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Thursday, Feb. 1

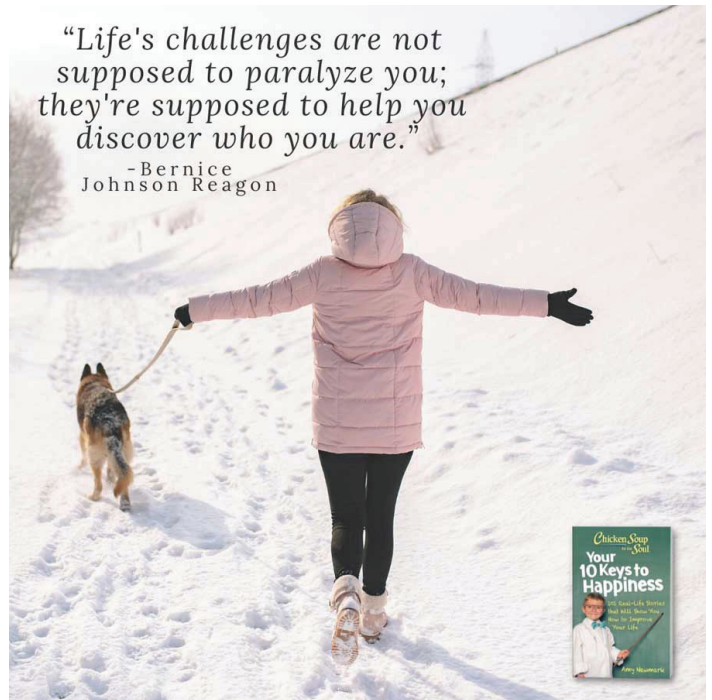
School Breakfast: French Toast.
School Lunch: Beef stew with biscuit
Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, garlic toast, chocolate cake, fruit cocktail.
Basketball Doubleheader at Deuel: Boys C game at 4 p.m. in auxiliary gym; Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m., Boys Varsity at 8:00.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

"Life's challenges are not supposed to paralyze you; they're supposed to help you discover who you are."

-Bernice Johnson Reagon



Friday, Feb. 2

School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch Taco Salads.
Senior Menu: Chicken cordon bleu hot dish, vegetable Catalina blend, pears, tapioca pudding, whole wheat bread.
Boys Wrestling Varsity Quad at Lyman.
Boys' Basketball hosts Vermillion: C game at 4 p.m., JV at 5:15 p.m., Varsity at 6:30 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 3

Girls Basketball at DAK XII/NEC Clash at Madison.
Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson at 12:30 p.m.
Boys Wrestling at Yankton, 9 a.m.
Girls Wrestling at Stanley County, 10 a.m.
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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1440

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Current sales of the controversial Alzheimer's treatment Aducanumab will be discontinued, and further development halted, biotechnology firm Biogen said yesterday. The drug's approval in 2021 drew scrutiny over claims there was little evidence it improved outcomes for patients.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy reportedly sought to dismiss his popular top general Valerii Zaluzhnyi after the general refused the president's request Monday to step down voluntarily, according reports yesterday. By yesterday evening Zelenskyy had pulled back

on the request after potential successors were said to have refused the job.

Universal Music Group—the world's largest music company representing artists including Taylor Swift, Drake, Adele, and BTS—has announced it will no longer license music to social video platform TikTok.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

MLB's Baltimore Orioles to be sold to investor group led by Carlyle Group's cofounder David Rubenstein for \$1.7B; other members of the group include Cal Ripken Jr., Grant Hill, and former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Digital media startup "The Messenger" to shut down less than one year after its launch; company had secured \$50M in upfront investment.

Tennessee and Virginia attorneys general file antitrust lawsuit against NCAA over name, image, and likeness guidelines. PGA Tour gets \$3B investment from consortium led by Fenway Sports Group that would provide equity to nearly 200 tour players.

Science & Technology

New study shows ancient humans migrated to Northern Europe as early as 45,000 years ago; influx may have been Neanderthals to extinction in the region.

Researchers make key step toward enabling the body to regrow heart valves, offering a potential alternative to invasive replacement surgery; approach relies on a biodegradable scaffolding that promotes cell growth.

Sea otters play a critical role in preventing erosion of coastal estuaries by preying on crabs, which otherwise consume vegetation and destabilize soil; findings underscore complex relationships within various ecosystems.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -1.6%, Dow -0.8%, Nasdaq -2.2%) as Fed holds interest rates steady, indicates rate cuts coming but not imminent.

Allen Media Group seeks to buy Paramount Global for \$14.3B, or \$30B including debt. Walmart announces 3-1 stock split, the first stock split since 1999 and the 12th in the company's history. Walmart to open 150 new US stores over five years. H&M CEO replaced after surprise exit.

CEOs of Meta, TikTok, X, Snap, and Discord testify before Senate Judiciary Committee on child exploitation.

Politics & World Affairs

US State Department reviewing policy options on possible recognition of a Palestinian state. The US says Iraq's Islamic Resistance behind Jordan airstrike that killed US troops. Families of American victims of Hamas' Oct. 7 raid sue Iran, Syria, and cryptocurrency exchange Binance for funding Hamas.

House passes \$78B bipartisan tax package on a 357 to 70 vote; legislation includes temporary expansion of Child Tax Credit. House panel approves two articles of impeachment against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for allegedly violating immigration laws.

Federal judge dismisses Disney lawsuit against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) for lack of legal standing; Disney sued DeSantis last year after he and other lawmakers removed Disney's self-governing status in the state.

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**GROTON
VET CLINIC**



1503 N Broadway, Groton, 605/397-8145

Groton Area February Calendar of Events

Thursday, Feb. 1

School Breakfast: French Toast.
School Lunch: Beef stew with biscuit
Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, corn, garlic toast, chocolate cake, fruit cocktail.
Basketball Doubleheader at Deuel: Boys C game at 4 p.m. in auxiliary gym; Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m., Boys Varsity at 8:00.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 2

Ground Hot Day
School Breakfast: Muffins.
School Lunch Taco Salads.
Senior Menu: Chicken cordon bleu hot dish, vegetable Catalina blend, pears, tapioca pudding, whole wheat bread.
Boys Wrestling Varsity Quad at Lyman.
Boys'. Basketball hosts Vermillion: C game at 4 p.m., JV at 5:15 p.m., Varsity at 6:30 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 3

Girls Basketball at DAK X!!/NEC Clash at Madison.
Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson at 12:30 p.m.
Boys Wrestling at Yankton, 9 a.m.
Girls Wrestling at Stanley County, 10 a.m.
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 4

Open Gym:
Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; 1st Communion Class, 1 p.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship with communion at Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:30 a.m.

Monday, Feb. 5

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.
School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, fries.
Senior Menu: Cranberry meatballs, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables, fruit, whole wheat bread.
Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Tuesday, February. 6

Senior Menu: Baked fish, au gratin potatoes, 3 bean salad, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Scones.
School Lunch: Scalloped potatoes and ham.
NAEP Testing at Groton Area
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Ladies Aid LWML, 1 p.m.
United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

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Aberdeen

225-6772

1-800-843-1865



Redfield

1-800-247-4650

Webster

1-800-658-2252



JOHN DEERE

Wednesday, Feb. 7

Senior Menu: Breaded pork cutlets, creamy noodles, broccoli and cauliflower blend frosted brownie, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Taco burgers, tater tots.

Groton Chamber Meeting, Noon at City Hall

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult

Bible Study begins at 7 pm

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

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

United Methodist: Community Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 8

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, sweet potatoes, vegetable capri blend, acini depepi fruit salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Corn dogs, baked beans.

Boys Basketball hosts Redfield: (JH game in Gym at 4 p.m.) C game at 6 p.m., Varsity game at 7:15 p.m. (No JV Game)

Groton Lions Club Meeting, 6 p.m. at 104 N Main

Friday, Feb. 9

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hot dish with peas, California blend vegetables, Swedish apple square, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Pizza, green beans.

Junior High Basketball at Roncalli (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.)

Girls Basketball at Redfield: C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15 p.m., Varsity at 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 10

Girls Wrestling at Brandon Valley.

Junior High State Wrestling at Pierre, 9 a.m.

Basketball Double Header with Mobridge-Pollock at Groton Area: Gym: Boys 7th at noon, Boys 8th at 1:00. Arena: Girls C game at noon, Girls JV at 1 p.m., Boys JV at 2 p.m., Girls Varsity at 3:15 p.m., Boys Varsity at 4:45 p.m.

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 11

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m. (Milestones 1st and 4th grade); Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m. and at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Caring Team, 9:45 a.m.; Sunday School (sings in worship), 10:30 a.m.

AAU Wrestling at Groton Area

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New Construction
Remodeling
Hoop Barns
Shops

Perry Blocker

13379 Sperry Ln, Bath

605/216-2677

prblocker@hotmail.com

Monday, Feb. 12

Senior Menu: Autumn soup, peas, chicken salad on croissant, cinnamon apple sauce.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Chicken patty, sweet potato fries.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Boys Junior High Basketball: Sisseton at Groton Area: 7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m.

Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 13

Senior Menu: Goulash, green beans, pineapple and mandarin oranges, breadstick.

School Breakfast: Waffles.

School Lunch: Meatballs, tiny whole potatoes.

Junior High Boys Basketball at Waubay: 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5:15 p.m.

Girls Basketball hosts Dakota Valley: JV game at 4:30 p.m., Varsity at 5:45 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Council, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 14

Senior Menu: Beef stew, buttermilk biscuit, Waldorf salad, sherbert.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Tuna noodle hot dish, peas.

Ash Wednesday

Emmanuel Lutheran: Soup supper (WELCA executive board serving), 6 p.m.; Worship with communion, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Ash Wednesday service, 7 p.m.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult

Bible Study begins at 7 pm

United Methodist: Community coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 15

Senior Menu: Chicken cacciatore, rice pilaf, Italian blend vegetables, apple sauce bars, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pop tarts.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, corn.

Parent-Teacher Conferences, 1:30 p.m. to 7 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 16

Senior Menu: Baked macaroni and cheese with kielbasa, vegetables normandy blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.

No School - Faculty In-Service

Junior High Boys Basketball hosts Britton-Hecla in the Gym: (7th at 3:30 p.m., 8th at 4:30 p.m.)

Boys Basketball hosts Britton-Hecla in the Arena: JV at 5 p.m., Varsity at 6:15 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 17

Region Boys Wrestling at Gettysburg

Boys Basketball at Henry: 7th at 11 a.m., 8th at Noon, C game at 1 p.m., JV at 2:15 p.m., Varsity at 3:30 p.m.

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 18

Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS

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Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's at 9 a.m. and at Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; No Sunday School.

Monday, Feb. 19

No Senior Meal

No School - President's Day

Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Christian Literature Circle, 7:30 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 20

Senior Menu: Ham rotini bake, mixed Monterey blend, peas, honey fruit salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Egg omelets.

School Lunch: Hot dots, fries.

Girls Basketball Region 1A

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

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

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 21

Senior Menu: Swiss steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, vegetable winter blend, carrot bars, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: French toast.

School Lunch: Cheese nachos.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Service at Rosewood Court, 10 a.m.; Soup Supper (Emmanuel Men serving), 6 p.m.; Worship, 7 p.m.

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

United Methodist: Community coffee hour, 9:30

a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m., Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 22

Senior Menu: Hamburger chow mein, chow mein noodles, vegetable stir fry blend, peaches.

School Breakfast: Muffins.

School Lunch: Sloppy joes, spudsters.

Girls Basketball Region 1A

State Wrestling at Sioux Falls

Friday, Feb. 23

Senior Menu: Salmon loaf, oven roasted potatoes, mixed vegetables, oranges, vanilla pudding, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Fish nuggets, tri taters.

State Wrestling at Sioux Falls

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian: One junior high game at 4 p.m., JV at 6 p.m., Varsity game to follow.

Saturday, Feb. 24

State Wrestling at Sioux Falls

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Feb. 25

Open Gym:

Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's at 9 a.m. and Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School at 9:45 a.m.

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m.; and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:30 a.m.

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Monday, Feb. 26

Senior Menu: Chicken tetrazzini, carrots, pineapple tidbits, bread stick.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: Pork chops, peas.

Senior Citizens Meet at the Groton Community Center with potluck at noon.

Planning and Zoning Board Meeting, 6 p.m.

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

Tuesday, February. 27

Senior Menu: Hamburger cabbage roll hot dish, corn, pears, muffin.

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.

Boys Region 1A

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 28

Senior Menu: Beef broccoli sir fry, rice, cauliflower, five cup salad, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Chef salad.

Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

Emmanuel Lutheran: Soup Supper (Sarah Circle serving), 6 p.m.; Worship, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation at 3:45 p.m. Lent Service at 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Community coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 29

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, sweet potatoes, vegetable capri blend, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Girls SoDak 16

Emmanuel Lutheran: Northern Plains Pastor's Meeting, 7 p.m.

Friday, March 1

Boys Region 1A

Saturday, March 2

Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, March 3

Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00

Monday, March 4

Pantry Open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Tuesday, March 5

Boys SoDak 16

Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

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Gov. Noem's Border Address to Joint Session of SD Legislature

By: Governor Kristi Noem
January 31, 2024

Lieutenant Governor Rhoden, Mr. Speaker, members of the House and Senate, and my fellow South Dakotans:

Thank you for calling this joint session of the legislative body today so I may address both chambers on a matter of grave importance to the people of South Dakota and the United States of America. It is no secret that our country is being overwhelmed with en masse illegal immigration. Nearly 10 million foreign nationals have broken federal law and infiltrated our country within the past 3 years, bringing with them drugs, trafficking, crime, and violence.

Our immigration system has long been a subject of discussion in this country, but the policies of the Biden Administration have elevated this to a national security crisis. Our history is proudly built on the stories of our ancestors who came to this country for opportunity and a new beginning. But today, many of those who are entering under the current policies of this administration are known terrorists, criminals, human traffickers, and drug cartel members. Because the federal government is facilitating the violation of federal law, vulnerable people from over 100 countries have heard the story of the open border, put their families in jeopardy, and have fallen victim to the atrocities of the Mexican cartels. Countries such as Venezuela have been known to empty out their prisons and mental institutions and send them to America. They are happy to let our open border be the solution to their problems and responsibilities.

We are a nation of laws. And our leaders should respect those laws.

South Dakota is directly affected by this invasion. We are affected by cartel presence on our tribal reservations; by the spread of drugs and human trafficking throughout our communities; and by the drain on our resources at the local, state, and federal level.

America is the greatest nation in the history of the world. But we weren't always that way. Our nation started as nothing more than an idea – an idea that was so controversial that our Founding Fathers had to pledge their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to each other just to write it down.

That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.

In that powerful document, our Founding Fathers outlined certain facts, a list of injuries, that King George had perpetrated against the colonies. Those grievances included ways that he failed to protect the colonies, and how he used force to make the colonists less safe.

When the original 13 states ratified the Constitution just a few years later, they did so with the understanding that this document would allow them to keep themselves safe from external threats. They would not have done so if they did not have the power to defend themselves. Texas would not have joined the Union in 1845 if they did not have the power to defend themselves – they were still at risk of invasion from Mexico at that time.

Article IV, Section 4 of the US Constitution provides that "The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government, and shall protect each of them against Invasion."

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So who repels the invasions? Well, Article I, Section 8 provides "for calling forth the Militia to...repel invasions." Article I, Section 10 provides for states to enter into compacts with other states if they are "actually invaded."

And in Federalist 29, Alexander Hamilton – one of the key architects of the Constitution – makes very clear that the militia is to be under the purview of the states and made up of the people. In closing that paper, Hamilton wrote, "In times of... invasion, it would be natural and proper that the militia of a neighboring State should be marched into another, to resist a common enemy, or to guard the republic against the violence of faction or sedition."

Ladies and gentlemen, the United States of America is in a time of invasion – the invasion is coming over the southern border. The 50 states have a common enemy – that enemy is the Mexican drug cartels that are waging war against our nation. And the cartels are perpetrating violence in each of our states, even here in South Dakota.

For almost 250 years America has been the standard of a government of, by, and for the people. But today, the American people are not secure. A nation without borders is not a nation at all. A government that does not value the security of its people is not only negligent but inhumane.

When the federal government fails to uphold its duty to the people, the responsibility falls to the states. I have been to the Southern Border many times. Some of you have, too. I have witnessed firsthand the invasion taking place. What shocks me is that every time I go, it is more of a warzone than the time before. The cartels have operational control of that border.

For three years, Texas Governor Greg Abbott has been left to handle the crisis at the border in his state while the federal government has refused his requests for help. Only a few governors have been willing to step up and lead alongside him. Last week, Governor Abbott declared an invasion under Article I, Section 10 of the U.S. Constitution to invoke Texas' constitutional right to defend and protect itself.

While I was at the border last week, I received a briefing from border patrol agents. They informed me that over the last several months as many as 4,000 apprehensions occur in just ONE DAY at Eagle Pass alone. December was the first month in American history with more than 300,000 encounters at the Southern Border.

Almost three years ago, when Governor Abbott asked states to send troops to help secure the border, South Dakota was the first state in the nation to send National Guard soldiers to help. We later deployed our Lakota helicopters on a federal mission when the Biden Administration needed help with surveillance of drug traffickers. Last summer, when Governor Abbott again asked for assistance, we sent more troops.

During my time there this past Friday, I was able to see with my own eyes what has changed. Texas has been calling their efforts and mission "Operation Lone Star." But more recently, the cartels have been pushing women and children across the Rio Grande, many of whom cannot swim. They're telling them that if they turn back, they will be shot before they reach the Mexican shore. When many of these women and children struggle and inevitably drown in the high waters, Texas DPS is pulling them out of the water, performing CPR, and bringing them back to life. This has been happening so frequently that Texas has begun calling their efforts "Operation Lazarus." So why are the cartels intentionally causing these women and children to drown? Because while Texas is distracted saving their lives, cartel members are smuggling drugs and sex-trafficked human beings just a couple miles down the river.

