is to compare the S&P 500's level against its earnings over the prior 10 years, adjusted for inflation. By that measure, which was popularized by Nobel-winning economist Robert Shiller, the S&P 500 is close to its most expensive level since the dot-com bubble was deflating in 2002.

Not so urgent anymore? Trump's new travel ban delayed

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — President Donald Trump was barely in office when he signed an executive order restricting immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations. There was not a moment to waste, he said, because any delay would allow the "bad dudes" to rush into the U.S.

Then federal courts struck down his ban. The White House said a new version would be coming.

That was a month ago. The urgency seems to have faded.

There has been no further legal appeal. And announcement of a replacement order has been repeatedly postponed, a reflection of legal difficulties, shifting administration priorities and politics. It now won't be unveiled until next week at the earliest, says a White House official.

"The holdup flies in the face of the mythology as to why they needed to rush the bill in the first place," said Doris Meissner, who was head of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for President Bill Clinton. "It was a contrived argument and a reflection of inexperience and a rush to fulfill a campaign promise."

The delay stands in stark contrast to the ban's rollout, a swift action designed as the centerpiece of a barrage of executive orders to set a bold tone for the Trump administration's first days.

Trump signed it late on a Friday afternoon, prompting widespread protests at the nation's airports while hardening battle lines between the president's supporters and opponents. But the rushed order, composed with little outside consultation, drew fierce bipartisan criticism as federal agencies, foreign governments and travelers were left confused to its contents, creating chaos at airports and leaving the White House to defend the rollout by saying that its speed was necessary.

"If we waited five days, 10 days, six months to begin establishing the first series of controls, we would be leaving the homeland unnecessarily vulnerable," said senior policy adviser Stephen Miller who, along with chief strategist Steve Bannon, was the architect of the ban.

But the unveiling of a new order has been postponed at least three times since then, and the White House has shifted its tone on the ban — in part by not talking about it.

Shifting priorities, Trump has spent more time at events meant to boost his economic agenda and on Thursday appeared on an aircraft carrier to tout his plans for a military buildup. During his first speech to Congress on Tuesday, he did not specifically mention the ban, merely saying that the administration "will shortly take new steps to keep our nation safe."

After Trump received high marks for that speech, aides scuttled plans to sign the new travel ban the next day, not wanting the controversial measure to overtake some of the best headlines of the young

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administration.

Moreover, public opinion has shifted against the ban. A Quinnipiac poll conducted in early January, before details were known, found that Americans supported "suspending immigration from 'terror prone' regions" by 48 percent to 42 percent.

But a follow-up poll after the ban was implemented found a 12 point net swing against the idea of a travel ban.

"This didn't go right the first time: The optics at the airports were bad and constituents flooded their lawmakers with calls," said Linda Fowler, professor of government at Dartmouth College. "The White House must know it has to get it exactly right this time. When this ban is released, more lawsuits are coming. To lose a second time would be devastating."

Government lawyers who defended the ban in court the first time made its speed a crucial part of their argument. August Flentje, special counsel to the U.S. attorney general, told judges on the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that the need to quickly enforce the ban prevented the administration from gathering evidence that citizens from the seven countries, including refugees, pose a serious threat of terrorism, a claim the judges did not buy.

When the court rejected the ban, the White House vowed to immediately and simultaneously appeal the decision and craft a new order, though Trump later acknowledged that delaying the first order might have helped it surmount legal challenges.

"Now if I would've done it in a month, everything would have been perfect," the president said in mid-February. "The problem is we would have wasted a lot of time, and maybe a lot of lives because a lot of bad people would have come into our country."

But the government didn't pursue its appeal. And the Pentagon and State Department have fought the White House about which countries should be included in the plan. And weeks have passed without the release of the new order, even though White House press secretary Sean Spicer said last week it was "finalized."

The next rollout, he said, would be "flawless."

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Trump, aboard Navy carrier, vows to boost defense spending

By KEN THOMAS, Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — President Donald Trump pledged to boost defense spending as he basked in the nation's military might aboard a next-generation Naval aircraft carrier on Thursday.

Wearing an olive green military jacket and blue ball cap, Trump vowed to mount "one of the largest" defense spending increases in history.

"Hopefully it's power we don't have to use, but if we do, they're in big, big trouble," Trump said.

