

Groton Daily Independent

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BLIZZARD WARNING

...BLIZZARD WARNING NOW IN EFFECT UNTIL 9 AM CST FRIDAY...

...WINTER STORM WARNING IS CANCELLED...

* WHAT...Blizzard conditions expected. Additional snow accumulations of 6 to 11 inches. Winds gusting as high as 50 mph.

* WHERE...Portions of northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota.

* WHEN...Until 9 AM CST Friday.

* ADDITIONAL DETAILS...Travel could be very difficult. Areas of blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility. The hazardous conditions could impact the morning or evening commute. The cold wind chills as low as 20 below zero could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 30 minutes.

A Blizzard Warning means severe winter weather conditions are expected or occurring. Falling and blowing snow with strong winds and poor visibilities are likely. This will lead to whiteout conditions, making travel extremely dangerous. Do not travel. If you must travel, have a winter survival kit with you. If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle.



**Holiday
Trash Pick-Up**

Garbage pick-up will NOT be on Christmas Day instead pick-up will be the following day, Wednesday, December 26!!

Garbage WILL be picked up on New Year's Day, January 1st!!

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located at 10 East Railroad Ave. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.



Put our experienced team to work for you!

GROTON
Ford
GROTONFORD.COM 605-397-2311

Front Porch Manager Wanted

Immediate opening for Restaurant General Manager at The Front Porch Bar & Grill in Langford SD. Hiring bonus available! Salary DOE. Must be 21 years old. Contact Suzie Easthouse at (605) 493-6570 or email resume by to langfordfrontporch@venture-comm.net. (1227.0111)

Homecare Services Caregivers

Flexible, part time positions available in the Groton area. Home Care Services is looking for friendly dependable people to provide care and companionship for elderly and disabled people in their homes. You will be assisting our clients with personal care needs, meal preparations, light housekeeping, errands and other tasks. If you have a passion for helping others and need a flexible schedule, please call our office at (605) 225-1076 or 1-800-899-2578. (1218.0101)

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South Dakota Governor
Dennis Daugaard



Thank You and Goodbye

This is the last column I will write as Governor of South Dakota, and I want to say "thank you."

Thank you to the people of South Dakota. It was a great honor when you placed your confidence in me. Over these past eight years, I have always tried to work hard to make our state better. Whenever times were tough, your strength encouraged me.

I first saw that strength during the Missouri River floods of 2011. Releases from the Oahe Dam were nearly triple the previous record. Large portions of Pierre, and nearly all of Fort Pierre and Dakota Dunes, were threatened by the flooding. In a matter of days, we filled hundreds of thousands of sandbags and we built emergency levies that saved most of Pierre, Fort Pierre and Dakota Dunes. Thousands of South Dakotans stepped up – National Guard, law enforcement, first responders, busloads of volunteers, hundreds of truckers, and even prison inmates. As I said at the time – "As high as the floodwaters rose, South Dakota rose even higher."

I saw that same spirit again and again over the eight years I've been governor – during Winter Storm Atlas, tornadoes in Wessington Springs and Delmont, fires in the Black Hills. I'll never forget that selflessness – South Dakotans helping each other. Those weren't the easiest moments, but they were the times when I was most proud to be governor of South Dakota.

I also thank the many fine people who have worked so hard on my behalf – in my cabinet, on my staff, or leading important work in state agencies. South Dakotans can be proud of the public servants who work for state government. Their advice and hard work helped me make better decisions.

In particular, I thank Lt. Governor Matt Michels. He has been a great lieutenant governor, in so many ways. He has helped with disaster response. He has led low-profile efforts to improve state risk management, insurance, bonding, and internal controls. More than anything else, Matt Michels cares about people – all people. Matt is a great South Dakotan and our state has been fortunate to have him serving us.

My wife, Linda, has been an outstanding First Lady. She led state efforts to reduce infant mortality. She encouraged more people to become foster parents. She read to thousands of students, visiting 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classes in 285 schools. But as much as she's been a terrific first lady, she's been a loving and devoted wife. Along with our three children, Laura, Sara, and Chris, my family have always been loyal and supportive, and I'm looking forward to spending more time with them.

I owe much to my parents. My mom and dad were both born deaf, but they didn't allow that to deter them. They worked hard on our farm for years, and once we were old enough, my sisters and I worked hard too. When Dad had financial troubles and had to sell the livestock and equipment, he didn't use his deafness as an excuse. He and my mother drove fifty miles, every day, to work as janitors in the dormitories at Augustana. It was work that some people would not accept. But my parents taught me an important lesson – that all work has dignity.

Most people wouldn't call my father a particularly successful man. He died with very little. But he worked hard, he took care of himself, and he paid his bills. He was self-reliant, persistent, and frugal. He was successful to me. South Dakota is a special place because there are many, many people who carry those same values with them and set that same example in their lives, every day.

That is why I love South Dakota. That is why it has been my great honor to be your governor. And that is why I know that our best days are still yet to come.

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New Storm Brings Heavy Snow, Will Impact Travel Plans

PIERRE, S.D. – A post-Christmas snowstorm, featuring heavy snow, high winds and rain, is now making its way across South Dakota and is expected to impact travel through week's end.

Parts of the state started to see snow and blowing snow early Wednesday morning. The heaviest snowfall amounts of 10 inches or more are expected Thursday and Friday in the central and northeast parts of the state. Light snow will change over to rain in the south central and southeast Wednesday before turning back to snow again Thursday.

Those conditions will make travel difficult. Wind gusts of 30 to 42 miles per hour will cause blowing and drifting snow with reduced visibility. Freezing rain also could lead to icy roads.

Travelers are urged to be flexible with their travel plans during this storm and to make adjustments as needed. People who must travel are strongly encouraged to visit <https://www.safetravelusa.com/sd/>, call 511 or download the SDDOT 511 app to check the latest road conditions and travel advisories before heading out.

Travelers are reminded that SDDOT crews will plow until early evening hours as conditions allow and it is safe for the drivers. After that, winter maintenance will be suspended and will resume about 5 a.m. the next morning, weather permitting. With the significant forecasted snow totals and high winds, it will take some time for crews to get roads clear and open again. If an interstate is closed, do not assume other highways are in any better condition.

The state Departments of Public Safety and Transportation remind travelers to take the following safety precautions:

Travel during the day and use highly traveled roads and highways when possible.

Be flexible and cancel travel plans if weather conditions warrant.

If the interstate is closed, secondary roads are not going to be any better and may be worse.

When driving in fog, use headlights.

Keep family and friends informed of your travel schedule and route.

If you travel, wear a seatbelt. Keep a winter weather survival kit in your car and a charged cell phone with location turned on in your car, but don't rely on the phone to get you out of trouble.

If you get stranded, stay with your vehicle.

Consider stocking food and water if you are in a remote area of the state.

Take care of livestock and outdoor animals ahead of the storm.



Snow Removal Notice
With the impending winter storm,
Groton City residents are
reminded to remove all vehicles,
trailers, campers, etc.
from city streets.
Your cooperation is
greatly appreciated.

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Today in Weather History

December 27, 1959: Precipitation began as freezing rain on the morning of the 27th throughout the eastern half of South Dakota, changing to snow mixed with occasional sleet late on the 27th, then continued as mostly snow through the late afternoon of the 28th. Glaze caused extensive breakage of tree limbs and power and telephone lines in southeast sections of the state and in scattered communities in the northeast counties. More than 40 communities were without telephone service for more than 24 hours. Highway travel was very dangerous; one man was killed when a tractor skidded on an icy highway and overturned on him in Kingsbury County. Strong winds averaging 20 to 25 mph both dates increased breakage of ice-laded utility wires and caused drifting and blocking of highways by the 3 to 6 inch snowfall. Damage and repair costs to utility lines were estimated at \$400,000.

December 27, 1987: A winter storm gave some freezing rain and snow to southern and eastern South Dakota and southwest and west central Minnesota on the 27th and 28th. In Minnesota, freezing rain began Sunday morning the 27th before changing to heavy snow, which extended into the 28th. The heaviest snowfall was across the high terrain of southwest Minnesota. In southern and eastern South Dakota, six to twelve inches of snow fell. Strong northwest winds of 20-40 mph hampered travel and snow removal. Snow drifts up to 6 feet deep were common. Across many areas of southern Minnesota, visibilities were reduced to zero due to blowing snow. Snowfall amounts in South Dakota included 12 inches in DeSmet; 10 inches in Wessington Springs and Madison; 9 inches in Huron; 8 inches in Pierre, Brookings, Mission and McCook County; 7 inches in Sioux Falls, Kadoka, Pine Ridge, and Martin. 8 inches also fell in Watertown and Highmore, with 7 inches at Bryant and 6 inches in Clear Lake.

December 27, 1987: Today marks the end of the infamous 2-day ice storm which began as freezing rain and sleet before sunrise on Christmas Day in Oklahoma. This ice storm left parts of Oklahoma without power for over a week. Sleet prevailed across the western and northern parts of Oklahoma City, while freezing rain devastated southern and eastern parts of the metro area. Despite heavy sleet and ice accumulations of up to 2 inches, total snowfall was only a trace.

December 27, 2001: Typhoon Vamei forms in the South China Sea, about 100 miles north of the Equator. Vamei is the first recorded tropical cyclone to develop within 1.5 degrees of latitude about 104 miles of the equator.

1869 - A post Christmas storm in New York and Vermont produced record storm totals of 30 inches at Burlington, VT, and 39 inches at Montpelier VT. A public emergency was declared in Vermont. (David Ludlum)

1892 - An Atlantic coast storm produced a record 18.6 inches of snow at Norfolk, VA, including 17.7 inches in 24 hours. The storm also produced 9.5 inches of snow at Raleigh NC, and brought snow to northern Florida for the first time in 35 years. (26th- 28th) (The Weather Channel)

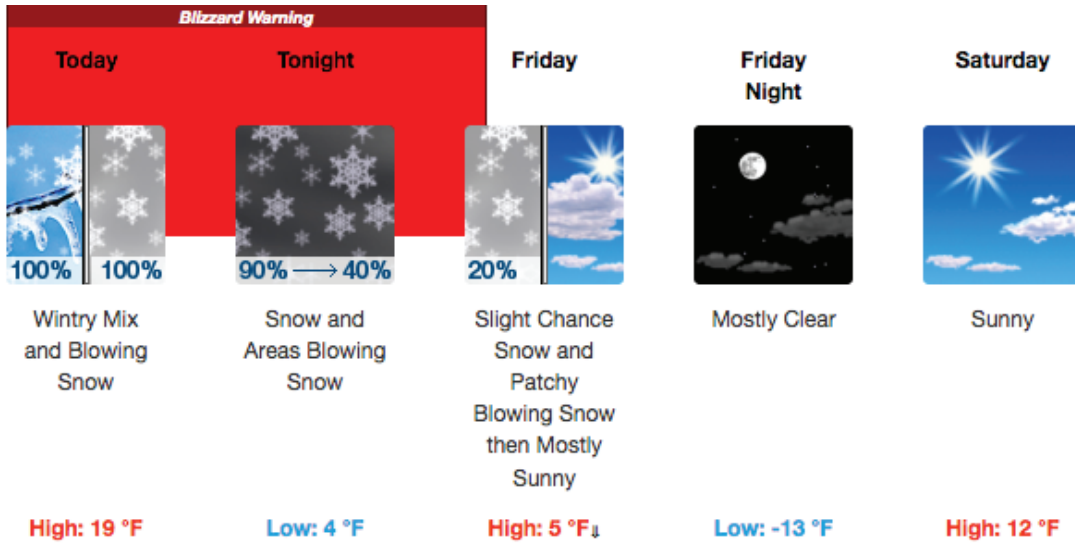
1982 - The worst Louisiana rainstorm in more than 100 years came to an end. More than 18 inches fell at Vinton, LA, during the three day storm. Flooding was widespread, and property damage was estimated at 100 to 200 million dollars. President Reagan visited the state and declared ten parishes in northeastern Louisiana disaster areas. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm produced snow and high winds in Wyoming, Colorado and Nebraska. Denver CO experienced its worst snowstorm since December 1983 as high winds gusting to 46 mph created near blizzard conditions, whipping the fifteen inch snow into drifts five feet high, and closing Stapleton Airport. Snowfall totals in the foothills southwest of Denver ranged up to 42 inches, at Intercanyon. Blizzard conditions raged across southeastern Wyoming through the day, stranding 300 holiday travelers in the tiny town of Chugwater. Heavier snowfall totals included 19 inches at La Grange WY, and 22 inches at Elsmere NE. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Severe thunderstorms developing along a cold front in the south central U.S. spawned a dozen tornadoes in Mississippi between early afternoon and sunrise the following day. A tornado at Harpersville destroyed five chicken homes killing thousands of chickens. Strong thunderstorm winds gusted to 80 mph at Rolling Fork MS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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Winter Driving

Check road closure information before you head out!