During my visit to Shelby Park, I watched as the Texas Department of Public Safety, the Texas National Guard, and various law enforcement officers ensured the border invasion didn't happen on their watch. And their efforts are working there. But the Biden Administration is threatening to seize control of that area. They claim that the Supreme Court gave them authority to do so. That's not true – the Supreme Court's order only allows them to cut or move the razor wire.

Democrat politicians are urging President Biden to federalize the Texas National Guard. If he were to do that, if he were to put them on Title 10 federal active duty, it would be the first time in American history

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that a President activated American armed forces explicitly to stand down – to make us less safe – to NOT protect the United States of America. And if President Biden can do that to Texas, he can do it to South Dakota – or any other state.

Governors are Commanders in Chief of our National Guards. These soldiers report to us, not the federal government. We understand our unique situations better than a distant federal authority can. I trust Governor Abbott to make the best decisions for his National Guard, just as I make the best decisions for ours here in South Dakota.

You may be sitting there wondering, “why should care? Texas is a long ways away and my community and my state are not affected by this.”

You would be wrong.

The sheer number of illegal migrants coming into the country has made it so that every state is now a border state. This isn't just an issue for Texas and other states along the border. This is an issue for every American. And this issue is about preserving this great nation for our kids and our grandkids.

We see the effects of Joe Biden's failures at the border every day here in South Dakota. The drugs and human trafficking pouring over the border devastate our people. Make no mistake, the cartels have a presence on several of South Dakota's tribal reservations. Murders are being committed by cartel members on the Pine Ridge reservation and in Rapid City, and a gang called the “Ghost Dancers” are affiliated with these cartels. They have been successful in recruiting tribal members to join their criminal activity. On the other side of the state, there is documented evidence of cartel activities on the Sisseton Wahpeton reservation and others.

We in state government do not have the jurisdiction to unilaterally intervene and provide law enforcement support to our tribes. That is a treaty obligation of the federal government. The Oglala Sioux Tribe sued the federal government. They pointed to evidence that the level of violent crime, drug trafficking, and gang activity on the Reservation is staggering, unprecedented, and overwhelming law enforcement resources. A federal judge ordered the Biden Administration to come to the table and work with the Oglala Sioux Tribe to provide the desperately needed law enforcement resources. But Biden has failed to make good on that obligation, so now the Oglala Sioux Tribe is suing again. They said that these crimes were being perpetrated primarily by “non-Native” individuals. They're talking about the cartels.

I plan to support the tribe in this litigation. I previously met with President Trump's attorney general, Bill Barr, to urge him to do what he could to help, but that progress did not carry over to the Biden Administration. Even before that, when I was in Congress, I raised alarm bells with Attorney General Jeff Sessions on this matter. I have signed law enforcement Memorandums of Agreement with some of our Native American tribes and stand ready to work with tribes who have not yet partnered with us.

The cartels are using our reservations to facilitate the spread of drugs throughout the Midwest. In particular, fentanyl – which is being manufactured by the Chinese and smuggled over our Southern Border – is causing these deaths. Total overdoses have increased by almost 20% across America since Joe Biden took office. Despite this hopelessness, South Dakota has been a bright spot. We led the nation for the largest decline in drug overdoses in 2020, and we led it again in 2022. Our anti-meth and anti-opioid campaigns are working. But even with that success, a higher share of the overdoses that do occur are happening as a result of fentanyl. There has been a 40% increase in just the past 2 years. It is literally killing our children.

This war is primarily being fought at the southern border, but it affects us here in South Dakota, too. We might see the effects differently than Texas, but make no mistake – the open border affects everyone. It is South Dakota's duty to protect OUR people.

So why am I standing before all of you today?

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Because as we move forward with action, I want us to be united. We are willing to provide Texas with additional razor wire. We can load that up and send it their way very quickly. We are currently exploring various legal options to support Texas and force the federal government to do their job. And I am consulting with my Adjutant General, Secretary of Public Safety, and others as to what our options are to provide personnel.

We sent our National Guard soldiers because the border is a warzone – and soldiers are best equipped to operate in such a situation. However, our troops have been hampered by federal restrictions when they've been deployed to the border in the past. I don't want South Dakota soldiers to facilitate an invasion – I want them to stand up and stop it. So we are talking to Texas about what rules of engagement can look like to make sure that happens.

We will do all that we can to defend the United States of America so that we can keep it safe for our kids and grandkids. There is no other nation in the world that is better or more free. And if we lose this country, where will we go? Every American throughout history has had the responsibility to preserve, protect, and proliferate the ideals upon which our Founders built this nation. This is a test of our endurance. It is a test of our patriotism. And it is a test of the very foundation of our nation.

But we have been tested before. Just since I have been Governor of South Dakota, we have seen the federal government try to take away our Freedoms. And we saw other states comply and force citizens to give up their Freedom of Assembly, their Freedom of Religion, and even at times their Freedom of Speech. Not here in South Dakota.

Now we need to be prepared to stand united to protect our state's constitutional right to defend ourselves. Defend our people. I am proud to support what Texas is doing to defend itself because I realize the consequences of what will happen if they don't. You need to know the facts. It is clear we cannot rely on this administration to uphold the law and secure our border. The cartels are here in South Dakota, and they are perpetuating violence and criminal activity daily on South Dakota families. They are killing our children with their drugs and trafficking. These cartels are being fed from over the open southern border where more dangerous individuals are entering the country to destroy America from within.

We must stand strong together. South Dakota will protect our people.

Thank you. God bless you all. God bless South Dakota. And may God continue to bless the United States of America.

Democrats Respond to Governor's Fear Mongering Speech About the Border

This afternoon, Gov. Kristi Noem delivered a fear mongering speech about the situation at the border. She said that the people who are crossing the southern border are "known terrorists, criminals, human traffickers and drug cartel members".

Ahead of the speech, several Democratic lawmakers spoke with South Dakota Voices for Peace, which lobbies against discrimination of immigrants, refugees and Muslims. The organization's CEO Taneza Islam says that the US has some of the strictest measures in place at the border under the Biden Administration. She also says the phrase "open border" is used to create fear and hate towards immigrants and people of color.

Research in Texas showed that US born citizens were more likely to be arrested for violent crimes, property crimes, and drug crimes when compared to undocumented immigrants. According to research from the CATO Institute, the criminal conviction rate was 782 per 100,000 for undocumented immigrants, 535 per 100,000 for legal immigrants and 1,422 per 100,000 for native-born Americans.

"Governor Noem made a statement today that all of the people coming across the southern border are criminals. We don't agree," said Minority Leader Rep. Oren Lesmeister. "There are a lot of these people seeking asylum in the United States, trying to get away from poverty and other issues that they have to live and deal with everyday. There's some good people that are coming across our border."

The National Bureau of Economic Research found that immigration has a positive impact on both innovation and growth within communities. With South Dakota's workforce shortage and low unemployment rate, the state needs immigrants to help fill those jobs and sustain our agriculture, manufacturing, construction and hospitality industries.

Gov. Noem also said that drug cartels are impacting South Dakota's tribal nations. Rep. Eric Emery of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe released the following statement:

"The tribal communities in South Dakota face a wide range of challenges on a daily basis," said Rep. Emery. "While the illegal presence of drug cartels is a valid concern that must be addressed, I do not believe it is the largest issue facing our tribes. Lack of access to adequate healthcare, housing, and education are much more significant issues taking place. However, it is encouraging to see South Dakota's governor and legislative members share concerns about the safety of our reservations' residents. While the State of South Dakota may not have jurisdiction to intervene, we must work together to protect our state and our people. This requires collaboration, exploring legal options, and supporting initiatives to secure our reservations and state. Our responsibility is crystal clear - we must safeguard the Oceti Sakowin Oyate."

Minority Leader Sen. Reynold Nesiba also released a statement, urging US Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds as well as Congressman Dusty Johnson to support the bipartisan immigration reform bill.

"Much of what Gov. Noem had to say about the problem at our border, I agree with," said Sen. Nesiba. "We need to tighten up our border security, we need to have more agents, and we need better control over the border. But we are a nation, not just of states, but we have a federal government. Federal government is what takes care of our immigration policies and our border. President Biden has known for months that this is an issue. He's been working in a bipartisan way to address this in Washington DC. And what we need is Senator Thune, Senator Rounds and Representative Johnson to meet with President Biden to reach this solution. What the President is talking about is the fairest and the strongest, most secure border that we've had in decades and what we need is that bipartisan solution. So rather than giving a speech that sounded an awful lot like a campaign speech today, what we instead need her to do is use her influence to reach out our Congressional delegation to reach an agreement with the President and enact this policy."

Sen. Nesiba just introduced a Senate Concurrent Resolution "Urging the South Dakota Congressional delegation to work with the Biden administration to address the nation's immigration system."