Trump spoke from the Gerald R. Ford, a \$12.9 billion warship that is expected to be commissioned this year after cost overruns and delays. He touted his spending plans, saying he would provide "the finest equipment in the world" and give the military the "tools you need to prevent war."

The president also toured the carrier and met with sailors and military leaders. He saluted the sailors as he arrived on the carrier.

Before his remarks, Trump was asked about the revelation that Attorney General Jeff Sessions twice talked with Moscow's U.S. envoy during the campaign, contact that seems to contradict Sessions' sworn statements to Congress during his confirmation hearings.

While there were mounting calls for Sessions to resign or recuse himself, Trump stood by Sessions on Thursday, saying he had "total" confidence in his attorney general. Asked if Sessions should recuse himself, Trump said: "I don't think so."

Trump also said he "wasn't aware" that Sessions had spoken to Russia and said that he "probably did" speak truthfully to the Senate.

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During his trip to Newport News, Trump was joined aboard Air Force One by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. A draft budget plan released earlier this week by the White House would add \$54 billion to the Pentagon's projected budget, a 10 percent increase. The U.S. currently spends more than half trillion dollars on defense, more than the next seven countries combined.

"To keep America safe, we must provide the men and women of the United States military with the tools they need to prevent war," Trump said in his address to Congress on Tuesday night.

Trump, in his 2016 campaign, repeatedly pledged to rebuild what he called the nation's "depleted" military and told supporters at Regent University in Virginia Beach in October that the region's naval installations would be "right at the center of the action with the building of new ships."

He often argued that the U.S. military is too small to accomplish its missions and pledged to put the Navy on track to increase its active-duty fleet to 350 ships, compared to the current Navy plan of growing from 272 ships to 308 sometime after 2020.

The PCU Gerald R. Ford CVN 78, located at Newport News Shipbuilding, will be the first of the Navy's next generation of aircraft carriers and is expected to accommodate some 2,600 sailors.

Trump's speech to a joint session of Congress, his first as president, included his past calls for repealing the "defense sequester," or across-the-board budget cuts instituted by Congress. He will need the repeal to achieve the kinds of increased defense spending that he is seeking.

On Twitter follow Ken Thomas at <http://twitter.com/KThomasDC>

Syrian army retakes town of Palmyra as IS defenses crumble

By ZEINA KARAM and DOMINIQUE SOGUEL, Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's military announced on Thursday it has fully recaptured the historic town of Palmyra from the Islamic State group as the militants' defenses crumbled and IS fighters fled in the face of artillery fire and intense Russia-backed airstrikes.

The development marks the third time that the town — famed for its priceless Roman ruins and archaeological treasures IS had sought to destroy — has changed hands in one year.

It was also the second blow for the Islamic State group in Syria in a week, after Turkish backed opposition fighters seized the Syrian town of al-Bab from the militants on Feb. 23, following a grueling three month battle. In neighboring Iraq, the Sunni extremist group is fighting for survival in its last urban bastion in the western part of the city of Mosul.

For the Syrian government, the news was a welcome development against the backdrop of peace talks underway with the opposition in Switzerland.

"You are all invited to visit the historic city of Palmyra and witness its beauty, now that it has been liberated," the Damascus envoy to the U.N.-mediated talks, Bashar al-Ja'afari, told reporters in Geneva.

"Of course, counterterrorism operations will continue until the last inch of our territory is liberated from the hands of these foreign terrorist organizations, which are wreaking havoc in our country," he added.

The Damascus military statement said troops gained full control of the desert town in central Syria following a series of military operations carried out with the help of Russian air cover and in cooperation with "allied and friendly troops" — government shorthand for members of Lebanese militant Hezbollah group who are fighting along Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces.

IS defenses around Palmyra had begun to erode on Sunday, with government troops reaching the town's outskirts on Tuesday. The state SANA news agency reported earlier that government troops had entered the town's archaeological site, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, around mid-day, then the town itself, as IS militants fled the area.

This is the Syrian government's second campaign to retake Palmyra. It seized the town from Islamic State militants last March only to lose it again 10 months later.

Before the civil war gripped Syria in 2011, Palmyra was a top tourist attraction, drawing tens of thousands of visitors each year.

The Kremlin spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, had said earlier that Russian President Vladimir Putin was

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informed by his defense minister that Syrian troops had gained control of Palmyra, with support from Russian warplanes.

The Syrian government's push has relied on ground support from Hezbollah and Russian air cover, according to Hezbollah's media outlets.