North Dakota

www.dot.nd.gov/travel-info-v2/

South Dakota

www.safetravelusa.com/sd

Minnesota

www.511mn.org/

- * Take it SLOW on icy roads
- * Drive cautiously and defensively
- * Inform others of your travel plans and times

Check out your latest forecast

www.weather.gov/abr

graphic created:
12/25/2018 3:27 PM

Published on: 12/25/2018 at 3:29PM

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Yesterday's Weather

High Outside Temp: 29 °F at 9:57 PM

Low Outside Temp: 13 °F at 1:49 AM

High Gust: 33 mph at 6:49 PM

Precip: About 6" snow

Today's Info

Record High: 54° in 1928, 1907

Record Low: -29° in 1914

Average High: 23°F

Average Low: 3°F

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.43

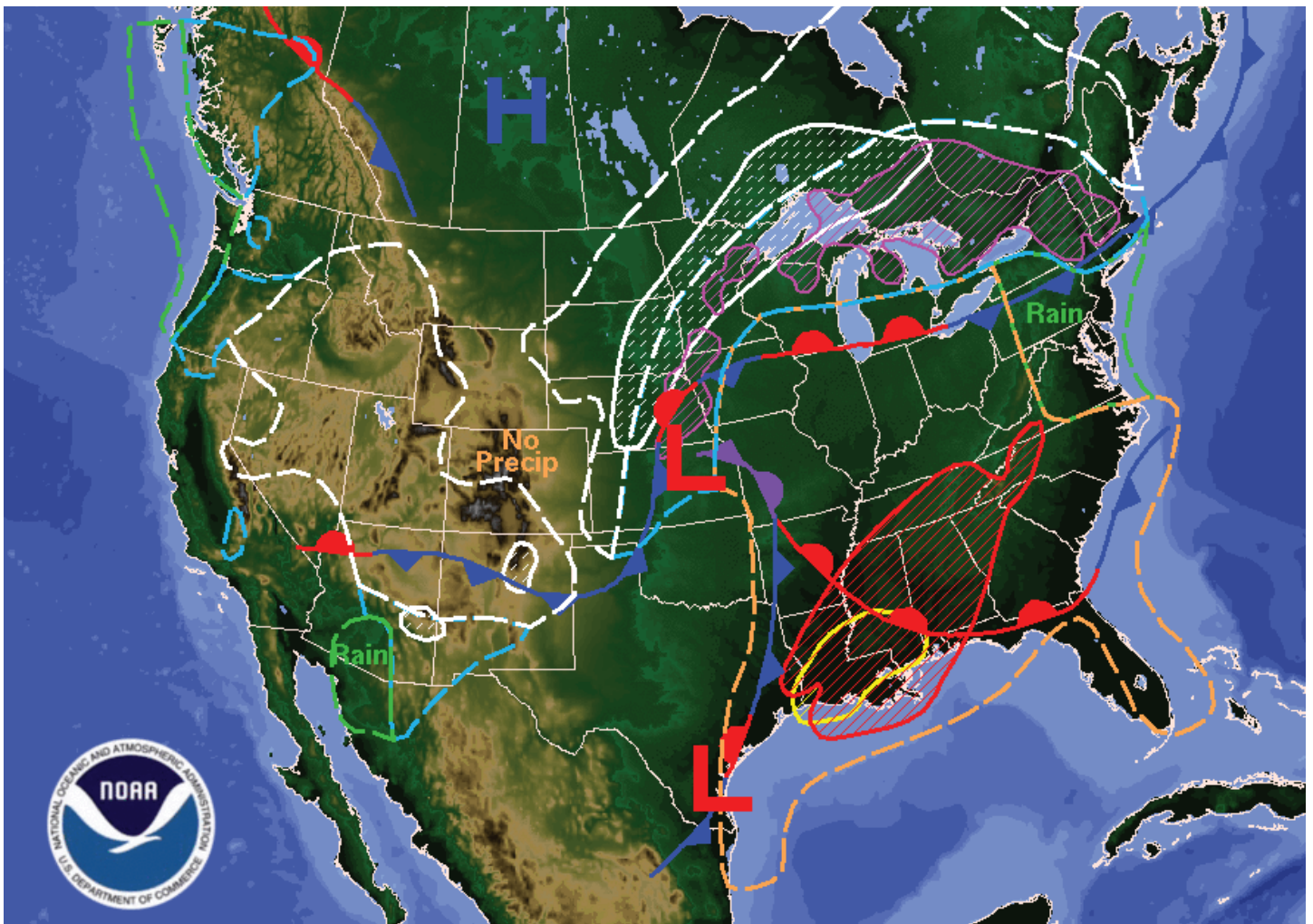
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.63

Precip Year to Date: 15.81

Sunset Tonight: 4:57 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.



Day 1 National Forecast Chart

Valid Thu, Dec 27, 2018, issued 4:41 AM EST
DOC/NOAA/NWS/NCEP/Weather Prediction Center
Prepared by McReynolds with WPC/SPC/NHC forecasts

Rain	Flash Flooding Possible (hatched)
Rain and T'Storms	Severe T'Storms Possible (hatched)
Rain and Snow	Freezing Rain Possible (hatched)
Snow	Heavy Snow Possible (hatched)



WHY FATHERS MATTER

We rarely think of Joseph when we speak of Mary and her son, Jesus. But Joseph was a very special individual as well.

In describing him, Matthew says that he was a just or righteous man. And because of that, he was a decent, fair and righteous man. When he was faced with an incredibly difficult decision whether or not he should abandon Mary an angel appeared and advised him to go ahead with your marriage to Mary.

Initially, Scripture informs us, that not wanting to disgrace her, he planned to send her away. He was well aware of the fact that stoning was the legal prescription for what people would think of Marys being pregnant without being married. If he took Mary to be his wife he could be humiliated or ridiculed by those around him. But he chose to obey the command of the angel to marry her. As a righteous man he was also a merciful man, a man willing to listen to, hear and obey God. Joseph was a man of great character.

But there is more. Not only was he righteous, merciful and obedient to the voice of God, but he was a man who was sensitive and discrete. Joseph was open to the voice of God and responded immediately when God spoke to him and protected the reputation and honor of Mary thereby revealing he was a man of integrity.

Prayer: Lord, we pray for fathers everywhere who will strive to be like the earthly father of Your Son. We ask that You will raise up men of integrity to honor You. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Scripture for Today: Matthew 1:18-25 Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

2018 Groton SD Community Events

- Groton Lion's Club Bingo- Wednesday Nights 6:30pm at the Groton Legion (Year Round)
- Nov./Dec./Jan./Feb./Mar. Groton Lion's Club Wheel of Meat- Saturday Nights 7pm at the Groton Legion (Fall/Winter Months)
- 1/27/2019 Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 4/13/2019 Easter Egg Hunt (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 5/4/2019 Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday in May)
- 5/27/2019 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Program at the Cemetery, Lunch to follow at the American Legion (Memorial Day)
- Transit Fundraiser (Middle Thursday in June)
- SDSU Golf at Olive Grove
- 6/15/2019 Triathlon (Saturday before Father's Day)
- 7/4/2019 Firecracker Golf Tourney (4th of July)
- 7/14/2019 Summer Fest
- 9/7/2019 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 10/12/2019 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/11/2019 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/31/2018 Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/10/2018 Groton American Legion Post #39 Turkey Shoot (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 12/01/2018 Olive Grove Golf Course 2018 Holiday Party
- Best Ball Golf Tourney
- SDSU Golf Tourney
- Sunflower Golf Tourney
- Santa Claus Day
- Fireman's Stag
- Tour of Homes
- Crazy Dayz/Open Houses
- School Events

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News from the Associated Press

Major storm whipping up blizzard conditions

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Forecasters posted a blizzard warning for parts of the Dakotas and Minnesota as a major winter storm delivered heavy snow and gusty winds to the region.

The powerful storm is making travel difficult Thursday with motorists on the move during this holiday week. The National Weather Service issued blizzard warnings for central South Dakota, eastern North Dakota and western Minnesota. The storm was expected to drop more than a foot of snow in the region before ending Friday.

The Minnesota State Patrol tweeted that road conditions are poor across much of western Minnesota. The North Dakota Highway Patrol issued a travel alert for all state highways due to whiteout conditions.

Eastern North Dakota is expected to deal with winds gusting up to 50 mph, creating blizzard conditions mainly in the Red River Valley.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

19-21-25-29-32

(nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-five, twenty-nine, thirty-two)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

05-10-18-19-51, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 3

(five, ten, eighteen, nineteen, fifty-one; Star Ball: two; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$12.85 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$348 million

Powerball

05-25-38-52-67, Powerball: 24, Power Play: 2

(five, twenty-five, thirty-eight, fifty-two, sixty-seven; Powerball: twenty-four; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$294 million

Winter storm expected to create difficult travel conditions

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Forecasters say a post-Christmas winter storm could dump more than a foot of snow on parts of the Dakotas and Minnesota in the next several days.

The National Weather Service predicted areas between Lake Andes, Mitchell and Watertown, South Dakota and Fargo, North Dakota could see between 12 and 18 inches of snow by Friday.

The weather service forecast 8 to 13 inches of snow across northern, central and western Minnesota by the end of the work week.

North Dakota officials on Wednesday issued a travel alert for all state highways.

Meteorologists say the storm will deliver a mix of rain, freezing rain and snow which was expected to cause deteriorating travel conditions and power outages. Reduced visibility due to blowing snow is likely Thursday into early Friday morning. Officials expected travel along Interstate 29 and I-94 to be treacherous.

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Noem names Flute South Dakota secretary of tribal relations

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov.-elect Kristi Noem says David Flute will join her administration as secretary of tribal relations.

Noem announced the appointment Wednesday. She says Flute's "knowledge and passion for Indian Country" will be instrumental in her administration's work to empower tribes.

Flute says Noem "has consistently been an ally to South Dakota's Native American community."

Flute is a lifelong member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe. He will finish his term as tribal chairman at the end of 2018.

As tribal chairman, Flute negotiated a tribal-state tax agreement and spearheaded several economic growth initiatives on the reservation.

Flute served in the South Dakota National Guard from 2004 to 2009, receiving two Army Commendation Medals and a Purple Heart. He lives near Sisseton with his two sons.

Philanthropist couple killed in South Dakota plane crash

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A couple who were well-known Sioux Falls philanthropists were killed when a small plane crashed in a residential neighborhood of South Dakota's largest city, police said Wednesday.

The Minnehaha County coroner positively identified the victims as Vaughn and JoAnn Meyer of Sioux Falls, police said. Both were 68 years old.

The plane crashed at around 5 p.m. Tuesday in the backyards of four homes in Sioux Falls, causing significant damage to two of the homes but not injuring anyone on the ground, authorities said.

Police Capt. Loren McManus said at a news briefing that the two people who were on the plane were killed. He later said authorities do not know who was piloting the plane.

The Meyers were known for their philanthropy, the Argus Leader reported. Sioux Falls Lutheran School announced earlier this year it was naming a new 400-seat chapel and performing arts center after the couple after they donated more than \$1 million to the project.

Vaughn Meyer was a retired plastic surgeon who, according to Federal Aviation Administration records, received his pilot's license in 2010, the newspaper reported.

McManus said the debris field stretches for blocks and asked that anyone who comes across mechanical wreckage or "biological debris" to call 911 so that officers can take care of it.

"Please try not to touch it if you can," McManus said.

Police have secured the crash scene and are awaiting further direction from the National Transportation Safety Board, the lead investigative agency. A company contracted by the NTSB will be in Sioux Falls Wednesday to start the investigation, which could last a few days, police said.

Fire Rescue Division Chief Steve Fessler said residents of two of the four houses that were evacuated following the crash have not returned to their homes. Fessler said the plane came down in the backyards of the four houses, with two of them sustaining significant damage. Firefighters were able to "knock down" the fire that resulted from the crash within 10 minutes, he said.

Jim Lang, who lives nearby, says he felt the ground shake and heard what sounded like a vehicle accelerating rapidly. He looked out his window and saw "a yellow ball of fire."

No charges in fatal shooting of 19-year-old man by deputy

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley says a Pennington County sheriff's deputy will not be charged for fatally shooting a 19-year-old Rapid City man last month.

Jackley said Wednesday that Deputy Christopher Plawman was justified in firing his gun and using lethal force.

Plawman shot Matthew Lorenzen on Nov. 30 following a chase that ended when Lorenzen crashed his minivan near the interstate exit for New Underwood.

According to the shooting summary, Lorenzen got out of the minivan and reached back in for a scoped rifle. Plawman fired once, striking Lorenzen as he stood up with the rifle in his hands.

Officers say Lorenzen fired shots during the chase. No officers were hit.
The South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation reviewed the fatal shooting.

Indian casinos across US wary of betting on sports books

By REGINA GARCIA CANO, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Two dozen large-screen TVs showing football and other sports line the walls. There's beer on tap, bar top seating and leather chairs. Chicken wings are on the menu. And at this American Indian casino in the heart of college-football mad Mississippi, you can legally bet on the games.

The sports book owned by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians is the first to open on tribal lands outside of Nevada following a U.S. Supreme Court ruling earlier this year, a no-brainer business decision given the sports fans among its gambling clientele.

"We are basically two hours from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and then, we are just an hour from Mississippi State. We have Ole Miss just to the north of that, and we have Southern Miss — they're not SEC, but they are a player. We are not that far from Louisiana," said Neal Atkinson, the tribe's director of gaming.

The book at Pearl River Resort is packed every college football Saturday, but remains an outlier months after the high court opened the door for expanded sports gambling across the United States by striking down a federal ban.

Tribes enthusiastically welcomed the decision in May but since then, the regulatory challenges and low-margin nature of the business have sunk in. Few Indian casinos have an enviable location like the Choctaw and many need state approval to add sports betting to their offerings.

Indian casinos started small three decades ago, but they have grown to be an annual \$32.4 billion segment of the U.S. gambling industry. The roughly 475 casinos operated by nearly 240 tribes create jobs for tribal members and profits that help pay a variety of services, including health care and housing.