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Noem to lawmakers: Be ready to take action on southern border 'invasion'

Drug cartels have infiltrated reservations, governor says, but some tribal voices call speech 'political'
BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 31, 2024 8:10 PM

PIERRE — Gov. Kristi Noem used a speech Wednesday before a joint session of the South Dakota Legislature to call the U.S.-Mexico border a "war zone" controlled by drug cartels that also use South Dakota's reservation communities as a home base for drug distribution.

The speech referred to the border situation as "an invasion," but presented no policy recommendations to lawmakers.

"So why am I standing here in front of you today?" Noem said. "Because as we move forward to take action, I want us to be united, I want you to be informed."

South Dakota could immediately send razor wire to the state of Texas, she suggested, and her administration is "exploring various legal options on how we can support Texas and force the federal government to do their job."

Noem made multiple references to three South Dakota National Guard deployments to the southern border – twice in 2021 and once last year – noting that South Dakota was the "first state in the nation" to offer such support to Texas.

She did not address the fact that Texas has not reimbursed the state, however, and did not call for another deployment. The state's troops "have been hampered by federal restrictions when they've been deployed to the border," she said.

Noem made multiple references to the ravages of fentanyl and other drugs in South Dakota's reservation communities, drugs she said got there thanks to Mexican drug cartels. At one point she offered to "very publicly" support the Oglala Sioux Tribe in a lawsuit filed against the federal government for its failure to adequately address public safety on the reservation.

"Murders are being committed by cartel members on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and in Rapid City, and a gang called the Ghost Dancers are affiliated with these cartels," Noem said. "They have been successful in recruiting tribal members to join their criminal activity."

She said the impact to the state's reservations proves that "every state is now a border state."

As Noem delivered her speech, U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, sent a post on X, formerly Twitter, that used nearly that exact phrase. Johnson linked to a Fox News story on a guilty verdict for two Central American men who kidnapped an FBI agent while they were trafficking drugs on the Pine Ridge Reservation in 2022.

Native reaction

Repeated references to the tribes didn't sit well with Rep. Peri Pourier, D-Rapid City, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe.

Using the reservations as a talking point was "not only disingenuous, but it's highly disrespectful," she said. "We have a myriad of issues," Pourier said. "She only sees us when it furthers her argument and ambitions."

Pourier was particularly troubled by the reference to a "Ghost Dancers gang." She said she was not aware of such a gang.

Oglala Sioux Tribal Treasurer Cora White Horse told South Dakota Searchlight that the only "Ghost Danc-

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ers" group was a collective of motorcyclists who attend memorials.

"She claimed that the cartels are in the reservations and are being hidden here or whatever, but they're not," White Horse said.

Division of Criminal Investigation spokesman Tony Mangan confirmed that state law enforcement has interacted with the Ghost Dancers, however, as a support group for a gang called the Banditos. The DCI helped serve search warrants on a Banditos club house in Rapid City in 2022.

As far as support on the lawsuit, White Horse told South Dakota Searchlight that Noem could have supported the tribe when it first filed suit over a lack of resources in 2022.

"I don't even believe a word she says, because she doesn't have a good history with our tribe at all," White Horse said.

Sen. Shawn Bordeaux, D-Mission, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, nodded to Noem's "ambitions," a reference to her name circulating as a potential running mate for Donald Trump, the leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination. Wednesday morning, Trump promoted an upcoming book by Noem on his Truth Social media platform.

The tribes "have never gotten the amount of money they're supposed to get" for health care, infrastructure or public safety, he said.

"It's about time somebody spoke about that," Bordeaux said. "But it's odd that it comes now, during the political climate where we're wondering whether she's going to be the next vice president ... It seems odd that the timing of all this is right in the middle of all of our good work we're doing here."

The speech was "political" and offered nothing new, according to Rep. Eric Emery, D-Rosebud, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Even so, he did welcome the offer of support for the Oglala Sioux Tribe's lawsuit, as relations between the Noem administration and the tribes "have been lacking."

"I would applaud that," Emery said. "But I would hope that will come with a grain of salt, and she would truly support what the tribes want and not just what the state wants."

Four members of the Sioux Falls-based advocacy group South Dakota Voices for Peace came to Pierre on Wednesday wearing T-shirts that read "no human is illegal."

The group's director, Taneza Islam, said she wanted to make sure they were present for the speech, as the group advocates for immigrants and refugees. One of her volunteers, Nitza Rubenstein, is a Latina who volunteers to work with Latin Americans in the Flandreau area for the group.

She told South Dakota Searchlight that the border "is not a war zone." She crossed the border in Nogales, Arizona, 10 days ago with her white boyfriend during a vacation.

They had a great time in Mexico, she said, but not before she lobbied him to make the trip.

"He was afraid to cross to the Mexican side," Rubenstein said. "All his friends told him not to cross the border because he'd get killed."

Both chambers pass resolution

The voices of dissent were a clear minority, however, at least among elected officials.

Shortly after Noem's speech, the House of Representatives voted on party lines to pass a resolution affirming South Dakota's support for securing the southern border.

House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, argued on the resolution's behalf, citing his experience of visiting the southern border last summer.

"We're in a critical moment in our nation's history and this is a memorable day that the South Dakota governor brought to us," Mortenson said.

Mortenson later told South Dakota Searchlight that the issue of drug trafficking on the state's reservations is a real and important issue, and that he hopes strained relations in other areas wouldn't prevent cooperation on public safety.

"I think the state should stand ready to partner with any tribal government that wants to address the infiltration of the cartels on the reservations," Mortenson said.

Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, was on the same summer trip to the border that

Mortenson was. In his Senate floor speech, he spoke of 60-foot gaps in the border wall he'd seen at the time, and recalled a conversation with a retired Border Patrol chief who told him that Customs and Border Protection officers had 30,000 encounters with migrants in the previous week, seizing 109 pounds of fentanyl.

"That is enough to kill every South Dakotan 27 times," Crabtree said. "That is one week of what they caught."

Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard, is a former adjutant general of the South Dakota National Guard. He'd visited the border in the past, but said the situation is far worse today.

The federal Border Patrol made 249,785 arrests for illegal border crossings in December, which was an all-time high since monthly numbers have been released. Congress is working to negotiate border policy legislation, and the issue has taken center stage in the presidential campaign.

"The message was pretty sobering," Reisch said. "Exactly what comes next remains to be seen. I think she got everybody's attention for sure."

—*South Dakota Searchlight's Makenzie Huber contributed to this report.*

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

'School safety 2.0' bill focusing on locked doors, anonymous tip line fails in Senate

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 31, 2024 5:07 PM

A revived and "fine tuned" bill to standardize minimum school safety practices in South Dakota – without requiring armed guards – failed to pass the state Senate on Wednesday in Pierre.

The bill would have required schools to post information about the statewide anonymous school safety tip line, as well as lock main entrances or have a staff member monitor unlocked doors.

The bill failed by two votes, despite passing unanimously out of the Senate Education Committee earlier in the week. One Senate seat is vacant this session after former Sen. Jessica Castleberry, R-Rapid City, resigned in 2023, and Sen. Michael Diedrich, R-Rapid City, is currently on leave due to health reasons. Two other senators were excused and didn't vote on the bill.

Opponents argued that the legislation tried to make every school fit into the same mold and that it should be handled at a local level.

"I believe every single school district board member has school safety in mind," said Sen. David Wheeler, R-Huron, on the Senate floor. "If you want to make sure the doors in your school district are locked, go to your school board and make this argument there. This isn't an argument for Pierre, South Dakota; it's an argument for your local district back at home."

Proponents called the bill common sense and a standard public safety measure, similar to school fire safety standards in South Dakota.

"School safety is inherently inconvenient," said prime sponsor Sen. Brent Hoffman, R-Hartford, in rebuttal.

The original school safety bill failed in committee during the first week of the 99th legislative session due to concerns about staffing, costs and local control. That bill included a requirement for schools to have either school resource officers supplied by local law enforcement agencies or sentinels, who are trained and armed employees without police credentials.

Hoffman said he doesn't have plans to revive the bill this session or introduce it again next year. He added that he hopes the Legislature doesn't wait until there is a school shooting in South Dakota to implement changes.

"If and when that happens, I expect we'll act," Hoffman said, "but it's very difficult to be proactive."

Lawmakers debated a bill in 2016 in response to a 2015 shooting at Harrisburg High School. The bill would

have required all accredited schools in the state develop safety plans and conduct safety drills, but it failed.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

Cap on property tax valuations narrowly endorsed by state Senate panel

BY: JOHN HULT - JANUARY 31, 2024 4:04 PM

PIERRE — Fifteen years ago, Aberdeen Republican Senator Al Novstrup railed repeatedly against a proposal to tie ag land property taxes to crop production instead of land values.

Detethering property taxes from the sticker price of the property itself was a deviation from reality, he argued, and one that would upset the tax apple cart in perpetuity.

The change happened anyway. Starting in 2011, the valuations slowly began to step away from land prices and toward crop sales. By 2018, ag land values – and property tax rates by extension – were wholly based on the value of crops produced.

Novstrup went another way on Wednesday morning in the Senate Taxation Committee.