Archeologists have decried what they say is extensive damage to its ruins.

Drone footage released by Russia's Defense Ministry earlier this month showed new damage to the facade of Palmyra's Roman-era theater and the adjoining Tetrapylon — a set of four monuments with four columns each at the center of the colonnaded road leading to the theater.

A 2014 report by a U.N. research agency disclosed satellite evidence of looting while the ruins were under Syrian military control. Opposition factions have also admitted to looting the antiquities for funds.

IS militants have twice used the town's Roman theater as a stage for mass killings, most recently in January, when they shot and beheaded a number of captives they said had tried to escape their December advance. Other IS killings were said to have taken place in the courtyard of the Palmyra museum and in a former Russian base in the town.

The developments in Palmyra came against the backdrop of the talks in Geneva, which have been without any tangible breakthroughs so far. Diplomats and negotiators have set their sights on modest achievements in the latest round, after a week of discussions centering on setting an agenda for future talks.

On Thursday, U.N. Special Envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura held another round of meetings with both the government delegation and opposition groups.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov told reporters Wednesday that "the parties have agreed to ... discuss all issues in a parallel way, on several tracks."

After a Damascus request, the issue of terrorism is also on the table, he had said. Russia is a key sponsor of Assad's government.

A top Syrian opposition negotiator, Nasr al-Hariri, said the talks would likely culminate in a closing ceremony on Friday and the parties may be back in Geneva for further discussions in a few weeks.

Setting the agenda and strategy to guide discussions has proven difficult as the main conflicting parties dig in their heels over form and semantics.

In Turkey, the country's foreign minister said that with the completion of an operation to retake the IS-held town of al-Bab in northern Syria, Turkish troops will head to the Syrian town of Manbij next, to oust U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish forces that Ankara views as terrorists and a threat to Turkey.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Thursday that Turkey would not shy away from attacking the Kurdish group that dominates the Syria Democratic Forces, which captured Manbij last year after weeks of deadly fighting with IS.

He renewed calls for the new U.S. administration not to support the Kurdish forces. Cavusoglu stressed that an operation to take Manbij had not started yet, but acknowledged that skirmishes between Turkish-backed forces and the Kurdish fighters may have occurred.

That front line in northern Syria was further complicated by a concurrent announcement by the Syrian Kurdish side on Thursday that they had agreed with Russia to withdraw from some of the territory between al-Bab and Manbij, to make room for a buffer.

The Manbij Military Council, part of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, said that under the deal, they will withdraw from a front line with rival Turkish-backed forces near the Euphrates River. This will allow Syrian government forces to create a buffer between them.

However, Cavusoglu denied any such agreement was reached.

There was no immediate comment from the Syrian government. The Turkish and Syrian authorities have long regarded each other with thinly-veiled hostility.

Soguel reported from Geneva. Associated Press writers Philip Issa in Beirut, Kirsten Grieshaber in Berlin, and Albert Aji in Damascus, Syria, contributed to this report.

Kremlin: Sessions uproar an impediment to fixing relations

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV, Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A senior lawmaker called it “hysteria.” The Foreign Ministry said it was “media vandalism.” And the Kremlin lamented the “emotional atmosphere” currently in Washington about Attorney General Jeff Sessions’ meetings with a Russian diplomat, saying it could thwart efforts to mend relations.

The uproar is widely seen in Moscow as part of efforts by President Donald Trump’s political foes to block any possible attempts at a rapprochement with Russia.

President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters he did not know anything about the meetings last year between Ambassador Sergei Kislyak and Sessions, who at that time was a U.S. senator. Sessions also was a policy adviser to Trump’s campaign.

News of the two meetings has spurred calls in Congress for Sessions to recuse himself from an investigation into alleged Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election. Sessions’ office has said the meetings were in his capacity as a senator rather than as a Trump campaign adviser.

Peskov argued it was normal for an ambassador to meet with officials and lawmakers, adding that “the more such meetings an ambassador has, the more efficient his work is.”

Asked if the accusations against Sessions smacked of McCarthyism, he answered cautiously that it’s not the Kremlin’s job to make judgments about U.S. domestic policy.

Peskov described the reaction to the news of the Sessions’ meetings as “an emotional atmosphere leading to resistance to the idea of any U.S.-Russia dialogue.”

“The negative effect for the idea to develop at least some dialogue with Russia is evident,” he added.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, was more combative, denouncing what she described as the U.S. “media vandalism.”