Some casinos only have games like bingo or pull tabs that don't need state approval. But the majority of them also have state-authorized slot machines, blackjack and other table games, according to the National Indian Gaming Commission.

Many tribes share a portion of casino profits with state governments in exchange for exclusive rights to conduct gambling operations within their states.

To offer sports betting, the majority of tribes would have to renegotiate compacts that vary widely in cycles and the issues covered, though some tribes believe their existing agreements already give them the right to offer the new wagers.

"There's a broad spectrum in Indian Country covering two extremes: Tribal nations that would not benefit at all, and on the other end, tribal nations that would significantly benefit," commission chairman Jonodev Osceola Chaudhuri said. "Those are largely business decisions that each tribe will have to make given its own economic landscape and its unique market realities."

Some federal lawmakers have also proposed regulating sports gambling more widely, adding yet another layer to a complex debate already involving commercial casinos and lotteries, plus sports leagues themselves.

So far, only the Santa Ana Pueblo near Albuquerque, New Mexico, has followed the Choctaw's effort into sports gambling. Neither tribe was required to obtain additional state approvals.

Contrary to popular belief, sports betting is a low-profit business that requires highly skilled employees. In Nevada, sportsbooks last year contributed only 2.4 percent of the gambling revenue of casinos statewide — dwarfed by the proceeds from table games and slots. The limited payoff has tribal casinos balancing the allure of a Las Vegas-style amenity with the risks of opening compacts for negotiations.

"Tribal leadership is extremely protective of what they have because it's meant so much to us, and there's always a risk of upsetting the apple cart," Washington State Gambling Commission member Chris Stearns said. "Is this going to help us? Is this going to hurt us? That's really at the heart of why you see Indian tribes gently venturing into sports betting. ... In a lot of states, tribes write a check out to the state in exchange for exclusivity. So, any time there's a new gambling product, and you ask the state to authorize

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it, there is a risk the state will say 'Sure, but it is going to cost you.'"

The only sports book in New Mexico, inside the Santa Ana Star Casino Hotel, began taking wagers in October. It offers bets on professional and college sports, but not for games involving two public in-state universities.

In Washington state, all casinos are tribally operated. Changing the state's laws to allow betting on sports would require a 60 percent supermajority vote in the legislature or a ballot initiative. Only then could sports betting be added to a tribal-state compact.

In California, where tribes have exclusivity on casino-style gambling, voters would have to approve a change to the state constitution.

Casinos are operated on and off reservations in South Dakota. Before the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribe can try to edge out its nearest competition across the state line in Iowa, South Dakota's constitution will have to be amended through a public vote.

The legislature could choose to put the question before voters or supporters could gather enough signatures to add the measure to the 2020 ballot. If the measure passes, it would open the opportunity for tribes to negotiate their compacts with the state.

Tribal councilman Kenny Weston said a sports book could attract new patrons who may also choose to play games already offered and spend nights at the hotel for big sporting events, like MMA fights.

"Normally, with the brick-and-mortar casino like we have, we attract a lot of older crowds and retired people," Weston said. "I think with sports betting we can bring a different age demographic and different people ... and have the opportunity to do the same that they do in Vegas."

Follow Regina Garcia Cano on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/reginagarciakNO>

More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

4 South Dakota snowmobilers found in southern Wyoming

LARAMIE, Wyo. (AP) — Four missing snowmobile riders have been found safe in southern Wyoming.

The Albany County Sheriff's Department says a search helicopter spotted the four men from South Dakota Tuesday afternoon and they all appeared to be in good condition.

The helicopter wasn't able to land in the rugged area of neighboring Carbon County and ground searchers weren't able to reach them by nightfall. The pilots dropped some supplies along with a note telling the men that help was on the way and asking them to remain there.

Searchers plan to rescue them Wednesday.

The sheriff's department was notified that they were missing Sunday after they failed to check out of their lodge in Albany as planned.

The search area was very large because it wasn't known exactly where they planned to go.

Head-on collision kills driver in northeast Nebraska

HARTINGTON, Neb. (AP) — Authorities say a driver was killed and four people were injured in a three-vehicle collision in northeast Nebraska.

The accident occurred Tuesday night on U.S. Highway 81 in Cedar County. Authorities say 82-year-old Marjorie Novak, of Hartington, was headed south in her pickup truck when it struck a northbound vehicle driven by a Yankton, South Dakota, man. A second northbound vehicle, driven by 52-year-old Brenda Saltzman, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, then ran into the rear of the first.

Authorities say Novak was pronounced dead at the scene. The Yankton man and Saltzman and her two passengers were taken to hospitals.

California moves up primary, wants bigger impact 2020 vote

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI, Associated Press

Go west, 2020 presidential candidates?

Early voting in California's primary will overlap with the traditional early nominating contests in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina. That could force the sprawling field of Democrats to navigate those states as well as California's notoriously complex landscape, where campaigning is done through paid political ads.

Strategists estimate it could cost at least \$5 million for a candidate to compete in California, an amount that could be prohibitive for all but the best-funded contenders. Nascent campaigns are asking themselves if they should gamble on California.

"Everyone's going to play in Iowa, everyone's going to go to New Hampshire," said Ben Tulchin, a San Francisco-based pollster who worked for Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential bid. "But there are only 3-4 of the top-tier candidates who will compete in California."

The nation's biggest and second-most-diverse state has long complained about being effectively shut out of the presidential nominating process because its primary usually comes months after the initial four contests in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina. Last year, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill moving the state's primary up to the earliest date permissible.

California is slated to vote on March 3, the first day allowed for a state that's not in the traditional early state lineup. And because of California's early-voting system, voters will get primary ballots starting 30 days before the primary, which coincides with the Iowa caucuses.

Alex Padilla, California's secretary of state and a Democrat, said there are already "a heck of a lot more calls for people who know California to join certain teams."

Especially for Democrats, California is a fixture on presidential aspirants' itineraries because of the trove of high-end donors there. But Padilla and other California politicians hope candidates now feel they must reach out to the state's voters, too.

"The voters of California deserve a larger role in selecting the nominees of both parties," Padilla said.

California won't be the only state voting on March 3. It will join at least eight others — including another behemoth, Texas — on what's known as Super Tuesday. It's possible that more states will move their primary dates up to increase their clout, especially since California has jumped to the front of the pack.

The enormous amount of votes up for grabs that day, coupled with the astronomical price tag of competing in California, may end up increasing the importance of the early states — especially overwhelmingly white and rural Iowa and New Hampshire, which are least like California.

That's because winners in those states are likely to receive heavy attention and, with that, donations that could fund a California operation. Once Super Tuesday is over, a huge percentage of Democrats will have voted, making it hard for candidates who aren't in first to catch up.

"You win early or you go home," said Josh Putnam, a professor at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington who tracks presidential primaries. The massive number of delegates up for grabs on Super Tuesday "doesn't mean it'll settle things, but it'll get us a measure of the way there," he said.

Bob Shrum, a veteran of several Democratic presidential campaigns who is now director of the Center for the Political Future and the Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California, said Iowa and New Hampshire will still be critical. "They winnow the field," he said.

Paradoxically, Shrum added, California could also be a bulwark for President Donald Trump, who's made it a perennial political target and symbol of what's wrong with liberal America. The president remains popular enough among the GOP that it's unlikely he'll have a serious primary challenge. But if he did and lost an early state, the state's beleaguered Republican voters would help him.

"As it has shrunk," Shrum said of the California GOP, which is now outnumbered by both Democratic and independent voters in the state, "it has gotten more and more Trump-esque."

Several potential Democratic presidential candidates hail from California — most prominently Sen. Kamala Harris, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and billionaire Tom Steyer — and that state's earlier primary date

could help them.

But there's no guarantee that loyalty to a local will overcome a candidate who catches fire with the party's base after Iowa and New Hampshire. Just ask Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, who was trounced by Trump in his state's Republican presidential primary in 2016.

"If Beto O'Rourke held a rally at Los Angeles or San Francisco City Hall, he'd get a larger crowd" than Garcetti or Harris, said Mike Trujillo, a veteran Democratic operative in Southern California.

Trujillo added there's no guarantee that O'Rourke, the Texas congressman who narrowly lost his challenge to Sen. Ted Cruz, can maintain that level of grassroots enthusiasm in 2020. But he said candidates who have that support will gain the edge in California, regardless of whether it's their home state.

Trujillo ran Hillary Clinton's California field operation in 2008, the last time the state's primary leapfrogged to Super Tuesday. It was no panacea for California's status in presidential politics — Trujillo recalls repeatedly being pulled from California and sent to early-state Nevada to help out. "I don't see that dynamic changing for any presidential campaign," he said.

Still, Trujillo said candidates will still have to learn California's ins and outs quickly because, as in 2008, it will become a critical part of the long march to the nomination. Trujillo says the state's numerous Latinos are particularly up for grabs in the primary.

The California presidential primary is like 53 individual elections because it allocates delegates based not on statewide vote totals but the results in each of its congressional districts. Those stretch the equivalent of the distance from Maine to North Carolina, through teeming cities, empty rural areas and affluent suburbs.

But in the end, California voters are not that different from other ones, said Andrea Steele, a veteran California-based Democratic operative who runs Emerge, a group that helps female candidates run for office. She expects traditional issues like the economy and health care to dominate, along with growing Democratic concerns like climate change.

"I don't think Californians are so different from people in Iowa and New Hampshire," Steele said.

Trump finally hews to ritual of meeting troops in harm's way

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE, Associated Press

JOINT BASE ANDREWS, Maryland (AP) — President Donald Trump once opined that it wasn't "overly necessary" for him to visit troops in danger zones abroad. But with the lights of Air Force One out and window shutters drawn, the president did just that, slipping into Iraq at night to greet U.S. service members and show that his norm-busting presidency would hew at least to this tradition.

Trump arrived back in Washington in the pre-dawn hours Thursday, capping a 29-hour and six minute trip to the conflict region conducted under the cover of night. Addressing troops at an air base in western Iraq Wednesday, Trump defended his decision to pull forces from neighboring Syria, declaring of Islamic State militants: "We've knocked them out. We've knocked them silly."

His appraisal is at odds with that of military officials, aides and allies who consider IS a diminished but deadly force. His defense secretary and envoy to the anti-IS coalition quit after Trump blindsided much of the national security establishment with his call.

Trump had faced criticism for not yet visiting U.S. troops stationed in harm's way as he comes up on his two-year mark in office. George W. Bush made four trips to Iraq and two to Afghanistan as president; President Barack Obama made four to Afghanistan and one to Iraq.

Such trips are typically unannounced and the subject of extreme security. Trump's was no exception as he flew overnight from Washington, spent three-plus hours on the ground and stopped at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany for refueling and to greet service members in a hangar there before leaving.

Trump told his audience in Iraq that the decision to withdraw the roughly 2,000 troops from Syria illustrated his quest to put "America first."

"We're no longer the suckers, folks," Trump said at al-Asad Air Base, about 100 miles or 60 kilometers west of Baghdad. "We're respected again as a nation."

He did not meet Iraqi officials while there but spoke on the phone with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-

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Mahdi. The visit appeared to inflame sensitivities about the continued presence of U.S. forces in Iraq as the two major blocs in the Iraqi parliament condemned the trip, likening it to a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

The air base where Trump spoke is about 155 miles (250 km) from Hajin, a Syrian town near the Iraqi border where Kurdish fighters are still battling IS extremists. Trump has said IS militants have been eradicated, but the latest estimate is that IS still holds about 60 square miles (100 square km) of territory in that region of Syria, although fighters also fled the area and are in hiding in other pockets of the country.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis was supposed to continue leading the Pentagon until late February, but Trump moved up his exit and announced that Patrick Shanahan, deputy defense secretary, would take the job on Jan. 1. Trump said he was in "no rush" to nominate a new defense chief.

"Everybody and his uncle wants that position," Trump told reporters traveling with him. "And also, by the way, everybody and her aunt, just so I won't be criticized."

Critics said the U.S. exit from Syria, the latest in Trump's increasingly isolationist-style foreign policy, would provide an opening for IS to regroup, give Iran a green light to expand its influence in the region and leave U.S.-backed Kurdish forces vulnerable to attacks from Turkey.

"I made it clear from the beginning that our mission in Syria was to strip ISIS of its military strongholds," said Trump, who wore an olive green bomber-style jacket as chants of "USA! USA!" greeted him and speakers blared Lee Greenwood's song "God Bless the USA."

"We'll be watching ISIS very closely," said Trump, who was joined by first lady Melania Trump, but no members of his Cabinet or lawmakers. "We'll be watching them very, very closely, the remnants of ISIS."

Trump also said he had no plans to withdraw the 5,200 U.S. forces in Iraq. That's down from about 170,000 in 2007 at the height of the surge of U.S. forces to combat sectarian violence unleashed by the U.S.-led invasion to topple dictator Saddam Hussein.

Abdul-Mahdi's office said "differences in points of view over the arrangements" prevented the two from meeting but they discussed security issues and Trump's order to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria over the phone. Abdul-Mahdi's office also did not say whether he had accepted an invitation to the White House. But Trump press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters on the flight back that the Iraqi leader had agreed to come.

Trump said that after U.S. troops in Syria return home, Iraq could still be used to stage attacks on IS militants.

"We can use this as a base if we wanted to do something in Syria," he said. "If we see something happening with ISIS that we don't like, we can hit them so fast and so hard" that they "really won't know what the hell happened."

He promised a "strong, deliberate and orderly withdrawal" of forces from Syria

Trump had told The Associated Press in October that he would visit U.S. troops in troubled areas "at some point, but I don't think it's overly necessary." He told reporters that he had planned to make the trip three or four weeks ago, but word started getting out and forced him to postpone it.