That was the day he cast the deciding vote on Senate Bill 167, which would cap increases in the value of a home for property tax purposes at 3% per year.

This time around, Novstrup said, he was being asked to move another of the three categories of property tax assessments – homes, commercial properties and ag land – away from reality.

“What do you do with a system that’s fundamentally broken by one third? Are you better off breaking the other third? Or are you better off keeping it in place?” said Novstrup, who said he came to Wednesday’s meeting prepared to vote down SB 167. “I’ll be voting for this bill, because a system with two subsets that lost touch with reality is probably better than one.”

Novstrup was joined by three other committee members in the 4-3 vote to send the bill to the Appropriations Committee.

Broad opposition

The committee backed the bill in spite of opposition from the state Department of Revenue and 11 lobbyists, representing retailers, schools, counties and economic development officials.

Revenue Department Secretary Mike Houdyshell said the bill would result in an immediate \$16 billion dip in property valuations, which would translate to \$47 million less for schools.

The state would be forced to pick up the tab.

“I don’t think the schools are going to take a \$47 million haircut,” Houdyshell said.

Counties also rely on property taxes to fund operations, and several opponents decried the possible impact to those governing bodies.

Sen. Herman Otten, R-Tea, argued that the massive property tax hikes seen in his area – tied to outsized growth in home prices since 2020 – need to be addressed.

“I have three growing communities back home where values are shooting through the roof. Taxes are going up,” Otten said. “I have to support them.”

Sponsor: Tax hikes unsustainable

Sen. Jack Kolbeck, R-Sioux Falls, sponsors the bill in the Senate. The goal is to stabilize property tax increases for those on fixed incomes, and to offer relief to those who’ve seen home prices skyrocket thanks to population growth and inflation.

The bill does two things. First, it resets the base value of owner-occupied homes to 2020 levels for people who lived in their homes at that time, sets the value for those who purchased their homes between

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2021 and Oct. 31, 2024, at the market value at the time of purchase, and sets a market rate value as the baseline for homes purchased after Nov. 1, 2024.

Secondly, it caps annual valuation increases at 3% from those base rates for all homes.

It wouldn't require property owners to be paid back for taxes they'd already paid, he said, but would offer relief into the future.

"This protects and safeguards our long-term South Dakotans and our elderly," Kolbeck said.

Other supporters talked of heavy tax burdens in their home areas. Lisa Janeiro of Keystone collected stories and letters from her neighbors, who knew she'd be in Pierre in a different capacity, as a lobbyist for Concerned Women of America.

"Most of their valuations are going up from 25-100%," Janeiro said.

She read off several statements and letters from people who've been "penalized" for simply living near homes sold to new residents at above-market prices.

"We are being taxed into homelessness," Janeiro read from one statement. "We are sincerely concerned about our survival."

Rep. Trish Ladner, R-Hot Springs, told the committee that the recent changes to the state's population have put a strain on long-term residents.

"When the COVID pandemic hit, you drove people out of densely populated areas to rural red states," she said, and many of those new residents came from states with higher incomes and more buying power.

South Dakota should protect those who built South Dakota "with the sweat of their backs and brows," she argued.

Opponents: Proposal unconstitutional, unfair

Houdyshell, the revenue secretary, said the bill is "fundamentally unfair," as it adjusts base valuations by looking at the date of the property sale.

His neighbors, who moved in after him, would pay more through no fault of their own, he said. The state constitution demands fairness, he said.

"Just depending on where you happened to buy your house at a certain point in time, you will be treated differently," Houdyshell said.

Just as important, he said, is that other entities would be forced to make up the difference in funding if the bill becomes law.

"This is an area that's very complicated. You start moving pieces around, it's like Jenga and things can start falling apart," Houdyshell said.

Lobbyists for the schools argued that the change would hurt the state, which would need to find ways to continue funding education at mandated levels. Lobbyists for the counties and economic development officials offered similar arguments.

Nathan Sanderson of the South Dakota Retailers Association argued that adjusting the law to favor one group of property owners is unfair and imbalanced.

"The structure that we've got in place is equally unpalatable," Sanderson said. "We'd ask that you keep that equally unpalatable system in place."

Rebuttal: System is already unfair

For his rebuttal, Kolbeck gave his time to Rep. Dennis Krull, R-Hill City. Krull presented the committee with figures on property tax growth since 2018 to make the case that a shift in property tax burden has already taken place.

"It's shifted to owner-occupied," Krull said.

Owner-occupied property taxes have increased nearly 41%, he said. For commercial properties, the increase was 35%; for ag land, the increase was 1.5%.

SB 167 is about adjusting taxes in favor of those hurt the most, he said.

"Who's standing up for the taxpayers? Who's standing up for the homeowners? We are," Krull said. "This

bill is our chance to show them that we're doing something."

That was among the arguments that won over Sen. Brent Hoffman, R-Sioux Falls. He said the fairness issue wasn't convincing, as several areas of growth are capped already. Growth in teacher salaries and the state's retirement fund are tied to inflation, Hoffman said, a nod to Ladner's earlier testimony on those topics.

"It's difficult for me to buy the argument that this would be unconstitutional given that there are already limits in other areas," Hoffman said.

Otten, the senator from Tea, said he understands the potential for unintended consequences. But, he said, it's impossible to get tax policy exactly right, and the bill starts an important conversation.

"I think we need to do something to get some help out there," Otten said.

Debate on the bill forced Committee Chair Jim Stalzer, a Sioux Falls Republican, to push back debate on two bills that aim to repeal the state's sales tax on food, either by legislative fiat or the endorsement of a ballot measure asking voters to do the same. A citizen group is already aiming to put such a question on the ballot.

Those bills, from Sioux Falls Democratic Senator Reynold Nesiba, are scheduled to see debate on Friday.

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

SD's Johnson votes yes on child tax credit expansion, business tax breaks

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 31, 2024 8:49 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to approve a \$78 billion tax package that would expand the child tax credit and reinstate some tax incentives for businesses.

The 357-70 vote sends the bill, dubbed the Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act of 2024, to the U.S. Senate, where lawmakers are expected to vote on it at some point, though passage isn't guaranteed. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, voted in favor of the bill.

House debate on the 84-page measure was broadly bipartisan, with both Democrats and Republicans backing the agreement between Missouri Republican Rep. Jason Smith, chairman of the House's tax-writing committee, and his Senate counterpart, Finance Chairman Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat.

Members of both political parties also spoke against the bill, with several far-right lawmakers arguing the expansion of the child tax credit would broaden the "welfare state" and progressive Democrats saying the bill didn't go far enough to provide relief to low-income and working families.

"Each of these policies will help American business, grow, create jobs and sharpen their competitive edge against China," Smith said.

The child tax credit expansion, he said, continues provisions that Republicans put into the 2017 tax law they passed during the Trump administration, while updating some of the language.

"We maintain work requirements while enhancing the benefit to support families crushed by today's inflation and remove the penalty for families with multiple children," Smith said.

Massachusetts Rep. Richard Neal, the top Democrat on the tax-writing committee, said the expansion of the child tax credit would immediately help 16 million children throughout the country.

"This is not the bill I would have written, but this is sensible policy," he said of the overall package.

Neal sharply criticized the far-right Republicans who spoke out against the measure during floor debate and called the CTC "welfare."

"I can't believe that we would stand here tonight and hear that addressing childhood poverty is welfare," Neal said.

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Immigrants and child tax credit

Freedom Caucus Chair Bob Good of Virginia, Matt Gaetz of Florida, Thomas Massie of Kentucky, Scott Perry of Pennsylvania and Chip Roy of Texas were among the Republicans who argued against passage during floor debate.

They all expressed frustration that child tax credit payments could go to undocumented immigrants, even though a provision from the 2017 GOP tax law requires the child to have a Social Security number. And several criticized the tax credits for businesses as well.

"Little kids don't get the checks sent to them even though they have a Social Security number. But their parents, who are here illegally, do," Perry said.

Georgia Republican Rep. Drew Ferguson vehemently rejected the criticism, saying he didn't worry "one single bit about making sure that American business is more competitive on the global stage."

"This is not about giving business a tax break, this is about investing in America and American jobs," Ferguson said. "And the complete mischaracterization about the child tax credit is the most intellectually dishonest conversation that I have heard on this floor in a very long time."

"This is about making sure that people that work and their families have the ability to get ahead," Ferguson added.

Connecticut Democratic Rep. Rosa DeLauro, one of the more progressive members of the House and a longtime advocate for the CTC, also said she couldn't support the bill, arguing it was a "mockery of who representative government works for."

"I cannot vote for a deal that so lopsidedly benefits big corporations while failing to ensure a substantial tax cut to middle- and working-class families," DeLauro said. "The deal is inequitable at a time when we've seen a rise in inequality."

Should Congress clear the bill, President Joe Biden is likely to sign it.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in mid-January the legislation was a "welcome step forward."

"And we believe Congress should pass it," she said.

What's in the child tax credit?

The bill would expand the current child tax credit, which is up to \$1,600 per child, to a maximum of \$1,800 in 2023, \$1,900 in 2024 and \$2,000 in 2025. The expansion would expire after that.