“Let me open a military secret for you: It’s part of the diplomatic job to have contacts in the country they are posted to,” she said sarcastically. “It’s their obligation to meet with officials and members of the political establishment.”

Zakharova also drew a literary allusion to George Orwell’s “1984.”

“The media in the United States have become such a Big Brother, moving far beyond professional ethics and their own competence, raising accusations and passing judgments by fabricating false information,” she said.

Alexei Pushkov, the head of the information policy committee in the upper house of the Russian parliament, described Democrats’ demands for Sessions’ resignation as a “borderless paranoia.”

“Hysteria in the U.S. has driven politicians into a trap,” Pushkov tweeted. “You met a Russian? That’s an end to your career. You concealed it? You go to prison. The spirit of Joseph McCarthy has been waiting for its hour to come.”

Trump has repeatedly said he wants to improve relations with Russia, but Moscow appears increasingly frustrated by the lack of visible progress, as well as by the support from Trump administration officials for continuing sanctions imposed on Russia for its interference in Ukraine.

Most Russian observers and news media cast the news over Trump’s alleged links with Russia as attempts by the Democrats to undermine the Republican’s agenda.

Fyodor Lukyanov, the head of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policies, a group of leading Russian foreign policy experts, said “the highest level of paranoia vis-a-vis Russia” in the U.S. makes any thaw in relations unlikely.

“The whole hysteria in the United States around Russia and the unprecedented presence of Russian issue and Russian factor in the U.S. domestic politics to me has one particular aim: to limit any space for maneuvering for President Trump in a relationship with Russia as much as possible, not to allow him to change the nature of relationship,” Lukyanov said.

“From this point of view their efforts are successful, because we see that his tone is changing,” he added.

Lukyanov ridiculed the portrayal of Russia as a “kingmaker everywhere in the world” and deplored what he called a “self-defeating and self-destructive approach” by the U.S. establishment.

“Everything we hear isn’t harming Russia that much but is harming the credibility of the United States,”

he said. "If Americans themselves believe that countries and leaders outside the U.S. can decide how they vote, that's very bad."

Associated Press writers Nataliya Vasilyeva, Jim Heintz and Alexander Roslyakov contributed to this report.

Wave of US airstrikes target al-Qaida in Yemen

By AHMED AL-HAJ and LOLITA C. BALDOR, Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — U.S. forces carried out more than 20 airstrikes against al-Qaida in Yemen on Thursday, killing at least seven militants in the largest operation since a ground raid a month ago that left a Navy SEAL and more than two dozen Yemenis dead.

The strikes targeted al-Qaida positions, weapons systems and equipment in a remote and mountainous area in central Yemen.

Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said the strikes were aimed at degrading the group's ability to "coordinate external terror attacks" and to limit its use of Yemen as a "safe space for terror plotting."

Yemeni security officials told The Associated Press that U.S. jets and drones targeted at least six districts where the provinces of Bayda, Shabwa and Abyan meet. An official said the strikes killed seven al-Qaida militants in Shabwa and Abyan.

The pre-dawn attack shook houses and awoke sleeping residents, many of whom fled in fear, as smoke billowed into the sky and explosions lit up the horizon, according to local tribal leaders, who spoke on condition of anonymity out of security concerns.

Al-Qaida issued a statement claiming that local fighters foiled a U.S. ground raid in the southern province of Abyan. It said U.S. naval vessels launched a wave of random shelling to provide cover for the forces to pull out.

Several U.S. officials flatly denied that the U.S. participated in any ground raid in Yemen. They said U.S. airstrikes targeted al-Qaida artillery and other sites, and that no U.S. Navy ships participated in the mission.

None of the officials were authorized to discuss the matter publicly, so they spoke on condition of anonymity.

Thursday's airstrikes came a month after U.S. special operations forces carried out a raid in Bayda in which a Navy SEAL was killed, six American soldiers were wounded and a military aircraft suffered a hard landing and had to be destroyed.

The attack was launched just days after President Donald Trump's inauguration. The administration and senior military officials have said the raid yielded valuable intelligence on the group.

Survivors and witnesses said at least 25 Yemenis were killed in the attack, including 10 children and nine women, sparking outrage in Yemen and prompting the government to ask Washington for a review of the Jan. 29 assault.

One U.S. official said Thursday's airstrikes had been planned for weeks, and were being discussed before the deadly January raid.