Iraqi leaders declared an end to combat operations against IS a year ago but the country's political, military and economic situation remains uncertain. It continues to experience sporadic bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, which most people attribute to IS.

On Dec. 15, the U.S.-led coalition launched an airstrike in support of Iraqi troops who were chasing IS fighters toward a tunnel west of Mosul. The strike destroyed the tunnel entrance and killed four IS fighters, according to the U.S. military in Baghdad. The last U.S. service member to die in Iraq was in August, as the result of a helicopter crash in Sinjar.

Trump had planned to spend Christmas at his private club in Florida, but stayed behind in Washington due to the partial government shutdown.

Trump campaigned for office on a platform of ending U.S. involvement in foreign trouble spots, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Pentagon is also said to be developing plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops still serving in Afghanistan.

Associated Press writers Deb Riechmann and Lolita C. Baldor in Washington and Philip Issa in Baghdad contributed to this report.

Follow Darlene Superville on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/dsupervilleap>

FBI steps up efforts against 'money mules' online fraud

By ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The email caught the executive at a small company by surprise one morning in 2016. The company's owner, or so he thought, was requesting a money transfer to pay for supplies from a new vendor.

It wasn't until that night when the executive, hours after the money had been transferred and still puzzled by the out-of-the-blue demand, texted the owner to make sure he'd heard the request correctly.

The befuddled reply was disheartening: "I just saw your message about a wire transfer today. What is that about?"

It was all part of a fraud scam that targeted companies, schools and nonprofits in Connecticut and elsewhere in the United States and that resulted this month in a 45-month prison sentence for one of the culprits. The case is part of a seemingly endless cycle of money laundering schemes that law enforcement officials say they're scrambling to slow through a combination of prosecution and public awareness.

Beyond the run-of-the-mill plots, officials say, is a particularly concerning trend involving "money mules" — people who, unwittingly or not, use their own bank accounts to move money for criminals for purposes they think are legitimate or even noble.

The "mule" concept has attracted renewed attention with this month's release of Clint Eastwood's "The Mule," a real-life tale of an elderly horticulturist who smuggled cocaine for a Mexican cartel. But the modern-day mules of most concern to the FBI are people who get themselves entangled in complicated, international money laundering schemes that cause huge economic losses and show no signs of stopping.

"They trial and error this stuff and they see what works and they see what doesn't," FBI supervisory special agent James Abbott said in an interview. "It's a much higher success rate when you have a lot of money using somebody else's account going through there instead of trying to cross the border with a physical transportation of cash."

The FBI and international law enforcement agencies have stepped up efforts against the fraud and say they're building bigger cases than before. Europol said this month it had identified 1,504 money mules, arresting 168, in a continent-wide bust. The FBI in June announced the arrests of 74 people, including 29 in Nigeria, for schemes targeting businesses and the elderly, and has launched a publicity campaign called "Don't Be a Mule."

The money mule cases are an offshoot of more generic frauds encountered by the FBI, including schemes that dupe people into thinking they've won the lottery and can claim their prizes by wiring an advance payment, or that trick the unsuspecting into believing a relative has been arrested and needs urgent bail money or that a supposed paramour they've met online requires cash. In cases like the Connecticut one, fraudsters assume identities of executives and scam employees into wiring cash.

That's what happened in 2016 at Beacon Systems, a Texas company where a new employee received emails from someone she thought was the chief executive officer instructing her to transfer nearly \$100,000 for a vendor-related payment.

Several weeks later, Kerry Williams, the CEO whose identity was impersonated, was on her way to the airport when the FBI contacted her and explained how the company had been victimized as part of a much broader swindle. A dual Nigerian-U.S. citizen was ultimately sentenced to four years in prison in connection with the scheme.

"It makes you kind of paranoid," Williams said, describing how the experience also made the SAP consulting firm more vigilant. "Even to this day, we're overly cautious about everything. I think you kind of go to that extreme."

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As for money mules, they're persuaded, sometimes with the incentive of keeping a cut of the funds, into allowing money transfers into their own bank accounts at the direction of a fraudster they may mistake for an online friend or romantic partner, a military officer overseas or an employer. They're then instructed to transfer those funds elsewhere, into accounts controlled by criminals.

In one example, the FBI says, a fraudster posing as an Army captain stationed overseas recruited a man he met online to be a money mule, saying he was making arrangements to travel home and needed the man's help receiving and sending some funds. The FBI says \$10,000 was wired into the man's account. He was then instructed to withdraw it in small increments and send it to a woman in Texas.

The mules are sometimes witting conspirators. Other times, they're elderly, lonely or just confused. The ones the FBI concludes are merely unwitting are given stern warnings but generally avoid prosecution.

"When we approach them and talk to them and explain to them what they've been doing, a lot of times, the horror is there, said Steven D'Antuono, an FBI section chief specializing in financial crimes. "It's all walks of life, all educational levels. Anyone can fall victim to this."

In the Connecticut case, the executive recounted those horrors in a letter to the judge before the sentencing of one of the defendants earlier this year.

The executive, whose name and company are redacted in the letter, described feeling initially apprehensive about the money transfer instructions and advising the company owner that it was a "lot of money for supplies."

That night, he described the interactions to his wife, who asked if he was really certain the emails were legitimate. He suddenly wasn't so sure, realizing for the first time he may have been duped.

"Because of crimes like these," he wrote, "our society is losing much of the trust and openness that we once experienced."

Trump's presidency has changed Washington, defied convention

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mr. Trump went to Washington. And he changed it.

In his first two years in office, President Donald Trump has rewritten the rules of the presidency and the norms of the nation's capital, casting aside codes of conduct and traditions that have held for generations.

In Trump's Washington, facts are less relevant. Insults and highly personal attacks are increasingly employed by members of both parties. The White House press briefing is all but gone, international summits are optional, the arts are an afterthought and everything — including inherently nonpartisan institutions and investigations — is suddenly political.

Taking a wrecking ball to decorum and institutions, Trump has changed, in ways both subtle and profound, how Washington works and how it is viewed by the rest of the nation and world.

"He's dynamited the institution of the presidency," said Douglas Brinkley, presidential historian at Rice University. "He doesn't see himself as being part of a long litany of presidents who will hand a baton to a successor. Instead, he uses the presidency as an extension of his own personality."

Is this a one-president aberration? Or has the White House forever changed? Whether the trends will outlast Trump's presidency is a question that won't be answered until there is a new occupant in the Oval Office, but Brinkley predicts "no future president will model themselves on him."

There was a time, many accelerated news cycles ago, when there was speculation, stoked by the candidate himself, that Trump would abandon the bluster of his campaign and become "more presidential" once he took office.

No one says that anymore.

Trump himself believes his unpredictability is what holds Americans' attention and fuels his success.

"I have these stupid teleprompters. You don't mind that I haven't used them all night, do you?" Trump asked the crowd at a June rally in South Carolina. "Every once in a while I look at it, I mean, it's so boring, we don't want it. America's back, bigger, and better, and stronger than ever."

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Indeed, Trump brought to the White House the same fact-challenged, convention-defying style that got him elected. From his first days in office, Trump pushed falsehoods about the size of the inaugural crowd and unfounded allegations about millions of illegal voters. He has not let up since.

The inaccuracies have been big and small: Trump repeatedly claimed in 2018 that he passed the biggest tax cut in history (he didn't), that the U.S. economy is the best in history (it's not) and that his Supreme Court choice Brett Kavanaugh finished atop his class at Yale Law School (the school doesn't rank students). Just last week, after making an abrupt, unilateral decision to pull U.S. troops from Syria, Trump tweeted that Russia was "not happy" about the decision. Hours earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin had cheered the move.

The cumulative effect has been to diminish the authority with which White House pronouncements are received.

When a federal report on climate change was released last month, showing an increasing impact, a White House statement cast doubt on its findings and suggested, erroneously, that a significant number of scientists doubted the phenomenon. That drew derision from a broad swath of scientific community. The White House distributed a doctored video of an encounter between a CNN reporter and an intern, exaggerating the contact made by the journalist and damaging the administration's credibility. Similarly, when Trump threatened to shut down the southern border, most of Washington just shrugged and dismissed the threat as so much bluster.

The White House press briefing, once a daily opportunity for the public to hear the president's views scrutinized, has all but vanished. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders has held just one briefing in December and it clocked in at a scant 15 minutes.

Now, the primary form of communication from the White House comes 280 characters at a time, as Trump's Twitter bursts set off cellphone alerts across Washington, sometimes taking even federal agencies and congressional allies by surprise. His decision last week to announce a withdrawal of troops from Syria left congressional Republicans complaining bitterly that they were not consulted or advised. And, despite counsel from his own party, he moved to shut down the government over the lack of money for a border wall, his signature campaign promise.

"The challenge is that Trump is like a quarterback who doesn't call a play and simply snaps the ball and expects his teammates to react," said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. A Trump ally, Gingrich said he approves of only 80 percent of the president's tweets but believes his unique style has made him impervious to criticism after he pulled out of multinational agreements in favor of deregulation and sovereignty, moves that fulfilled campaign pledges yet drew global derision.

"The thing you have to ask yourself about Trump is: Could he, in fact, be as disruptive as he is in the ways in that his base wants but be more traditional on tactical things?" Gingrich said. "Or can you not have one without the other?"

Trump's tweets often trade in public insults that modern presidents just don't share in public: The Senate minority leader is "Cryin' Chuck Schumer." The media are "the enemy of the people." His own former secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, is "dumb as a rock."

And that level of insult, at times veering into the coarse and the crass, has bled into the dialogue of official Washington. Outgoing Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, weeks before he resigned in a cloud of ethics scandals, tweeted that a Democratic congressman had struggled "to think straight from the bottom of a bottle." House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi told fellow Democrats this month that the border wall was a "manhood" issue for the president.

Trump has transformed the presidency in scores of other ways, inserting himself into matters his predecessors avoided. He has chastised his own Justice Department for not opening investigations into his political foes. He has threatened to oust the chairman of the Federal Reserve, which prizes its political independence, for raising interest rates because he believes that could slow the economy. With deadly wildfires raging, he criticized Californians for poor forest management. He doesn't attend national arts events that typically have had a presidential imprimatur, such as the Kennedy Center Honors.

Some Washington institutions have held: The courts have dealt his administration several defeats and

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the special counsel's Russia probe continues apace. But on the world stage, too, Trump has broken the presidential mold.

He has eschewed sweeping diplomacy in favor of transactional relationships. He has strained longtime alliances — including with Canada, of all places — and befriended global strongmen. He has skipped summits, including a gathering in Asia in November, that have long been fixtures on presidential itineraries. And world leaders have taken to heart that flattery, pageantry, golf and maybe some business at a Trump-owned hotel are the pathway to a good relationship with the president.

"He is a sui generis president," said Brinkley, using the Latin for "unique." "Trump doesn't know history and doesn't model himself on any president ... but he's all we can talk about."

Follow Lemire on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/@JonLemire>

Beaver bourbon, runaway peacocks: A wild 2018 in New England

By WILLIAM J. KOLE, Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Things got a little wild in New England in 2018 — as in actual animals weaseling their way into the headlines.

A Vermont family's pet peacock ran off with a flock of turkeys. A black bear trashed a car in Connecticut after locking itself inside. Beavers flavored bourbon at a distillery in New Hampshire. And so many crows descended on one corner of Massachusetts, it took a cannon to shoo them away.

There was no shortage of antics from the naked apes at the top of the food chain, either.

A sampling of some of the region's weirder stories from the past 12 months:

ARE YOU MY MOTHER?

Pea the peacock must have been lonely, or maybe he was just confused. For whatever reason, Rene and Brian Johnson's unusual family pet took off, lured by birds of a different feather: a flock of wild turkeys. After trying unsuccessfully to get close enough to scoop it up with a net, the couple from Springfield, Vermont, posted this plea on Facebook: "My peacock has run off with the turkeys. Do you have any suggestions on how to catch the little twerp?"

UNBEARABLE DAMAGE

Things got hairy very quickly for a Connecticut woman whose car was shredded by an adult bear that somehow got inside and couldn't get out. Linda Morad was house-sitting in Canton when she noticed her car lights on and heard strange noises. She called police, who found the bear frantically clawing up the interior. Officers opened a door and dashed to the other side of the vehicle as the bear scampered away. Morad said she thinks the bear was drawn by the smell of garbage she had hauled to the dump earlier in the day.

COUNTING CROWS

It took the boom of cannon fire to chase off hundreds of crows that decided to roost at an electrical substation in North Adams, Massachusetts. National Grid deployed a propane cannon that doesn't shoot projectiles to disperse the crows, which it said could short out equipment and trigger a power outage and damage gear with their corrosive droppings. The utility said no birds were harmed — just annoyed by the noise.

CLOTHING OPTIONAL

Dressing for success at this job interview might be a little risky — or risqué. A nudist campground in Rhode Island that offers swimming, hiking, volleyball and a sauna for people who aren't afraid to bare it all advertised for a lifeguard. Required: "excellent communication skills" and the ability to "work as part of a team." Clothing? Not so much. Dyer Woods Nudist Campgrounds president Jim Johnson said the suc-

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successful applicant would have the option of wearing a swimsuit or a birthday suit.