The three-year expansion of the child tax credit would not reach the level Congress approved during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it reached a maximum \$3,000 or \$3,600 for children under 6 years old.

The bill includes several tax incentives for businesses, including a provision that would immediately allow businesses to deduct research and development investments made within the United States.

The bill would "strengthen America's competitive position with China by removing the current double taxation that exists for businesses and workers with a footprint in both the United States and Taiwan," according to a summary of the legislation.

The legislation would help make housing more affordable through an enhancement of the low-income housing tax credit and other provisions.

Parts of the legislation are intended to help communities recover from natural disasters, including tax relief for families harmed by hurricanes, wildfires, flooding or the train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio.

The legislation would be paid for by ending a tax break for businesses that kept their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, known as the employee retention tax credit. The law would end the ability for businesses to file new claims on Jan. 31 instead of April 15, 2025.

The House Ways and Means Committee voted 40-3 in mid-January to send the legislation to the floor.

'Kids that need diapers and shoes'

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, said Wednesday he supports the tax bill and will be working to figure out when and how it should move to the floor for a vote.

Wyden, chairman of the Senate's tax-writing committee, said he'll be talking with Schumer to determine if there will be amendment votes on the package. But he said he wants to see it get a vote "as quickly as possible."

Wyden also rejected some criticism of the bill not having a more significant expansion of the child tax credit, noting that it lasts for three years and Congress will need to renegotiate on tax policy after that.

"We got kids that need diapers and shoes and paying for essential (and) small businesses that are trying to compete with China," Wyden said. "I gotta say, 'Get on with it,' 'Get it done.'"

West Virginia Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito said she hopes the Finance Committee holds a markup before the bill moves to the Senate floor.

"I think they need to move it through Finance and have an amendment process without having everything all pre-decided," Capito said. "That's what bothers people when they're trying to make policy, they don't have any opportunities to weigh in. So I'm for the committee process. Bring it over and let it go through committee."

North Carolina Republican Sen. Thom Tillis said he has several concerns with the bill, including that it's "not comprehensive enough." He said he hopes leaders will hold amendment votes on the floor.

"I've been saying it's a mistake. I also think the pay-for is fake," Tillis said. "I mean, it's a program that we didn't pay for when we were doing the COVID bills that we're now considering a pay-for. And most of that is actually clawing back fraud and abuse."

"Here's a concept — why don't we just send that back to the Treasury and start filling in the \$34 trillion hole we have," Tillis said, referring to the national debt.

Indiana Republican Sen. Todd Young said he and Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo, the top Republican on the tax-writing committee, are hoping to make changes to the legislation once it arrives in their chamber.

"We're still hoping to make improvements," Young said, though he declined to detail what changes he wants to make to the tax package. "I'm not going to elaborate."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

Fed keeps interest rates same, as expected, with changes likely months away

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - JANUARY 31, 2024 5:45 PM

The Fed held key interest rates steady again Wednesday, as expected, and signaled that a decision that could affect everything from credit card rates to the housing market to new business creation could still be months away.

It was the fourth consecutive time the central bank has left the rate unchanged since its September 2023 announcement. In March 2022, the Fed began aggressively raising rates to stop ballooning inflation.

Following the announcement, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said that confidence is growing that inflation is coming down to meet the Fed's target of 2%, it needs to see more data to decide to cut rates, particularly in the 12-month core inflation data.

But Powell said its confidence likely won't be strong enough to cut rates by March as many economists believed would happen, meaning it could be May before a decision is made to cut rates.

"I think to get to that place where we feel comfortable starting the process we need some confirmation that inflation is in fact coming down, sustainably to 2%," Powell said.

Powell added that serious changes to the labor market would affect the Fed's decisions about when to cut rates.

"If we saw an unexpected weakening certainly in the labor market, that would weigh on cutting sooner," he said. "And if we saw inflation being stickier or higher, or those sorts of things, we'd argue for moving later."

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The decision to hold rates steady was in line with economists' expectations for the meeting. The issue of when to stop increasing rates and when to begin cutting rates, to avoid harming the economy and cause high unemployment, has been a matter of intense debate among economists and policymakers during this latest cycle of rate hikes. Over the past six months, core inflation or the Personal Consumption Expenditures price index is 1.9%, leading some economists to argue that it's time to begin cutting rates.

Mike Konczal, director of macroeconomic analysis at the Roosevelt Institute, a progressive think tank, said it would make sense for the Fed to begin cutting rates soon.

"[A cut] is appropriate given how much inflation has fallen, both faster and in a more broad way than the Federal Reserve thought even six or nine months ago," Konczal said. "The Fed is targeting a level of inflation that is just not the reality right now in the economy."

The Federal Reserve has a pivotal decision to make in the coming months — when to start cutting interest rates after an aggressive campaign of rate hikes to combat inflation. Some economists worry that if the Fed doesn't cut rates soon enough, now that the rise in core inflation over the past six months is in line with the Fed's 2% inflation target, it could damage the labor market and send ripples through the economy.

There is some risk to waiting too long to cut rates, Konczal said. Although the economy is adding jobs and decent wage growth continues, he's looking for signs of cracks underneath the surface of an otherwise stable labor market. He said that the rate for people leaving their jobs and being hired for new ones has slowed.

If the Fed waits too long to change course, he said there could be some danger of the unemployment rate ticking up too fast.

"Once those things start to fall, they fall very quickly," he said.

Several Democratic senators have urged the Fed to begin cutting rates, arguing that it could hurt the economy not to do so as soon as possible, a reminder that the economy will be a big issue in the fall elections. Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH), chair of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs advocated for Powell to lower rates in a letter addressed to the chairman this week.

Brown wrote his own letter, which highlighted the struggles of Ohioans he said are not able to rent or buy homes, a problem he said has been exacerbated by higher interest rates.

"I hear from so many Ohioans that they feel trapped — those who rent feel like they'll never be able to afford to buy and those who already own their homes feel like they will never be able to afford a larger one if they decide to grow their family," Brown wrote.

Sometime after the Fed cuts rates, Americans can expect to see relief in the housing market, where homeowners have struggled with low housing supply and high prices, and high demand for rentals that has also pushed up rental prices.

"The first place where we see the reaction in the economy is the housing market and is in those mortgage applications, like some refinancing, for example," Lara Rhame, chief U.S. economist and managing director of FS Investments. "The other places we see it are things like auto sales, which are very interest-rate sensitive. It's worth noting that credit card interest payments have really increased, but that doesn't move until the Fed actually cuts rates. That's a shorter term interest rate, but when the Fed cuts, that will start to come down a little bit."

William Hauk, associate professor of economics at the University of South Carolina, said it could take a while for the average person to feel a shift in the economy as a result of Fed policy changes.

"How quickly this translates into changes for the rest of the economy is a matter of some debate. Making it easier for people and firms to borrow and/or refinance loans does typically have a positive impact on economic demand," he said. "And people spending money is good for keeping the economy out of recession. However, this effect typically hits the broader economy with a lag, perhaps as long as 12 to 18 months."

Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.

Biden, not Congress, responsible for action on immigration, U.S. House speaker asserts

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 31, 2024 5:32 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson on Wednesday used his first floor speech since taking hold of the gavel more than three months ago to call for immediate action to address undocumented immigration and border security, saying it's a "moral" responsibility.

The Louisiana Republican, however, argued the task should fall to the White House, not Congress.

"While there may be some who think that it's not a good time to act, I disagree," Johnson said. "Good policy — like a strong border and securing our nation and defending our sovereignty — is always good politics."

"It's the right thing to do, it's the moral thing, it's the constitutional thing to do, it's the common sense thing to do," Johnson added. "I cannot for the life of me understand why the president won't agree with that."

Former President Donald Trump, the front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination, repeatedly has urged Republicans in Congress to end negotiations on any bipartisan immigration deal, though so far senators attempting to strike a deal have continued their work.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican, said Wednesday afternoon that negotiators were "close" to reaching a deal.

Johnson, during his 30-minute speech on the House floor, called the volume of undocumented immigrants entering the country a "crisis" before picking apart ongoing bipartisan negotiations in the Senate, where lawmakers have been working for months to find agreement on changes to immigration and border policy.

Johnson repeatedly called on President Joe Biden to use executive authority to reduce the number of undocumented immigrants entering the country by reinstating Trump-era policies.

Migrants claiming asylum and seeking to enter the United States should have to remain in Mexico until their hearing, he said.

The Department of Homeland Security, which includes Customs and Border Protection as well as Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, has essentially become a shuttle service for the drug cartels, Johnson said.

"The Department of Homeland Security has effectively become a taxi driver to just help traffickers complete the last few miles of their human smuggling operation," Johnson said. "It's all absolute madness and it is dismantling the safety of our communities."

But still, Johnson said the crisis must be addressed through the president's executive authority, not Congress' lawmaking powers.

"President Biden and Secretary Mayorkas have designed this catastrophe," Johnson said, referring to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, the subject of an impeachment drive by House Republicans. "And now, rather than accept any accountability or responsibility for what they have clearly done, President Biden wants to somehow shift the blame to Congress."