A week ago, Human Rights Watch called on the U.S. to investigate the January raid, saying it needs to "provide a full accounting of possible laws-of-war violations."

Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, as the Yemen affiliate is known, has long been seen as the global network's most dangerous branch, and has been implicated in a number of attempted attacks on the U.S. homeland.

The group has recently exploited the chaos of Yemen's civil war, which pits Shiite Houthi rebels and allied army units against a Saudi-led coalition battling to restore the internationally recognized government.

The United States has been waging an air campaign against al-Qaida in Yemen for well over a decade, and has killed a number of senior militants in drone strikes, most recently in 2015, when the group's top leader was killed in the southern city of Mukalla.

Baldor reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Maggie Michael in Cairo contributed to this

report.

EU Parliament lifts Le Pen immunity over gruesome tweets

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN, Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The European Parliament voted Thursday to lift the immunity from prosecution for French far-right leader Marine Le Pen for tweeting gruesome images of Islamic State violence, a crime that carries up to three years in prison in France.

The legislature voted by a broad majority in Brussels to clear the way for the possible prosecution of Le Pen over tweets she made in December 2015 showing executions, including the killing of American reporter James Foley by Islamic State extremists.

French prosecutors in the city of Nanterre had asked lawmakers to lift the immunity that Le Pen enjoys as a member of the European Parliament.

Le Pen, a leading candidate in this year's French presidential election, posted her tweets in response to a journalist who drew an analogy between her anti-immigration National Front party and IS extremists. She was trying to show the difference between the two groups but the effort backfired, drawing widespread condemnation.

Le Pen took down the tweet showing the killing of Foley after his family protested, but left up another image of violence by Islamic State extremists.

Under French law, publishing violent images can be punished by up to three years in jail and a fine of 75,000 euros (\$78,800).

Before the vote, Le Pen on Thursday defended her tweets, saying she just wanted to condemn the barbaric practices of IS, also known as Daesh.

"I'm a lawmaker. I'm in my role when I condemn Daesh, this is my role," she told French TV station LCP. "And if I don't fulfill my role, I'm worth nothing as a lawmaker. Nobody can prevent a republic's representative from condemning Daesh's acts of violence."

Her campaign manager, David Rachline, denounced the lawmakers' actions.

The EU parliament decision "marks the difference between those who denounce and fight Islamist fundamentalism and those who want to hide the atrocities," Rachline said.

The lifting of Le Pen's immunity does not relate to another corruption case centered on her aide at the European Parliament, who is suspected of being paid from EU money while working on her party's behalf. Le Pen's chief of staff, Catherine Griset, was handed a preliminary charge of receiving money through a breach of trust.

The campaign to replace France's unpopular Socialist President Francois Hollande has also been rocked by corruption allegations targeting another top contender, conservative candidate Francois Fillon.

Fillon, a former prime minister and once the front-runner in France's two-round April-May presidential election, announced Wednesday that he was summoned to appear before judges on March 15 for allegedly using taxpayers' money to pay family members for jobs that may not have existed. Fillon, however, vowed to stay in the race.

Fillon's troubles have benefited centrist independent candidate Emmanuel Macron, who on Thursday announced his policy platform, including boosting European unity and combating populism and corruption.

To counter the growing political scandals, Macron said he wants to shrink the size of parliament, introduce term limits and ban officials from hiring family members.

He wants to continue good security cooperation with the U.S. despite his ideological differences with Donald Trump. Macron on Thursday called Trump's skepticism toward the Paris Agreement to fight global warming "a deep mistake" and expressed opposition to Trump's proposed U.S. protectionist trade measures.

Macron said he would not comment on Le Pen's situation, then added "fortunately our national and European institutions are not losing their common sense."

The top two vote-getters in France's April 23 presidential ballot move on to compete in the May 7 presidential runoff. Others in the running include Socialist Benoit Hamon and far-left candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon.

Snap stock to debut Thursday after better-than-expected IPO

By BARBARA ORTUTAY and MICHAEL LIEDTKE, AP Technology Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — The company behind the popular messaging app Snapchat is expected to start trading Thursday after a better-than-expected stock offering.

Snap Inc. passed its first major test on Wall Street on Wednesday as it priced its initial public offering of 200 million shares at \$17 each. That is above the expected range of \$14 to \$16 and values the Los Angeles company at \$24 billion.