HIS 'PHONE' WAS DELICIOUS

A man insisted he was wrongly ticketed for distracted driving by a police officer who mistook his McDonald's hash brown for a cellphone in Connecticut. Westport police issued Jason Stiber a \$300 citation, but he challenged it in court, saying the only thing he was guilty of was the munchies. Stiber said phone records prove he didn't make any calls around the time he was pulled over. A judge found him guilty, but he's appealing.

PERPS NEED NOT APPLY

If you've got a rap sheet, maybe don't apply for a job at the county jail? That happened in New Hampshire, where Kristina Hoefs applied in person for a position at the Hillsborough County Department of Corrections. Workers there ran a routine background check and realized she was wanted on a theft-related charge in Maine. Hoefs was promptly taken into custody and taken to Manchester police headquarters.

TOWN FLIPPED OFF

Take that, town hall. A Vermont man erected a sculpture of a giant middle finger after officials in Westford refused to let him move his truck repair and recycling business to his property. Ted Pelkey mounted the huge upraised digit on a 16-foot (4.8-meter) pole with lights so his inelegant salute can be seen from a nearby state highway. "I wasn't trying to get fame out of it at all ... I'm just mad," he said.

THIS G.O.A.T. IS HERE TO STAY

Tom Brady has a lot of fans, but few as zealous as Megan Uhrynowski. After the New England Patriots' star quarterback signed the Connecticut college student's arm, she decided to make the ink permanent and had TB12's scrawl turned into a tattoo on the inside of her wrist. Many people regret their tattoos; not Uhrynowski, who called hers "the coolest thing."

BEAVER BOURBON

Rich leathery notes with a hint of vanilla and an undertone of ... beaver musk? So says New Hampshire-based Tamworth Distilling, which produced bourbon flavored partly by secretions from a beaver's castor sacs. The distillery, which dubbed its new whiskey Eau De Musc, said beaver secretions long have been used as flavoring because of their "bright fruit qualities."

Follow Bill Kole on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/billkole> .

White House, Congressional Democrats see no deal on shutdown

By JULIET LINDERMAN and DARLENE SUPERVILLE, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Chances look slim for ending the partial government shutdown any time soon.

Lawmakers are away from Washington for the holidays and have been told they will get 24 hours' notice before having to return for a vote. And although the Senate is slated to come into session Thursday afternoon, few senators were expected to be around for it.

After a weekend and two holiday days for federal employees, Wednesday was the first regularly scheduled workday affected by the closure of a variety of federal services.

Trump vowed to hold the line on his budget demand, telling reporters during his visit to Iraq Wednesday that he'll do "whatever it takes" to get money for border security. He declined to say how much he would accept in a deal to end the shutdown.

"You have to have a wall, you have to have protection," he said.

The shutdown started Saturday when funding lapsed for nine Cabinet-level departments and dozens of agencies. Roughly 420,000 workers were deemed essential and are working unpaid, while an additional

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380,000 have been furloughed.

While the White House was talking to congressional Democrats — and staff talks continued on Capitol Hill — negotiations dragged Wednesday, dimming hopes for a swift breakthrough.

Republican Rep. Mark Meadows of North Carolina, a Trump ally who has been involved in the talks, said the president “is very firm in his resolve that we need to secure our border.” He told CNN, “If they believe that this president is going to yield on this particular issue, they’re misreading him.”

The impasse over government funding began last week, when the Senate approved a bipartisan deal keeping government open into February. That bill provided \$1.3 billion for border security projects but not money for the wall. At Trump’s urging, the House approved that package and inserted the \$5.7 billion he had requested.

But Senate Republicans lacked the votes they needed to force the measure through their chamber. That jump-started negotiations between Congress and the White House, but the deadline came and went without a deal.

The shutdown has been playing out against the backdrop of turmoil in the stock market.

Kevin Hassett, the chairman of the White House’s Council of Economic Advisers, said the shutdown does not change the administration’s expectation for strong growth heading into 2019. He told reporters a shutdown of a few weeks is not going to have any “significant effect on the outlook.”

The shutdown — the third of 2018 — caused a lapse in financing for nine of 15 Cabinet-level departments and dozens of agencies, including the departments of Homeland Security, Transportation, Interior, Agriculture, State and Justice.

Those being furloughed include 52,000 workers at the Internal Revenue Service and nearly everyone at NASA. About 8 in 10 employees of the National Park Service are staying home, and many parks have closed.

The shutdown didn’t stop people from visiting the White Sands National Monument in southern New Mexico, where hundreds of unauthorized visitors have in recent days climbed over a fence to enter the monument, according to The Alamogordo Daily News. State highway workers were sent to the area Monday to erect “no parking” signs along U.S. 70 outside the monument.

Trump has claimed federal workers are behind him in the shutdown fight, saying many told him, “stay out until you get the funding for the wall.” He didn’t say who told him that. Many workers have gone to social media with stories of the financial hardship they expect to face because of the shutdown.

One union representing federal workers slammed Trump’s claim. Paul Shearon, president of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, said the union has not heard from a single member who supports Trump’s position.

“Most view this as an act of ineptitude,” he said.

Superville reported from al-Asad Air Base in Iraq. Associated Press writer Paul Davenport in Alamogordo, New Mexico, contributed to this report.

Follow Darlene Superville on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/dsupervilleap>

Legal marijuana industry had banner year in 2018

By GILLIAN FLACCUS, Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — The last year was a 12-month champagne toast for the legal marijuana industry as the global market exploded and cannabis pushed its way further into the financial and cultural mainstream.

Liberal California became the largest legal U.S. marketplace, while conservative Utah and Oklahoma embraced medical marijuana. Canada ushered in broad legalization, and Mexico’s Supreme Court set the stage for that country to follow.

U.S. drug regulators approved the first marijuana-based pharmaceutical to treat kids with a form of epilepsy, and billions of investment dollars poured into cannabis companies. Even main street brands like

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Coca-Cola said they are considering joining the party.

"I have been working on this for decades, and this was the year that the movement crested," said U.S. Rep. Earl Blumenauer, an Oregon Democrat working to overturn the federal ban on pot. "It's clear that this is all coming to a head."

With buzz building across the globe, the momentum will continue into 2019.

Luxembourg is poised to become the first European country to legalize recreational marijuana, and South Africa is moving in that direction. Thailand legalized medicinal use of marijuana on Tuesday, and other Southeastern Asian countries may follow South Korea's lead in legalizing cannabidiol, or CBD. It's a non-psychoactive compound found in marijuana and hemp plants and used for treatment of certain medical problems.

"It's not just the U.S. now. It's spreading," said Ben Curren, CEO of Green Bits, a San Jose, California, company that develops software for marijuana retailers and businesses.

Curren's firm is one of many that blossomed as the industry grew. He started the company in 2014 with two friends. Now, he has 85 employees, and the company's software processes \$2.5 billion in sales transactions a year for more than 1,000 U.S. retail stores and dispensaries.

Green Bits raised \$17 million in April, pulling in money from investment firms including Snoop Dogg's Casa Verde Capital. Curren hopes to expand internationally by 2020.

"A lot of the problem is keeping up with growth," he said.

Legal marijuana was a \$10.4 billion industry in the U.S. in 2018 with a quarter-million jobs devoted just to the handling of marijuana plants, said Beau Whitney, vice president and senior economist at New Frontier Data, a leading cannabis market research and data analysis firm. There are many other jobs that don't involve direct work with the plants but they are harder to quantify, Whitney said.

Investors poured \$10 billion into cannabis in North America in 2018, twice what was invested in the last three years combined, he said, and the combined North American market is expected to reach more than \$16 billion in 2019.

"Investors are getting much savvier when it comes to this space because even just a couple of years ago, you'd throw money at it and hope that something would stick," he said. "But now investors are much more discerning."

Increasingly, U.S. lawmakers see that success and want it for their states.

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. states now have legalized some form of medical marijuana.

Voters in November made Michigan the 10th state — and first in the Midwest — to legalize recreational marijuana. Governors in New York and New Jersey are pushing for a similar law in their states next year, and momentum for broad legalization is building in Pennsylvania and Illinois.

"Let's legalize the adult use of recreational marijuana once and for all," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said last week.

State lawmakers in Nebraska just formed a campaign committee to put a medical cannabis initiative to voters in 2020. Nebraska shares a border with Colorado, one of the first two states to legalize recreational marijuana, and Iowa, which recently started a limited medical marijuana program.

"Attitudes have been rapidly evolving and changing. I know that my attitude toward it has also changed," said Nebraska state Sen. Adam Morfeld, a Democrat. "Seeing the medical benefits and seeing other states implement it ... has convinced me that it's not the dangerous drug it's made out to be."

With all its success, the U.S. marijuana industry continues to be undercut by a robust black market and federal law that treats marijuana as a controlled substance like heroin. Financial institutions are skittish about cannabis businesses, even in U.S. states where they are legal, and investors until recently have been reluctant to put their money behind pot.

Marijuana businesses can't deduct their business expenses on their federal taxes and face huge challenges getting insurance and finding real estate for their brick-and-mortar operations.

"Until you have complete federal legalization, you're going to be living with that structure," said Marc Press, a New Jersey attorney who advises cannabis businesses.

At the start of the year, the industry was chilled when then-U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions rescinded

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a policy shielding state-licensed medical marijuana operators from federal drug prosecutions. Ultimately the move had minimal impact because federal prosecutors showed little interest in going after legal operators.

Sessions, a staunch marijuana opponent, later lost his job while President Donald Trump said he was inclined to support an effort by U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner, a Colorado Republican, to relax the federal prohibition.

In November, Democrats won control of the U.S. House and want to use it next year to pass legislation that eases federal restrictions on the legal marijuana industry without removing it from the controlled substances list.

Gardner and Massachusetts Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren have proposed legislation allowing state-approved commercial cannabis activity under federal law. The bill also would let states and Indian tribes determine how best to regulate marijuana commerce within their boundaries without fear of federal intervention.

If those provisions become law, they could open up banking for the marijuana industry nationwide and make it easier for cannabis companies to secure capital.

Blumenauer's "blueprint" to legalize marijuana also calls for the federal government to provide medical marijuana for veterans, more equitable taxation for marijuana businesses and rolling back federal prohibitions on marijuana research, among other things.

"We have elected the most pro-cannabis Congress in history and more important, some of the people who were roadblocks to our work ... are gone," Blumenauer said. "If we're able to jump-start it in the House, I think there will be support in the Senate, particularly if we deal with things that are important, like veterans' access and banking."

Gillian Flaccus is a member of AP's marijuana beat team. Follow her on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/gflaccus>. Find complete AP marijuana coverage here: <https://apnews.com/LegalMarijuana>.

World shares mixed, Japan rallies on Wall Street rebound

By ANNABELLE LIANG, Associated Press

SINGAPORE (AP) — An incredible day on Wall Street, where major indexes finished at least 5 percent higher, lifted Japanese stocks but garnered a mixed reaction elsewhere in Asia and Europe on Thursday as some traders returned from a Christmas break.

KEEPING SCORE: Trading resumed Thursday for European markets, which were closed for the festive season. Germany's DAX dropped 0.3 percent to 10,601.98 while France's CAC 40 added 0.8 percent to 4,664.54. Britain's FTSE 100 was flat at 6,685.64. Wall Street was poised to open lower. Futures for the broad S&P futures were down 1 percent at 2,447.25. Dow futures fell 1 percent to 22,666.00.

ASIA'S DAY: Japan's Nikkei 225 index rebounded 3.9 percent to 20,077.62. It tumbled more than 5 percent on Tuesday before recovering slightly a day later. South Korea's Kospi was less than 0.1 percent higher at 2,028.44. The Shanghai Composite index lost 0.6 percent to 2,483.09. Markets in Hong Kong and Australia reopened after Christmas. The Hang Seng index was 0.7 percent lower at 25,478.88. Australia's S&P-ASX 200 jumped 1.9 percent to 5,597.20. Stocks climbed in Taiwan and throughout Southeast Asia.

WALL STREET JUMP: On Wednesday, U.S. markets snapped a four-day losing streak and clocked their best day in more than 10 years. Investors were reassured by an official signal that President Donald Trump, who has piled criticism of the Fed on Twitter, will not try to oust chairman Jerome Powell. Markets were also buoyed by strong U.S. holiday sales. Retail sales gained 5.1 percent between Nov. 1 and Dec. 24, as compared to a year ago, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse. It said U.S. shoppers spent more than \$850 billion this year, both online and offline.

ANALYST'S TAKE: "The question, of course, is whether this is just a snapback bear market rally, or as Trump said, a tremendous opportunity to buy stocks?" Chris Weston of Pepperstone Group Limited said in a market commentary. "We can assess the fundamental drivers, such as poor global economics, the Fed not altering its forward guidance or providing flexibility to the pace of balance sheet normalization,

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and ascertain nothing has really changed here," he added.

U.S.-CHINA TALKS: Bloomberg reported that the U.S. will send a government delegation to hold trade talks with Chinese officials in Beijing in the week starting Jan. 7. It cited two people familiar with the matter. This follows a meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Argentina earlier this month. The two leaders agreed to hold off on additional tariffs for 90 days, to work on disagreements on trade and technology policies.

ENERGY: Benchmark U.S. crude dropped 46 cents to \$45.76 a barrel in electronic trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. The contract posted its biggest one-day gain in more than two years and settled at \$46.22 a barrel in New York on Wednesday. Brent crude, used to price international oils, shed 68 cents to \$53.79 a barrel.

CURRENCIES: The dollar eased to 110.90 yen from 111.37 yen late Wednesday. The euro rose to \$1.1397 from \$1.1353.