The situation, he said, is "absolutely laughable."

Johnson — who has elicited frustration from several Republican colleagues who do believe Congress has a role to play in immigration policy — said Biden must take executive action if he wants House Republicans to possibly move to the negotiating table.

"My counter is this, if President Biden wants us to believe he's serious about protecting national security, he needs to demonstrate good faith and take immediate action to secure that border," Johnson said. "If he wants our House Republican Conference to view him as a good faith negotiator, he can start with the stroke of a pen, but he's got to do it quickly."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

'A product that's killing people': Lawmakers chastise social media giants for harm to kids

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - JANUARY 31, 2024 5:21 PM

Members of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee castigated executives at leading social media companies Wednesday, calling for more to be done to shield children from sexual exploitation, drug dealing, self-harm encouragement and other damaging content.

In one tense exchange, Missouri Republican Sen. Josh Hawley demanded to know if Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, had ever apologized to his platforms' victims — prompting Zuckerberg to turn around and briefly speak to the audience of family members in the Senate committee room, saying he was sorry for what they have gone through.

Senators of both parties during the four-hour, emotionally charged hearing promoted a raft of bills the committee has unanimously passed that they say would add significant accountability to tech platforms.

And they urged the tech executives — including Zuckerberg of Meta, Shou Chew of TikTok and Linda Yaccarino of X — to work with them on legislation or risk being "regulated out of business."

Social media users, especially children and teens, are vulnerable to online scams, extortion and other dangerous material, several senators said.

More than 100,000 instances of child sexual abuse material are reported daily, said Senate Judiciary Chairman Dick Durbin, an Illinois Democrat.

Children and teens are also subject to "sextortion," where predators trick them into providing compromising material, then demand payments to keep the images from being shown publicly, he said.

The psychological damage from such episodes can lead to suicide, Durbin and other senators noted.

The panel's ranking Republican, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, said he had concluded that, perhaps despite company founders' initial aims, social media platforms are "dangerous products" that are "destroying lives, threatening democracy itself."

"You have blood on your hands," he said in an opening statement, prompting the first of several rounds of applause from an audience filled with family members of victims of online exploitation. "You have a product that's killing people."

Big tech defense

The social media executives acknowledged that their platforms could be exploited by bad actors, but said harmful content made up small portions of what appeared on their platforms and noted their companies had teams working to control unsafe material.

The executives declared a responsibility to protect users from dangerous content.

"All of us here on the panel today and throughout the tech industry have a solemn and urgent responsibility to ensure that everyone who uses our platforms is protected from these criminals, both online and off," Jason Citron, CEO of the video game-focused platform Discord Inc., said.

But the executives were hesitant to commit their support to legislation touted by senators that would expand protections for social media users.

Graham asked Citron if he supported several policy changes, including repealing Section 230 of the Communications Act that protects online companies from liability for content on their platforms.

Citron didn't endorse any.

"So here you are," Graham said. "If you wait on these guys to solve the problem, we're going to die waiting."

Senators demand votes

Graham called for "a day of reckoning on the floor of the United States Senate" to have votes on the

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proposals passed out of the committee.

Those bipartisan bills include Graham's legislation to remove Section 230 protections in the cases of sexual exploitation of minors and a bill from Minnesota Democrat Amy Klobuchar to criminalize distribution of revenge porn.

Graham, Klobuchar and other members of the committee said opening the companies to legal liability was key to making the user experience safer.

Klobuchar said the platforms could be venues for drug dealing, citing examples of people who died after buying fentanyl-laced pills on social media platforms.

"When a Boeing plane lost a door in mid-flight several weeks ago, nobody questioned the decision to ground a fleet of over 700 planes," she said. "So why aren't we taking the same type of decisive action on the danger of these platforms when we know these kids are dying?"

North Carolina Republican Thom Tillis urged the executives to "secure your platforms."

"Do you not have an inherent mandate to deal with this?" he said. "Because it would seem to me if you don't, you're going to cease to exist. I mean, we could regulate you out of business if we wanted to."

Hawley and Zuckerberg

In the back-and-forth between Hawley and Zuckerberg, Hawley urged the billionaire social media pioneer to compensate victims of abuse on his company's platforms.

Zuckerberg said his job was to make platforms safer, which his company took seriously.

"Have you apologized to the victims?" Hawley asked Zuckerberg. "Would you like to do so now? They're here, you're on national television. Would you like now to apologize to the victims?"

Zuckerberg stood and turned around to face the audience. His full remarks were not captured by the microphone he had turned away from, but he could be heard saying he was sorry for what families had experienced.

"No one should have to go through the things that your families have suffered," he said. "This is why we invest so much and are going to continue to do industry-leading efforts to make sure that no one has to go through the types of things that your families have had to suffer."

The audience, which had applauded Hawley's aggressive questioning, was silent as Zuckerberg sat and turned back to the senators.

TikTok Chinese ties again under fire

A few Republican senators asked Chew about the data security of TikTok users, noting the platform's parent company was based in China and subject to the Communist country's requirements to share data with the government.

The issue was the subject of its own U.S. House hearing last year, with Chew as the sole witness.

TikTok "is subject to the control and inspection of a foreign, hostile government that has actively tried to track the information and whereabouts of every American they can get their hands on," Hawley, who has a bill to bar the platform from the United States, told Chew Wednesday. "Your app ought to be banned in the United States of America."

Chew said the company, which is headquartered in the U.S., has a program based in Texas that is dedicated to users' data security.

Arkansas Republican Tom Cotton questioned Chew's personal loyalties. Cotton, a former U.S. Army captain, asked if Chew, a citizen of Singapore, had ever been a member of the Chinese Communist Party.

"No, Senator," Chew answered. "Again, I'm Singaporean."

Chew, who is married to a U.S. citizen and has two children who are U.S. citizens, said he had "not yet" applied for his own U.S. citizenship. He and his family live in Singapore, he said.

Cotton pushed Chew to label Chinese President Xi Jinping a dictator. Chew declined to answer, saying he was there to answer questions about his company, not comment on world leaders.

"Are you scared that you'll lose your job if you say anything negative about the Chinese Communist

Party?" Cotton asked. "Are you scared that you'll be arrested and disappeared the next time you go to mainland China?"

Chew said content critical of the Chinese regime could be found on TikTok.

Compelled to testify

Zuckerberg and Chew appeared at the hearing voluntarily, Durbin said, while the others — Yaccarino, Citron and Snap CEO Evan Spiegel — testified only after they received subpoenas. U.S. marshals had to visit Discord's San Francisco headquarters to serve Citron, he added.

Each of the five companies represented at the hearing took steps to improve child-safety features in recent days, Durbin said, derisively noting the timing was "coincidentally" just before the hearing.

"Coincidentally, coincidentally, several of these companies implemented common-sense child safety improvements within the last week," he said. "Days before their CEOs would have to justify their lack of action before this committee."

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Effort to study child care costs in SD receives unanimous committee support

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 31, 2024 1:35 PM

One of the first pieces in the long-term effort to address South Dakota's child care needs cleared its first hurdle Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre.

A bill that would require the state to study the cost of child care across South Dakota was unanimously approved by the Senate State Affairs Committee and will head to the Joint Appropriations Committee for further consideration.

The study required by the bill would include the cost of keeping and retaining workers alongside the impacts of inflation, population growth and business growth on child care providers. The study would also require the department to develop a cost estimation model for the state's child care assistance program. The bill includes \$250,000 to fund the study.

Prime sponsor Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, leads the Brookings Economic Development Corporation and sees child care primarily as a workforce and economic development problem.

South Dakota suffers an estimated \$329 million loss in productivity due to its inadequate child care landscape, according to a study from ReadyNation, a nonprofit organization focused on business and economic development across the country.

The bill's study looks to better inform key stakeholders, including the private sector, so future partnerships can properly fund the "essential workforce service," as proponents called the industry.

"It's too expensive and too hard to find for parents, but yet it's not expensive enough for child care operators to stay in business," Reed said. "That's what this study would help us do: find out what it truly costs, what it will take to make sure these centers can survive."

There was strong support from child care providers and economic development organizations across South Dakota during the committee hearing. Kerri Tietgen, CEO of nonprofit child care provider Embe in Sioux Falls, explained to legislators that the nonprofit loses about \$46,000 a year per classroom of infant and toddler students. There are 18 classrooms serving those children at Embe, and there is a waitlist exceeding 10 months.

"The business model for child care is not sustainable," Tietgen said. "... This industry needs support."

She added that it's difficult to raise tuition any higher because parents already pay unaffordable rates for child care. Increasing efficiency is difficult due to regulations and licensing requirements in the industry,

and cutting costs is also a struggle when about 80% of cost in the industry covers salary and benefits.

The child care industry is rife with turnover primarily due to low pay. Child care employees make an average annual salary of \$25,490 in South Dakota, according to 2022 statistics from the Bureau of Labor and Statistics.