Snap's IPO is one of the most anticipated for a technology company since Twitter's stock market debut in 2013. Co-founders Evan Spiegel and Robert Murphy will retain controlling power over all matters at Snap; the Class A stock being sold in the IPO has no voting power. Snap is getting the ticker symbol "SNAP" on the New York Stock Exchange.

PROSPECTS FOR SNAP

For Snap, which started its official bid to go public last Halloween, the looming question now is whether investors are in for a trick or a treat.

Snap's Snapchat app is best known for disappearing messages and quirky facial filters for jazzing up selfies. It's popular with teenagers and younger millennials. While Facebook launched in the era of desktop computers and Twitter in text-based mobile, Snapchat jumped straight to photos and videos. In a sense, it's ahead of the game.

But its user growth has slowed down in recent months.

Blame Facebook. Growth slowed to a crawl since Facebook's Instagram cloned Snapchat's "stories" in August. With the feature, photos and videos shared by users play in a loop for 24 hours, then disappear. The feature helped Snapchat recover from stagnant growth before, but now it's no longer unique to Snapchat. After adding 36 million daily active users during the first half of last year, Snapchat picked up just 15 million in the second half.

The number of people downloading Instagram's app has been accelerating during the past six months, suggesting a gradual shift away from the Snapchat app, based on an analysis financial advice site ValuePenguin did of activity in Apple's app store.

While the higher-than-expected pricing looks good for Snap, its troubles aren't over.

"What that number means for the longer term — very little," said Chi-Hua Chien, managing partner at Goodwater Capital who originated the VC firm Accel Partners' investment in Facebook and later invested in Twitter while at another firm.

Twitter, for example, shot up nearly 73 percent on its first trading day and now trades well below its IPO price. Facebook, meanwhile, saw its stock decline sharply for a few months after going public. Now, it's trading more than three times its IPO price, near a record high.

TIME IS LIMITED

Snapchat started 2017 with 158 million daily active users, most of whom are people in their teens, 20s and early 30s. But many of them are finding Snapchat harder to fit in with daily life.

Evan Rodriguez, a 20-year old student at Abilene Christian University in Texas, used to send snaps of funny stuff he saw throughout the day, just as his friends did. For instance, he might take video of a friend walking across campus and send it via Snapchat — "Hey, I see you!"

But something about the whole thing "just became cumbersome," Rodriguez said. "It was like one more thing to do."

Celia Schlekewey, a 20-year-old University of Washington student who also works at a small business, liked the fact that when she first joined, it was "all just about sending pictures to your friends." Over time, the stories feature became a "big deal," and keeping up with friends and famous people became time-consuming.

"It got to the point that if I wanted to keep up with everyone's story, I'd have to sit on my phone and watch it for 25 minutes," she said.

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Easing this feeling of pressure will be key for Snapchat, especially if it wants to attract older users. They might not have as much time — or might not feel like spending that time on social media — as their young millennial counterparts.

SNAPCHAT'S IDENTITY

Since Snapchat was never about typing, the phone's camera is already its main focus. In fact, CEO Evan Spiegel has taken to calling it a "camera company," and this is how the company describes itself in its IPO documents.

That doesn't necessarily just mean that Snap wants to make cameras, though last year it launched Spectacles, actual physical sunglasses that snap photos for you.

Snapchat is more about image-based communication, said Chien of Goodwater Capital.

Open the app, and you open a camera. Turn the camera to selfie mode, and you get a bunch of filters to overlay on your face. Because the images you send eventually disappear, there's less pressure to put forward your best self.

Snapchat has often drawn comparisons to both Twitter, which also faces stagnant growth, and Facebook, whose users are highly engaged, just like Snapchat's. Ultimately, Snap doesn't have to be like either to succeed and can forge its own path and identity.

LaVon Murphy, 45, a photographer in Portland, Oregon, uses Facebook to keep up with friends, Instagram to express herself through pictures and Twitter to keep up with the news. She added Snapchat recently to stay in touch with her 17-year-old son.

"I don't really understand why he and his friends use the app so extensively, but I am trying to keep up," she said. "It allows me to be silly and show a silly side of myself to my son and it allows him to be silly with me."

Snap just needs millions more like Murphy willing to make time for yet another social network.

Liedtke reported from San Francisco.