Pope's initial blind spot on sex abuse threatens legacy

By NICOLE WINFIELD, Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — It has been a wretched year for Pope Francis, whose blind spot on clergy sex abuse conspired with events beyond his control to threaten his legacy and throw the Catholic hierarchy into a credibility crisis not seen in modern times.

The latest development — a high-profile verdict in a far-away country — cements the impression that Francis simply didn't "get it" when he first became pope in 2013 and began leading the church.

Early missteps included associating with compromised cardinals and bishops and downplaying or dismissing rumors of abuse and cover-up. Francis finally came around in 2018, when he publicly admitted he was wrong about a case in Chile, made amends, and laid the groundwork for the future by calling an abuse prevention summit next year.

But damage to his moral authority on the issue has been done. Before his eyes were opened, Francis showed that he was a product of the very clerical culture he so often denounces, ever ready to take the word of the clerical class over victims.

The year started off well enough: Francis dedicated his annual Jan. 1 peace message to the plight of migrants and refugees. Soon thereafter, he baptized 34 cooing babies in the Sistine Chapel and urged their mothers to nurse, a typical Franciscan show of informal practicality amid the splendor of Michelangelo's "Last Judgment."

Then came Chile .

Francis' January visit was dominated by the clergy abuse scandal there, and featured unprecedented protests against a papal visit: churches were firebombed and riot police used water cannons to quell demonstrations.

Chilean opposition to Francis had actually begun three years prior, when the Argentine-born pope appointed Juan Barros as bishop of the southern diocese of Osorno. Francis had dismissed allegations that Barros ignored and covered up abuse by Chile's most prominent predator priest, imposing him on a diocese that wanted nothing to do with him.

"The day they bring me proof against Bishop Barros, I'll speak," Francis said on his final day in Chile. "There is not one shred of proof against him. It's all slander. Is that clear?"

Francis defended Barros because one of his friends and advisers, Chilean Cardinal Javier Errazuriz, defended Barros. Francis in 2013 had named Errazuriz to his inner circle, a formal parallel cabinet of nine cardinals who meet every three months at the Vatican.

Chilean victims, though, had long charged that Errazuriz had been deaf to their claims while he was archbishop of Santiago, giving cover to abusers and their enablers. Francis disregarded the victims' concerns and appointed Errazuriz to the high-profile cabinet post.

In the wake of his disastrous trip to Chile, Francis slowly came around to the victims' view, in part in response to reporting by The Associated Press. He ordered an in-depth investigation into the Chilean church,

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admitted to "grave errors in judgment" and personally apologized to the victims he had discredited. He accused the Chilean leadership of creating a "culture of cover-up" and secured the resignations of every active bishop there, Barros included. He vowed that the Catholic Church would "never again" hide abuse, and earlier this month the Vatican announced Francis had fired Errazuriz from the cabinet.

Also removed was Cardinal George Pell, who left his post as the Vatican's economy minister in June 2017 to stand trial for historical sex abuse offenses in his native Australia. Like Errazuriz, Pell had been the target of abuse victims' ire for years, well before Francis brought him to the Vatican, given his prominent role in Australia and the church's horrific record with abuse there.

Both men deny wrongdoing. But their continued presence on the Council of Nine, as the cabinet is called, became a source of scandal for the pope, who bid them farewell in October with a letter thanking them for their service. For Pell, the C9 removal suggests he won't resume work at the Vatican since his five-year term expires early next year.

They are not the only cardinals on the hot seat: The current archbishop of Santiago is under investigation in a broad criminal inquiry into sex abuse cover-up. Prosecutors in a dozen U.S. states are investigating church files. A cover-up trial in France has two cardinals as defendants, including the Spaniard who heads the Vatican office that processes sex abuse cases. The Holy See invoked sovereign immunity to spare Spain's Cardinal Luis Ladaria Ferrer. But it has no such power to protect Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, the archbishop of Lyon, France, who is accused of failing to report a self-confessed abusive priest to authorities. Francis has said French justice should take its course but has praised Barbarin as "brave."

Despite such problems, with the Chile scandal largely atoned for and decisions made to purge his inner circle of compromised members, Francis appeared by summer to be well on his way to steering himself out of the 2018 sex abuse crisis.

Then Round 2 hit.

In July, Francis removed U.S. Archbishop Theodore McCarrick as a cardinal after church investigators said an allegation that he groped a teenage altar boy in the 1970s was credible. Subsequently, several former seminarians and priests reported that they too had been abused or harassed by McCarrick as adults.

A month later, a grand jury report in Pennsylvania revealed seven decades of abuse and cover-up in six dioceses, with allegations that more than 1,000 children had been molested by about 300 priests. Most of the priests were dead, and the crimes far pre-dated Francis' papacy.

But the combined scandal created a crisis in confidence in the U.S. and Vatican hierarchy. It was apparently common knowledge in the U.S. and Vatican leadership that "Uncle Ted," as McCarrick was known, slept with seminarians, and yet he still he rose undisturbed up the church ranks.

Having removed McCarrick and approved a canonical trial against him, Francis should have emerged as the hero in the saga since he righted the wrong of St. John Paul II, the pope from 1978-2005 who had promoted McCarrick to begin with and whose record on abuse issues is far worse than Francis' given his inaction.

But Francis' get-tough victory lap was cut short when a former Vatican ambassador to the U.S. accused the pope himself of participating in the McCarrick cover-up.

In an 11-page denunciation in August, Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano claimed that Vatican officials from the top on down over the course of three pontificates had known about McCarrick's penchant for seminarians, and turned a blind eye.

Vigano wrote that he had told Francis in 2013, at the start of his pontificate, that McCarrick had "corrupted a generation" of seminarians and priests and that Pope Benedict XVI had eventually sanctioned him for his sexual misconduct.

Vigano claimed Francis disregarded his 2013 warning and rehabilitated McCarrick from those sanctions, making him a key adviser and entrusting him with delicate missions to China and elsewhere.

Francis never responded to Vigano's laundry list of claims. Instead, Francis took to blaming the devil — "the Great Accuser" — for sowing division and discord in the church, an indirect jab at Vigano that only fueled conservative outrage at Francis and demands that he come clean about what he knew about McCarrick and when.

The Vatican didn't help Francis' standing any when, without providing any plausible reason, it blocked U.S. bishops from adopting accountability measures to try to restore trust with their flocks.

It now seems clear that Francis, at least at the start of his pontificate, was willing to overlook past sexual misbehavior or cover-up claims if those responsible had atoned. Francis launched his pontificate with his famous "Who am I to judge" comment, about a gay priest whom he had appointed to a top advisory position despite allegations he had had a string of lovers.

That comment, which won him plaudits from liberal Catholics and landed him on the cover of Advocate magazine, may now be his undoing. If he had judged his advisers more scrupulously at the start of his pontificate on their abuse and cover-up records, he might have retained more credibility in 2018.

Sudan's protests point to weaknesses in Bashir's rule

By HAMZA HENDAWI, Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudan's Omar Bashir fended off a march by opponents on his presidential palace in the capital, Khartoum, unleashing his security forces in hopes of putting an end to an Arab Spring-style uprising. But nearly a week of protests has pointed to the weaknesses threatening his 29-year hold on power.

Despite the heavy hand of police, who have reportedly killed at least 37 protesters, Bashir's response has been feeble. He left the capital ahead of Tuesday's march on his palace, and he has been fumbling and vague in addressing the economic crisis that prompted the outburst of anger.

Perhaps most alarming for Bashir, an Islamist who came to power in a 1989 military coup, the powerful military and security agencies have only voiced half-hearted support for him amid the turmoil.

On the streets, the lengthy battles with police on Tuesday in Khartoum may have only emboldened Sudanese to take on the security forces again.

"Today, we the Sudanese people ... have crossed the point of no return on the path of change," a coalition of professional unions that organized Tuesday's march said in a statement afterward. "We will pursue all options of peaceful, popular actions ... until we bring down the regime that continues to shed blood. Today, more than any time before, we are confident in our collective ability to realize that."

Bashir, who is in his mid-70s, put down two previous bouts of protests and may do so yet again. But the rule of one of the longest serving leaders in the Middle East is clearly fraying.

BASHIR'S LEADERSHIP

The Sudanese leader has held onto power despite a series of major setbacks over the past decade. The first was in 2010 when he was indicted by the International Criminal Court on charges of committing crimes against humanity and genocide in the Darfur region. He managed to build outside ties that prevented his complete isolation but has been weighed down by the stigma.

More damaging was the 2011 secession from Sudan by the mainly animist and Christian south. The split, approved in a referendum by southerners, came under a peace deal signed by Bashir that ended a draining, decades-long civil war. But as it became independent, the south took with it three quarters of Sudan's oil wealth.

The north's economy has struggled ever since. In recent months, Bashir devalued the currency, causing a spike in prices and worsening the hardships faced by most Sudanese. The public already is wrestling with fuel shortages, and a decree to raise the price of bread proved to be spark that set off the latest protests.

Bashir has done little to help himself. He headed to a region south of the capital ahead of Tuesday's march on his palace. It was a previously scheduled trip but was widely interpreted as fright. There, he tried to put on a show of strength, but his speech at an outdoor rally attended by several hundred people was lackluster, relying on quotes from the Quran vowing that God will provide for people.

He promised economic reforms but gave no details. He blamed the crisis on unnamed enemies of Sudan and called the protesters traitors, mercenaries, agents and heretics. Afterward, he stayed on the makeshift stage and performed his trademark dance to local music while waving his cane.

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Bashir still dominates Sudan's political class. Loyal lawmakers are rallying support for constitutional amendments that would allow him to run in the 2020 elections.

But his real power base is the military, which has dominated Sudan since independence in 1956. Its support for him in the unrest has been less than resounding.

In a statement Sunday, several days into the protests, the military said it stood behind the country's leadership but didn't mention Bashir by name. Instead, it talked of preserving the nation's security and "achievements."

Later in the week, the leader of a powerful paramilitary force who reports directly to Bashir delivered thinly-veiled criticism of his rule. Lt. Gen. Mohammed Hamad Daqlou of the Rapid Support Force called on the government to "secure services, fulfill its duties and create the means for a dignified life" for Sudan's people.

He said a "realistic and radical solution" must be found for Sudan's economic crisis, and he called for "corrupt individuals who sabotage the economy" to be brought to account.

REGIONAL ALLIES

Another possible judgment on Bashir was the silence of his Arab allies.

Only the Gulf nations of Bahrain and Qatar publicly stated their support for Bashir. No word came from his most important backers, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The two countries have long given financial support to Khartoum, and Bashir sought to strengthen ties even further by sending Sudanese troops to Yemen to fight alongside them against Iran-aligned rebels there.

Their silence suggests what an unreliable ally they consider Bashir to be. The Sudanese president has at various points forged close ties with the Saudis' and Emiratis' top regional rivals — Iran, Turkey and Qatar — apparently trying to play the sides against each other to extract more from them.

Sudan's neighbor to the north, Egypt, has also refrained from voicing support for Bashir. Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi has courted Bashir for years, hoping to secure his goodwill in Egypt's dispute with Ethiopia over that country's construction of a massive dam that Egypt fears will reduce its share of the Nile River. But the mercurial Bashir has moved closer to Ethiopia and stoked a long-running border dispute with Egypt.

Western countries have largely shunned Bashir since the ICC charges but they remain key donors of aid to Sudan. The United States, Canada, Norway and Britain have demanded Khartoum investigate "credible reports" that Sudanese security forces used live ammunition against protesters. In a joint statement, they referred to the constitutional right of the Sudanese to peaceful protests and labelled their demands as "legitimate."

Israeli official confirms Syria airstrikes as Russia objects

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and NATALIYA VASILYEVA, Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — An Israeli security official on Wednesday confirmed responsibility for overnight airstrikes in Syria, saying the air force had hit a series of targets involved in Iranian arms transfers to the Hezbollah militant group.

Russia had criticized the airstrike, saying it endangered civilian flights. The comments highlighted the increasingly tense relations between Israel and Russia, which have grown strained since the September downing of a Russian plane by Syrian forces responding to another Israeli raid.

The Israeli official said the air force had attacked several Iranian targets in three main locations late Tuesday and early Wednesday. He said the targets were primarily storage and logistics facilities used by archenemy Iran to ship weapons to Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese group that fought Israel in a 2006 war.

The Israeli official said it was Syrian air defenses that endangered the civilian planes, by firing 30 missiles in response to the airstrike. He also claimed that Iranian forces are operating less than 80 kilometers (50 miles) from the Israeli border, contrary to Russian assurances.

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The official spoke on condition of anonymity under standard Israeli security protocols. The military has not commented on the incident.

Earlier Wednesday, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said that six Israeli F-16 jets launched a "provocative" raid at the moment when two civilian airliners were preparing to land in Damascus and Beirut, creating a "direct threat" to the aircraft.

Lebanon's acting Transport Minister Youssef Fenianos confirmed Konashenkov's account, saying the two airplanes in Lebanese airspace "narrowly" escaped Israeli warplanes, averting a "human catastrophe." Fenianos said Lebanon will present a complaint to the U.N. Security Council.

Konashenkov said the Syrian military didn't fully engage its air defense assets to avoid accidentally hitting the passenger jets. He added that Syrian air traffic controllers redirected the Damascus-bound plane to a Russian air base in Syria's coastal province of Latakia.

Konashenkov said Syrian air defense forces shot down 14 of the 16 precision-guided bombs dropped by the Israeli jets, while the remaining two hit a Syrian military depot 7 kilometers (about 4 miles) west of Damascus, wounding three Syrian soldiers.