Lawyers sue Chinese authorities for not getting rid of smog

By LOUISE WATT, Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Lawyer Cheng Hai has an itemized list of compensation demands from Beijing authorities over the city's smog: 65 yuan (\$9) for having to buy face masks, 100 yuan (\$15) for seeing a doctor for a sore throat and 9,999 yuan (\$1,500) for emotional distress.

Fed up with what they consider halfhearted efforts to fight air pollution, Cheng and like-minded lawyers are putting China's legal system to the test by suing the governments of the capital and its surrounding regions.

"Some people might think that air pollution is inevitable with economic development, but they are wrong," said Cheng, 64. "We have laws to protect air quality, and major pollution can be avoided if they are fully enforced."

The lawsuits demonstrate the mounting frustration of China's middle class at the country's notoriously bad air, a topic that is expected to be discussed at the upcoming annual meeting of the country's parliament three years after Premier Li Keqiang declared a "war on pollution" at the same event.

The dissatisfaction comes even as authorities in the capital are closing factories, getting rid of coal-fired boilers and taking older, heavier-polluting vehicles off the road.

Official data show those measures are having some effect, with Beijing showing year-on-year improvements since 2013.

Yet the city's average reading of the tiny particulate matter PM2.5 — considered a good gauge of air pollution — is still seven times what the World Health Organization considers safe.

"We are the victims of smog and we are entitled to ask for an apology and compensation from the government," said another of the lawyers, Yu Wensheng, 50, from Beijing.

The suits, which accuse authorities of failing to deal effectively with the smog, are important to show that the government is not above the law, said Yu.

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"If the government is not restricted by law, then what else can restrict it?" said Yu, who has spent time in detention accused of supporting Hong Kong pro-democracy protests in 2014 and for speaking up in support of detained rights lawyers.

Along with Beijing, the group has attempted to sue the neighboring province of Hebei and the port city of Tianjin. The region generally suffers the worst pollution in China and forms a front line in the central government's battle against the scourge.

The lawyers say their cases are more about drawing attention to government inaction rather than winning a settlement.

China is grappling with serious pollution resulting from three decades of breakneck growth that vastly improved living standards for many, but took a disastrous toll on the environment.

As people became more aware of the health issues associated with smog, the declaration of a "war on pollution" at the National People's Congress in 2014 resulted in measures to reduce pollutants in the air, including capping coal consumption. However, a particularly heavy bout of smog at the beginning of this year still triggered pollution "red alerts" in more than 20 cities.

Beijing plans to spend \$2.7 billion on fighting air pollution this year, part of which would be used to close or upgrade more than 3,000 polluting factories, replace the use of coal with clean energy on the outskirts of the city and phase out 300,000 high-polluting older vehicles, according to the city's acting mayor, Cai Qi.

Despite efforts to enlist the public in the anti-pollution struggle, China's authoritarian Communist government heavily discourages protests and other forms of independent action, and at least one of the initial five lawyers in the case appears to have withdrawn his lawsuit under pressure from local authorities.

The Beijing press office said the government hadn't received any notices about the lawsuits and was unable to comment. The governments of Hebei and Tianjin didn't respond to requests for comment.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection has been sending out inspection teams to check on how well local governments are implementing smog control measures. On Monday, it announced that the lists of companies that have to halt production during periods of heavy pollution drawn up by three lower-level governments under Beijing and Hebei included companies that were already no longer operating.

A Beijing court has already twice rejected attempts by the lawyers to file cases, while a court in Hebei province's capital, Shijiazhuang, has yet to respond to a case filed more than two months ago. Similar attempts to file suits in previous years have also been derailed, and while a change in the law has allowed some environmental NGOs to bring cases against polluters since 2015, they are discouraged to do so by the high costs of investigating and proving environmental damage, and potential threats and harassment from those they're suing.

Wang Canfa, the director of a center that helps people bring lawsuits relating to pollution, said it would be difficult for the plaintiffs to establish a link between the governments' actions and the harm they have suffered.

"In this circumstance, the governments are not the ones that inflict harm, rather it is the companies that discharge emissions, and individuals who drive cars, who are the polluters," said Wang, who teaches at the China University of Political Science and Law.

Still, the lawyers appear to feel it's worth the risks and frustrations to make their point.

Another of them, Lu Tingge, who filed the Hebei case, said his mother suffers respiratory illnesses and the pollution makes it difficult for her to breathe.

He's asking for 10 yuan (\$1.50) in compensation for masks, 5,000 yuan (\$730) for "spiritual damage" and an official apology for the harm to his life and work.