The Israeli official said the Israeli jets hit all their targets, in some cases causing secondary explosions. He said they also destroyed a Syrian anti-aircraft battery.

In recent years, Israel has acknowledged carrying out scores of airstrikes in neighboring Syria, most believed to have been aimed at suspected Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah. Iran and Hezbollah have sent forces to Syria to bolster President Bashar Assad, who appears close to victory after a devastating seven-year civil war.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly said Israel will not allow Iran to establish a permanent military presence in postwar Syria.

That mission has been complicated by the Sept. 17 downing of the Russian reconnaissance aircraft by Syrian fire. Russia, which also backs Assad, has blamed Israel for the friendly-fire mishap and reportedly scaled back a hotline that allowed the two air forces to coordinate and avoid unintended clashes.

Russia also sent Syria sophisticated S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, though the Israeli official said an older system was fired at the Israeli planes in Wednesday's incident.

Israeli officials have also expressed concern about U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria. The U.S. presence has given Israel an extra element of protection.

Speaking at a military ceremony Wednesday, Netanyahu said the U.S. withdrawal will not change his policy.

Although he did not directly mention the airstrikes, he said Israel's air force has unmatched capabilities and can reach areas "near and far, very far."

"We are not prepared to accept the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, which is directed against us. We will act against it vigorously and continuously, including during the current period," he told a graduation ceremony of new air force pilots.

Addressing the same ceremony, Israel's military chief, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, praised the army's "many important accomplishments," including "thwarting the expansion of Iranian influence."

The Syrian Foreign Ministry accused Israel of exacerbating the crisis in the country and standing in the way of the government's war on terrorism.

In messages sent to the U.N. secretary-general and the president of the Security Council, the ministry said the Israeli airstrike wouldn't have been launched if it wasn't for what it called "unlimited" U.S. support for Israel.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor, said Tuesday's Israeli strike targeted three positions south of Damascus that are arms depots for Hezbollah and Iranian forces.

Vasilyeva reported from Moscow. Associated Press writers Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow and Sarah El Deeb in Beirut contributed to this report.

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Trump signals no end to shutdown: 'You have to have a wall'

By JULIET LINDERMAN and DARLENE SUPERVILLE, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A shutdown affecting parts of the federal government appeared no closer to resolution Wednesday, with President Donald Trump and congressional Democrats locked in a hardening standoff over border wall money that threatens to carry over into January.

Trump vowed to hold the line, telling reporters during a visit to Iraq that he'll do "whatever it takes" to get money for border security. He declined to say how much he would accept in a deal to end the shutdown, stressing the need for border security.

"You have to have a wall, you have to have protection," he said.

The shutdown started Saturday when funding lapsed for nine Cabinet-level departments and dozens of agencies. Roughly 420,000 workers were deemed essential and are working unpaid, while an additional 380,000 have been furloughed.

While the White House was talking to congressional Democrats — and staff talks continued on Capitol Hill — negotiations dragged Wednesday, dimming hopes for a swift breakthrough.

With no deal at hand, members of the House were told there would be no votes on Thursday, assuring the shutdown would last yet another day. Lawmakers are away from Washington for the holidays and have been told they will have 24 hours' notice before having to return for a vote. The Senate is slated to come into session Thursday afternoon.

Rep. Mark Meadows of North Carolina, a Trump ally who has been involved in the talks, said the president "is very firm in his resolve that we need to secure our border." He told CNN, "I don't know that there's a lot of progress that has been made today."

But he added of Democrats: "If they believe that this president is going to yield on this particular issue, they're misreading him."

The impasse over government funding began last week, when the Senate approved a bipartisan deal keeping government open into February. That bill provided \$1.3 billion for border security projects but not money for the wall. At Trump's urging, the House approved that package and inserted the \$5.7 billion he had requested.

On Friday afternoon, a Senate procedural vote showed that Republicans lacked the 60 votes they'd need to force the measure with the wall funding through their chamber. That jump-started negotiations between Congress and the White House, but the deadline came and went without a deal.

Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York on Saturday said funding for Trump's wall will "never pass the Senate."

"So President Trump, if you want to open the government, you must abandon the wall, plain and simple," Schumer said.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is in lockstep with Schumer against the wall funding. If the shutdown continues into 2019, she has vowed that her new Democratic majority will act quickly to pass legislation reopening the government.

The shutdown has been playing out against the backdrop of turmoil in the stock market, which is having a roller-coaster week.

Kevin Hassett, the chairman of the White House's Council of Economic Advisers, said the shutdown does not change the administration's expectation for strong growth heading into 2019. He told reporters a shutdown of a few weeks is not going to have any "significant effect on the outlook."

The shutdown that began on Saturday — the third of 2018 — caused a lapse in funding for nine of 15 Cabinet-level departments and dozens of agencies, including the departments of Homeland Security, Transportation, Interior, Agriculture, State and Justice.

Roughly 420,000 workers were deemed essential and were working unpaid, while another 380,000 were furloughed, meaning they'll stay home without pay. The shutdown complicates things for essential employees who planned trips for the holidays: According to the Office of Personnel Management rules, employees deemed essential or otherwise exempted from their respective agency furloughs can't take

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any vacation or sick days.

Furloughed federal workers have been given back pay in previous shutdowns.

Those being furloughed include 52,000 workers at the Internal Revenue Service and nearly everyone at NASA. About 8 in 10 employees of the National Park Service are staying home, and many parks have closed.

Roughly 44,000 U.S. Coast Guard employees are considered essential, and will report to work this week without pay, with another 6,000 furloughed. The Coast Guard is the only arm of the military affected by the shutdown because it is funded through the Department of Homeland Security.

The shutdown didn't stop people from visiting the White Sands National Monument in southern New Mexico, where hundreds of unauthorized visitors have in recent days climbed over a fence to enter the monument, according to The Alamogordo Daily News. State highway workers were sent to the area Monday to erect "no parking" signs along U.S. 70 outside the monument.

Trump claimed on Monday that federal workers are behind him in the shutdown fight, saying many "have said to me and communicated, 'stay out until you get the funding for the wall.'" He didn't say who he had heard from. Many rank-and-file workers have gone to social media with stories of the financial hardship they expect to face because of the shutdown.

One union representing federal workers slammed Trump's claim. Paul Shearon, the president of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, in a statement said the union has not heard from a single member who supports Trump's position.

"Most view this as an act of ineptitude," he said.

Superville reported from Iraq. Associated Press writer Paul Davenport in Alamogordo, New Mexico, contributed to this report.

Follow Darlene Superville on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/dsupervilleap>

Trump makes first visit to US troops in harm's way

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE, Associated Press

AL-ASAD AIRBASE, Iraq (AP) — In an unannounced trip to Iraq on Wednesday, President Donald Trump staunchly defended his decision to withdraw U.S. forces from neighboring Syria despite a drumbeat of criticism from military officials and allies who don't think the job fighting Islamic State militants there is over.

Trump, making his first presidential visit to troops in a troubled region, said it's because the U.S. military had all but eliminated IS-controlled territory in both Iraq and Syria that he decided to withdraw 2,000 forces from Syria. He said the decision to leave Syria showed America's renewed stature on the world stage and his quest to put "America first."

"We're no longer the suckers, folks," Trump told U.S. servicemen and women at al-Asad Airbase in western Iraq, about 100 miles or 60 kilometers west of Baghdad. "We're respected again as a nation."

The decision to pull U.S. forces from Syria, however, stunned national security advisers and U.S. allies and prompted the resignations of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who was not on the trip, and the U.S. envoy to the coalition fighting the Islamic extremist group. The militant group, also known as ISIS, has lost nearly all its territory in Iraq and Syria but is still seen as a threat.

Iraq declared IS defeated within its borders in December 2017, but Trump's trip was shrouded in secrecy, which has been standard practice for presidents flying into conflict areas.

Air Force One, lights out and window shutters drawn, flew overnight from Washington, landing at an airbase west of Baghdad in darkness Wednesday evening. George W. Bush made four trips to Iraq as president and President Barack Obama made one.

During his three-plus hours on the ground, Trump did not meet with any Iraqi officials, but spoke on the phone with Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. He stopped at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany on his way back, for a second unannounced visit to troops and military leaders.

Trump's Iraq visit appeared to have inflamed sensitivities about the continued presence of U.S. forces

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in Iraq. The two major blocs in the Iraqi parliament both condemned the visit, likening it to a violation of Iraqi sovereignty.

The airbase where Trump spoke is about 155 miles (250 km) from Hajin, a Syrian town near the Iraqi border where Kurdish fighters are still battling IS extremists. Trump has said IS militants have been eradicated, but the latest estimate is that IS still holds about 60 square miles (100 square km) of territory in that region of Syria, although fighters also fled the area and are in hiding in other pockets of the country.

Mattis was supposed to continue leading the Pentagon until late February but Trump moved up his exit and announced that Patrick Shanahan, deputy defense secretary, would take the job on Jan. 1 and he was in "no rush" to nominate a new defense chief.

"Everybody and his uncle wants that position," Trump told reporters traveling with him in Iraq. "And also, by the way, everybody and her aunt, just so I won't be criticized."

Critics said the U.S. exit from Syria, the latest in Trump's increasingly isolationist-style foreign policy, would provide an opening for IS to regroup, give Iran a green light to expand its influence in the region and leave U.S.-backed Kurdish forces vulnerable to attacks from Turkey.

"I made it clear from the beginning that our mission in Syria was to strip ISIS of its military strongholds," said Trump, who wore an olive green bomber style jacket as he was welcomed by chants of "USA! USA!" and speakers blaring Lee Greenwood's song, "God Bless the USA."

"We'll be watching ISIS very closely," said Trump, who was joined by first lady Melania Trump, but no members of his Cabinet or lawmakers. "We'll be watching them very, very closely, the remnants of ISIS"

Trump also said he had no plans to withdraw the 5,200 U.S. forces in Iraq. That's down from about 170,000 in 2007 at the height of the surge of U.S. forces to combat sectarian violence unleashed by the U.S.-led invasion to topple dictator Saddam Hussein.

Trump spoke on the phone with the prime minister, but the White House said security concerns and the short notice of the trip prevented the president from meeting him face-to-face.

The prime minister's office said "differences in points of view over the arrangements" prevented the two from meeting but they discussed security issues and Trump's order to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria over the phone. Abdul-Mahdi's office also did not say whether he had accepted an invitation to the White House. But Trump press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters on the flight back that the Iraqi leader had agreed to come.

Trump said that after U.S. troops in Syria return home, Iraq could still be used to stage attacks on IS militants.

"We can use this as a base if we wanted to do something in Syria," he said. "If we see something happening with ISIS that we don't like, we can hit them so fast and so hard" that they "really won't know what the hell happened."

Trump said it's time to leave Syria because the U.S. should not be involved in nation-building, and that other wealthy nations should shoulder the cost of rebuilding Syria. He also said Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has agreed to battle "any remnants of ISIS" in Syria, which shares a border with Turkey.

"The nations of the regions must step up and take more responsibility for their future," Trump said, promising a "strong deliberate and orderly withdrawal" of forces from Syria

Trump had faced criticism for not yet visiting U.S. troops stationed in harm's way as he comes up on his two-year mark in office. He told The Associated Press in October that he "will do that at some point, but I don't think it's overly necessary.

Trump told reporters that he had planned to make the trip three or four weeks ago, but word of the trip started getting out and forced him to postpone it.

Iraqi leaders declared an end to combat operations against IS a year ago but the country's political, military and economic situation remains uncertain. It continues to experience sporadic bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, which most people attribute to IS.

On Dec. 15, the U.S.-led coalition launched an airstrike in support of Iraqi troops who were chasing IS fighters toward a tunnel west of Mosul. The strike destroyed the tunnel entrance and killed four IS fight-

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ers, according to the U.S. military in Baghdad. The last U.S. service member to die in Iraq was in August, as the result of a helicopter crash in Sinjar.

Trump had planned to spend Christmas at his private club in Florida, but stayed behind in Washington due to the partial government shutdown.

Trump campaigned for office on a platform of ending U.S. involvement in foreign trouble spots, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Pentagon is also said to be developing plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops still serving in Afghanistan.

Associated Press writers Deb Riechmann and Lolita C. Baldor in Washington and Philip Issa in Baghdad contributed to this report.

Follow Darlene Superville on Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/dsupervilleap>

AP Exclusive: Migrant teen tent city staying open into 2019

By GARANCE BURKE and ANITA SNOW, Associated Press

The Trump administration said Wednesday it will keep open through early 2019 a tent city in Texas that now holds more than 2,000 migrant teenagers, and also will increase the number of beds at another temporary detention center for children in Florida.

The Tornillo facility opened in June in an isolated corner of the Texas desert with capacity for up to 360 children. It eventually grew into a highly guarded detention camp where, on Christmas, some 2,300 largely Central American boys and girls between the ages of 13 and 17 slept in more than 150 canvas tents.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spokesman Mark Weber said Tornillo, which originally was slated to close Dec. 31, has stopped receiving new referrals of migrant youth.

Tornillo will now shut down after the new year, Weber said, but he did not give an exact date or more precise time frame for when it might close for good.

The agency is working with its network of shelters including Tornillo to release the children "to suitable sponsors as safely and quickly as possible," he said.

The government also plans to house more teens at another temporary shelter in Homestead, Florida, expanding the total number of beds from 1,350 to 2,350, he added.

Tornillo came under fire last month after revelations that the Trump administration had waived FBI fingerprint checks for the 2,100 staff working there and allowed the private contractor running the facility to have just one mental health clinician for every 100 children. In November, Health and Human Services officials said they hoped the fingerprints would be completed in a month but they haven't given an update.

Lawmakers called for stricter background checks, more mental health support and a public hearing to further investigate problems at Tornillo raised by a federal watchdog report and an Associated Press investigation.

The federal program originally intended to offer a safe haven to vulnerable children fleeing danger across the globe has expanded considerably over the last two years. Three months after President Donald Trump took office there were 2,720 migrant youth in government care. Today, the system has 16,000 beds available for migrant children.

Confidential government data obtained and cross-checked by AP has shown that as the year draws to a close, about 9,800 detained migrant children are in facilities holding 100-plus total kids, including Tornillo and Homestead.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and many experts warn against institutionalizing children in large groups, saying the experience of treating the young migrants like cogs in a big machine can have severe psychological consequences and cause lifelong trauma.

Weber has said that sheltering children in large facilities, while not preferable, is a better alternative than holding them for long periods at Border Patrol stations ill-suited to care for them.

Follow @garanceburke and @asnowreports on Twitter.

No more paperwork: Estonia edges toward digital government

By **DANICA KIRKA, Associated Press**

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — In the Estonian capital of Tallinn, three-day-old Oskar Lunde sleeps soundly in his hospital cot, snuggled into a lime green blanket decorated with red butterflies. Across the room, his father turns on a laptop.

“Now we will register our child,” Andrejs Lunde says with gravity as he inserts his ID card into the card reader. His wife, Olga, looks on proudly.

And just like that, Oskar is Estonia’s newest citizen. No paper. No fuss.

This Baltic nation of 1.3 million people is engaged in an ambitious project to make government administration completely digital to reduce bureaucracy, increase transparency and boost economic growth. As more countries shift their services online, Estonia’s experiment offers a glimpse of how interacting with the state might be for future generations.

Need a prescription? It’s online. Need someone at City Hall? No lines there — or even at the Department of Motor Vehicles! On the school front, parents can see whether their children’s homework was done on time.

Estonia has created one platform that supports electronic authentication and digital signatures to enable paperless communications across both the private and public sectors.

There are still a few things that you can’t do electronically in Estonia: marry, divorce or transfer property — and that’s only because the government has decided it was important to turn up in person for some big life events.

This spring, government aims to go even further. If Oskar had been born a few months later, he would have been registered automatically, with his parents receiving an email welcoming him into the nation.

Marten Kaevats, Estonia’s national digital adviser, says the goal is a government that supports its citizens while staying out of the way.

“In an ideal world, in the case of an invisible government, when a new child is born neither of the parents would ever have to apply for anything: to get maternity leave, to get child support from the municipality, to get a kindergarten place, to put the name to the child,” he said. “All of those different services would be delivered automatically.”

Siva Vaidhyanathan, director of the Center for Media and Citizenship at the University of Virginia, says other countries have a lot to learn. Estonia took time to build security and privacy into its model, in contrast with failed efforts by private companies to provide secure online voting systems in the United States, for example.

“It made sure that state accountability is part of the process,” he said.

Estonians largely seem to have embraced the system despite global concerns about data hacks.

At a demonstration showcasing the digital system, project manager Indrek Onnik stood beside a huge screen illustrating his profile. He showed off his high school grades from a decade ago and his diving license records. If he had a dog, its vaccination record would appear there, too.

Citizens can monitor their data and see if any government or private institution accesses it.

“To generate trust, you really have to have transparency,” he said. “And that’s why people have access to their own data. And that’s why they can actually see if the government has used their own data.”

The platform is underpinned by software called X-Road, a decentralized data exchange system that links databases. Outgoing data is digitally signed and encrypted, and all incoming data is authenticated and logged.

The government, fearing attempts to compromise its borders by neighboring Russia, also has a backup plan to restore digital services in the event of invasion or severe cyberattacks: data “embassies” in countries like Luxembourg. Like a regular embassy, the servers are considered Estonian territory and would give the government a chance to boot up elsewhere if needed.

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Making life simpler for citizens has economic benefits in a country otherwise known for unforgiving winters and old growth forests.

The project, which began in 1997, laid the groundwork for Estonia's booming tech sector. Skype, the video-calling service Microsoft bought for \$8.5 billion in 2011, is Estonia's most famous high-tech export, but the impact is broader. Information and communications accounted for 5.9 percent of the economy last year.

The government hopes to increase that figure with an "e-residency" program that lets entrepreneurs around the world register their businesses in Estonia and gain a foothold in the European Union. More than 51,000 people from 167 countries have applied at a cost of 100 euros (\$114) each.

The advances in digitization are the result of long-term thinking.

When Estonia declared independence in 1991, the economy was so backward in this former Soviet republic it had to be rebuilt from scratch. The leadership looked for an industry where the country could compete. They decided on information technology and the internet, a field that was as new as Estonia, said former President Toomas Hendrik Ilves.

When the cash-strapped country needed to replace a 1930s phone system, Finland offered a late 1970s analog system free of charge. But Ilves argued that the government should decline the offer and invest in digital technology.

"The only way we could do really well was to go digital," Ilves said, speaking from Stanford University, where he is a distinguished visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution. "We stood a chance of competing there."

Ilves, who grew up in the United States and was introduced to computers in junior high, proposed getting kids started early. The government started building computer labs in schools. Banks supported the move, as it reduced the need for branches in rural villages. More than 99 percent of Estonia's banking transactions now take place online.

Whether Estonia's system can be used in larger countries is an open question, said Zvika Krieger, head of technology policy and partnerships at the World Economic Forum.

What works in a small, progressive country won't necessarily work in sprawling democracies like the U.S. or India.

"When you add in more people, more diverse stakeholders, more layers of government at the city, state, and local level, you are adding in exponentially more complexity," Krieger said. "Estonia is a good first test case. And now the question is whether other countries will find Estonia's success compelling enough to take the risk to try it at a larger scale."

Estonia sees its approach as a prototype for modern democracy — a counterpoint to authoritarian countries intent on using digitization to control their citizens. Ilves, who travels around the world talking about the project, tells other countries that increased efficiency builds trust — and improves governance.

"Estonians hate their politicians just as much as everyone else," he said. "But at least since the administration of the state works extremely well and efficiently, people trust the system."

Andrejs Lunde is among the believers.

He says digital government makes life so much easier that it's worth any potential security risk, pointing out that personal information can be stolen from paper-based systems as well.

"If someone really wants my information, they will get it anyway," said Lunde. "If they can get Hillary's emails, they can get mine."

Bad headlines for Trump also means ratings slump for Hannity

By DAVID BAUDER, AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The drumbeat of bad news for President Donald Trump hasn't been good for his most prominent backer in the media.

While Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity will end 2018 as cable news' most popular personality for the second year in a row, he's been slumping in the ratings since the midterm elections and ominous stories related to Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of the president.

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His show averaged 2.76 million viewers since the election through Dec. 17, down 19 percent compared to the previous month, the Nielsen company said. Among the 25-to-54-year-old demo most coveted by advertisers, he's down 30 percent. Competitors Rachel Maddow on MSNBC and Chris Cuomo on CNN are up in each measurement.

Maddow has been beating Hannity outright in December, a turnaround from October. During that month, when Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation drama dominated the news, Hannity's audience routinely exceeded Maddow's by about a million people each night, Nielsen said.

"I think it's a reflection of the mood of his audience," said Mark Lukasiewicz, dean of Hofstra University's communications school and a longtime NBC executive. "They can't be happy with what is coming out of Washington every day."

Hannity has been associated with Trump perhaps more than any other media figure. He was scolded by Fox for being called onstage by the president and speaking during a Trump rally shortly before midterm election. The Pew Research Center found in a 2014 survey that 83 percent of Hannity's viewers identified themselves as conservative.

With bad news piling up for Trump, Hannity frequently spends time criticizing ideological opponents in the media for the types of stories they emphasize, and discusses misdeeds by previous Democratic administrations.

"Even hard-core Trump fans are starting to put Hillary Clinton in their rear-view mirrors and say, 'it's been two years,'" Lukasiewicz said.

In a joint statement, Fox News CEO Suzanne Scott and President Jay Wallace touted the network's top status among all basic cable networks.

There's precedent for a news-related slump. Maddow's ratings sank sharply just after the 2016 election, as fans distressed by Trump's win took a timeout from the news. Her ratings steadily improved as her show became a destination for Trump opponents.

Ken LaCorte, a former Fox News executive who spent 20 years at the network, cautioned against reading too much into a few weeks of ratings. Pulling back for a broader view, Hannity's show will be the most popular on cable news for the second year in a row, with an average of 3.3 million viewers that is up 17 percent over 2017, according to Nielsen.

It's certainly possible that Republicans have been less interested in the news lately, said LaCorte, who is launching a news web site, LaCortenews.com, next month.

"It's probably more interesting to hear about the party you support taking over the House of Representatives because there are more interesting things to discuss," he said.

Hannity also has company. Fox's prime-time schedule as a whole, which also includes Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham, has been down 20 percent since the election, Nielsen said.

Even with Fox's recent slump, the Trump administration continues to be glory days for cable news. Fox News Channel is the top-rated network for all of basic cable for the third year in a row, topping ESPN, and will finish with the highest-rated prime-time schedule in its history. That comes despite losing Bill O'Reilly and Megyn Kelly from its lineup over the past two years.

MSNBC is third overall in basic cable, and is also on pace to finish with the biggest audience in its history, Nielsen said. CNN will finish 11th, and is likely to finish with its third-best year ever.

Today in History By The Associated Press

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 27, the 361st day of 2018. There are four days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 27, 1979, Soviet forces seized control of Afghanistan. President Hafizullah Amin (hah-FEE'-zoo-lah ah-MEEN'), who was overthrown and executed, was replaced by Babrak Karmal.

On this date:

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In 1831, naturalist Charles Darwin set out on a round-the-world voyage aboard the HMS Beagle.

In 1904, James Barrie's play "Peter Pan: The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up" opened at the Duke of York's Theater in London.

In 1945, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were formally established.

In 1947, the original version of the puppet character Howdy Doody made his TV debut on NBC's "Puppet Playhouse."

In 1949, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands signed an act recognizing Indonesia's sovereignty after more than three centuries of Dutch rule.

In 1968, Apollo 8 and its three astronauts made a safe, nighttime splashdown in the Pacific.

In 1970, the musical play "Hello, Dolly!" closed on Broadway after a run of 2,844 performances.

In 1981, composer and bandleader Hoagy Carmichael ("Stardust") died in Rancho Mirage, Calif., at age 82.

In 1985, Palestinian guerrillas opened fire inside the Rome and Vienna airports; 19 victims were killed, plus four attackers who were slain by police and security personnel. American naturalist Dian Fossey, 53, who had studied gorillas in the wild in Rwanda, was found hacked to death.

In 1995, Israeli jeeps sped out of the West Bank town of Ramallah, capping a seven-week pullout giving Yasser Arafat control over 90 percent of the West Bank's one million Palestinian residents and one-third of its land.

In 2001, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld announced that Taliban and al-Qaida prisoners would be held at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In 2002, A defiant North Korea ordered U.N. nuclear inspectors to leave the country and said it would restart a laboratory capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons; the U.N. nuclear watchdog said its inspectors were "staying put" for the time being.

Ten years ago: Israel bombed security sites in Hamas-ruled Gaza in retaliation for rocket fire aimed at civilians in southern Israeli towns, opening one of the Mideast conflict's bloodiest assaults in decades. Tens of thousands of people in Pakistan paid homage to Benazir Bhutto on the one-year anniversary of her assassination.

Five years ago: Connecticut police released thousands of pages from their investigation into the Newtown massacre, providing the most detailed and disturbing picture yet of the Dec. 14, 2012, shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School that left 20 first-graders and six educators dead.

One year ago: Freezing temperatures and below-zero wind chills socked much of the northern United States. Houston Astros star second baseman Jose Altuve was named AP Male Athlete of the Year after leading the team to its first World Series title. A power outage struck parts of Disneyland in California, forcing some guests to be escorted from stalled rides.

Today's Birthdays: Actor John Amos is 79. ABC News correspondent Cokie Roberts is 75. Rock musician Mick Jones (Foreigner) is 74. Singer Tracy Nelson is 74. Actor Gerard Depardieu is 70. Jazz singer-musician T.S. Monk is 69. Singer-songwriter Karla Bonoff is 67. Rock musician David Knopfler (Dire Straits) is 66. Actress Tovah Feldshuh is 65. Journalist-turned-politician Arthur Kent is 65. Actress Maryam D'Abo is 58. Country musician Jeff Bryant is 56. Actor Ian Gomez is 54. Actress Theresa Randle is 54. Actress Eva LaRue is 52. Wrestler and actor Bill Goldberg is 52. Actress Tracey Cherelle Jones is 49. Bluegrass singer-musician Darrin Vincent (Dailey & Vincent) is 49. Rock musician Guthrie Govan is 47. Musician Matt Slocum is 46. Actor Wilson Cruz is 45. Singer Olu is 45. Actor Masi Oka is 44. Actor Aaron Stanford is 42. Actress Emilie de Ravin is 37. Actor Jay Ellis is 37. Christian rock musician James Mead (Kutless) is 36. Rock singer Hayley Williams (Paramore) is 30. Country singer Shay Mooney (Dan & Shay) is 27. Actor Timothee Chalamet is 23.

Thought for Today: "A dollar saved is a quarter earned." — Oscar Levant, American composer, musician, actor (born this date in 1906, died in 1972).