"I know my chances of winning are small," said Lu, 47. "But I just want to make people understand that the government bears the main responsibility for dealing with smog and air pollution."

Associated Press researcher Yu Bing contributed to this report.

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Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 3, the 62nd day of 2017. There are 303 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 3, 1931, "The Star-Spangled Banner" became the national anthem of the United States as President Herbert Hoover signed a congressional resolution.

On this date:

In 1845, Florida became the 27th state.

In 1849, the U.S. Department of the Interior was established.

In 1887, Anne Sullivan arrived at the Tuscomb, Alabama, home of Captain and Mrs. Arthur H. Keller to become the teacher for their deaf and blind 6-year-old daughter, Helen.

In 1913, more than 5,000 suffragists marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., a day before the presidential inauguration of Woodrow Wilson.

In 1923, Time magazine, founded by Briton Hadden and Henry R. Luce, made its debut.

In 1945, the Allies fully secured the Philippine capital of Manila from Japanese forces during World War II.

In 1959, the United States launched the Pioneer 4 spacecraft, which flew by the moon. Comedian Lou Costello died in East Los Angeles three days before his 53rd birthday.

In 1960, Lucille Ball filed for divorce from her husband, Desi Arnaz, a day after they'd finished filming the last episode of "The Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show" ("Lucy Meets the Mustache") on Arnaz's 43rd birthday.

In 1974, a Turkish Airlines DC-10 crashed shortly after takeoff from Orly Airport in Paris, killing all 346 people on board.

In 1987, entertainer Danny Kaye died in Los Angeles at age 76.

In 1991, motorist Rodney King was severely beaten by Los Angeles police officers in a scene captured on amateur video. Twenty-five people were killed when a United Airlines Boeing 737-200 crashed while approaching the Colorado Springs airport.

In 2002, voters in Switzerland approved joining the United Nations, abandoning almost 200 years of formal neutrality.

Ten years ago: President George W. Bush handed out hugs to residents who survived killer tornadoes that ripped through Alabama and Georgia and offered encouraging words at Enterprise High School, where students were grieving the loss of eight classmates.

Five years ago: Mitt Romney rolled to a double-digit victory in Washington state's Republican presidential caucuses, his fourth campaign triumph in a row. Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh apologized on his website to Georgetown University law student Sandra Fluke, whom he had branded a "slut" and "prostitute" after she testified to congressional Democrats that she wanted her college health plan to cover her birth control. Eleven passengers and five workers were killed when two trains crashed head-on in southern Poland.

One year ago: Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz leveled withering criticism at Donald Trump's "flexible" policy positions and personal ethics during a Republican presidential debate in Detroit. President Barack Obama visited Milwaukee to highlight how his signature health insurance overhaul had helped millions of Americans gain coverage. North Korea fired six short-range projectiles into the sea hours after the U.N. Security Council approved the toughest sanctions on Pyongyang in two decades.

Today's Birthdays: Socialite Lee Radziwill is 84. Singer-musician Mike Pender (The Searchers) is 76. Movie producer-director George Miller is 72. Actress Hattie Winston is 72. Singer Jennifer Warnes is 70. Actor-director Tim Kazurinsky is 67. Singer-musician Robyn Hitchcock is 64. Actor Robert Gossett is 63. Rock musician John Lilley is 63. Actress Miranda Richardson is 59. Rock musician John Bigham is 58. Radio personality Ira Glass is 58. Actress Mary Page Keller is 56. Olympic track and field gold medalist Jackie Joyner-Kersey is 55. Former NFL player and College Football Hall of Famer Herschel Walker is 55. Actress Laura Harring is 53. Contemporary Christian musician Duncan Phillips (Newsboys) is 53. Rapper-actor Tone Loc (lohk) is 51. Actress Julie Bowen is 47. Country singer Brett Warren (The Warren Brothers) is 46. Ac-

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tor David Faustino is 43. Gospel singer Jason Crabb is 40. Singer Ronan Keating (Boyzone) is 40. Rapper Lil' Flip is 36. Actress Jessica Biel is 35. Rock musician Blower (AKA Joe Garvey) (Hinder) is 33. Pop singer Camila Cabello is 20.

Thought for Today: "Happiness always looks small while you hold it in your hands, but let it go, and you learn at once how big and precious it is." — Maxim Gorky, Russian writer (1868-1936).