The state Department of Social Services was the sole opponent to speak against the bill, saying that the department is already required by the federal government to carry out market rate and actual cost analyses. The latest data will be available in a report this summer, and the department is also conducting a workforce and economic study of child care, said Alex Mayer, chief of the department's Division of Children and Family Services.

Reed countered that the department's efforts are narrow, specifically focusing on low income subsidies rather than the entire industry in the state.

The Joint Appropriations Committee, which prepares the state's annual budget, will consider the bill next.

"When we talk about this overall, we've talked about this from a workforce standard and the economic impact that has," said Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, before voting. "We know in South Dakota parents and private employers will lead the way in figuring out a solution, but this will give them the data."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.

U.S. House Speaker Johnson decries antisemitism, urges protection of Uyghurs in China

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 31, 2024 1:04 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson rejected antisemitism and called on the Biden administration to fully enforce the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act during brief remarks to the International Religious Freedom summit on Wednesday.

The Louisiana Republican also argued that God, not the government, provides American citizens with their rights and that those ideas are reflected in the First Amendment as well as other documents like the Declaration of Independence.

"These ideals come from the self-evident truth that men and women are created by God and that it is God, not the government, that gives us our rights," Johnson said.

Anytime a government removes its citizens' ability to freely practice their religion, Johnson said, "it moves beyond its sphere of jurisdiction and it becomes tyrannical."

"When religious freedom is taken away from people, political freedom soon follows," Johnson said. "We know that that is the lesson of history."

Johnson then rebuked governments around the world that he said don't allow religious freedom or where people have experienced violence for practicing as they wish, including China, Cuba, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Nigeria and North Korea.

"Uyghur Muslims are suffering under the Chinese Communist Party's genocidal campaign of forced sterilization, forced detention and reeducation," Johnson said. "Millions of Uyghurs have been detained in these camps, where they're kept in cramped cells, and they're tortured and brainwashed."

Johnson said that the Biden administration must "fully enforce the letter and the spirit" of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, a law that passed both chambers of Congress on voice votes and was signed by President Joe Biden in 2021.

The law required the Forced Labor Enforcement Task Force to work toward ensuring "that goods mined, produced, or manufactured wholly or in part with forced labor in the People's Republic of China, including by Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tibetans, and members of other persecuted groups in the People's Republic of China, and especially in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, are not imported into the United States."

Speaking at the summit, Johnson said people should "use all of our resources to prevent American in-

volvement in Uyghur genocide," noting that the United States has sought to prevent genocides since the Holocaust.

"Sadly, the same antisemitism that led to the Holocaust is now being spread through new tools and once again rearing its ugly head," Johnson said. "Since Hamas slaughtered thousands of Israeli citizens on October 7, we've seen a frightening, seemingly coordinated rise of antisemitism including here on our own shores, and it's been alarming."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

U.S. House committee advances impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Mayorkas to floor

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 31, 2024 8:46 AM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House Committee on Homeland Security early Wednesday voted 18-15 along party lines to send articles of impeachment against Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to the House floor. Republicans argue the charges are legitimate.

Members of the full House could vote as soon as next week to impeach Mayorkas, who is engaged with members of the Senate and the White House in finalizing a deal to overhaul immigration laws. Republicans, including the GOP front-runner in the race for the presidency, Donald Trump, have made clear immigration will be a central issue in the 2024 elections.

If the articles of impeachment are brought to the House floor for a vote and passed, it will be the first time in U.S. history that a Cabinet official is impeached due to what Democrats said are policy differences rather than alleged misconduct.

Even if the Republican House, with its slim majority, manages to impeach Mayorkas, the Democrat-controlled Senate will likely acquit him. This means, in the end, Mayorkas probably will not be removed from office.

"This is not about policy differences at all," House Homeland Security Chair Mark Green, a Tennessee Republican, said in his opening statement at the committee markup. "This goes far deeper. Secretary Mayorkas has put his political preferences above following the law."

Mayorkas sent a letter to Green Tuesday before the markup, defending his record, and pushed back on House Republicans' claims that he has not enforced immigration law.

"We have provided Congress and your committee with hours of testimony, thousands of documents, hundreds of briefings, and much more information that demonstrates quite clearly how we are enforcing the law," Mayorkas wrote.

After a more than 15-hour meeting that initially started Tuesday morning, the committee passed two articles of impeachment, accusing Mayorkas of "high crimes and misdemeanors." It will be up to House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana to call for a House vote.

Democrats submitted nine amendments, and none were adopted.

Two articles of impeachment

The first article of impeachment against Mayorkas is for a "willful and systemic refusal to comply with the law" by not following court orders or laws passed by Congress, with the result an unprecedented number of migrants at the southern border.

The second article of impeachment cites Mayorkas for a breach of public trust by making false statements and obstructing oversight efforts at DHS by the Office of Inspector General, the agency's internal watchdog.

The top Democrat on the committee, Bennie Thompson of Mississippi, said that those two articles of

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impeachment do not reach the standards of "high crimes and misdemeanors."

"In a process akin to throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what sticks, Republicans have cooked up vague, unprecedented grounds to impeach Secretary Mayorkas," Thompson said in his opening statement.

Articles of impeachment have also historically gone through the House Judiciary Committee, Thompson added.

Green held two hearings this month on impeachment proceedings without Mayorkas as a witness. In the most recent hearing, Mayorkas was invited but could not attend due to a scheduling conflict, as he was meeting with officials from Mexico about migration issues.

Officials at DHS have called the markup "political games," and noted that Mayorkas has testified 27 times before Congress, "more than any other Cabinet member."

Democrats lambasted the markup as a "sham" and argued that Republicans were moving forward with impeachment as a way to campaign on immigration.

Thompson said that Republicans should instead agree to pass the bipartisan deal that the Senate is working on. No bill text has been released of that deal, and Johnson has not publicly supported it, or indicated that he will bring it for a vote in the House.

Press conferences

Leading up to the markup, Republicans and Democrats held dueling press conferences Monday.

Democrats, including Thompson and Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, called the move to impeach Mayorkas "illegitimate," and said that a Cabinet official cannot be impeached over policy differences.

Republicans, made up of mostly the Texas delegation, threw their support behind Texas GOP Gov. Greg Abbott, who is defying orders from the U.S. Supreme Court and the White House to remove razor wire fencing along the Texas-Mexico border.

Those Republicans repeatedly told Biden to leave the Lone Star State alone, and that they would move forward with impeaching Mayorkas.

"I think the voters are going to continue into November by calling this what it is. It is an invasion. It is the most egregious breach of our national security in the history of this country," Texas GOP Rep. August Pfluger, who also sits on the House Homeland Security Committee, said.

GOP cites Supreme Court decision

Republicans focused on a recent Supreme Court decision, *United States vs. Texas*, to justify the move to impeach Mayorkas. In that case, Texas and Louisiana challenged new DHS immigration enforcement guidelines that prioritized the arrest and removal of certain noncitizens.

The conservative court voted 8-1 and found that the two states lacked standing. Republicans cite the lone dissent of that case from Justice Samuel Alito as part of their arguments for congressional authority to remove Mayorkas.

Alito said that "even though the federal courts lack Article III jurisdiction over this suit, other forums remain open for examining the Executive Branch's enforcement policies. For example, Congress possesses an array of tools to analyze and influence those policies [and] those are political checks for the political process."

Georgia's Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, along with other Republicans, argued that one of those tools is the ability to impeach and said that the Supreme Court decision "left the House of Representatives with little choice."

"The only one (tool) that makes sense in the current political environment is impeachment," Greene said.

Maryland's Democratic Rep. Glenn Ivey said that tools that Congress possesses for policy are "oversight, appropriations, the legislative process and Senate confirmations and through elections," not impeachment.

Rep. Josh Brecheen, an Oklahoma Republican, said he felt it was dangerous for the executive branch to pick and choose which policies to follow.

"To allow the executive (branch) on how to enforce it or what to enforce, you've granted them the ability

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to become a king," Brecheen said.

Ivey agreed there is no monarchy in the United States.

"We don't have kings, we have elections and we have three branches of government," he said.

'Thin on constitutional grounds'

Democrats defended Mayorkas and argued that the articles of impeachment did not rise to the high bar needed.

Rhode Island Democratic Rep. Seth Magaziner said that the grounds for impeachment are treason, bribery or high crimes and misdemeanors, and he argued that Republicans have not made that case for Mayorkas.

"The case here is so thin on constitutional grounds that it's laughable," he said.

The first article of impeachment that cites laws Mayorkas did not follow includes detention and removal requirements under the Immigration and Nationality Act, such as the requirement for expedited removals.

Exceptions to expedited removal include credible fears on the part of migrants and claims of asylum. In 2021, Biden directed DHS to review those noncitizens who were subject to expedited removal and a year later the agency rescinded the expansion of expedited removal under the Trump administration, citing limited resources.

The first article of impeachment also cites Mayorkas' use of parole authority, which allows migrants temporary protections without a visa. The executive branch has had this authority since the 1950s, but federal courts are currently reviewing the range of that parole authority.

The Biden administration has created temporary protections for certain nationals who qualify to allow them to temporarily work and reside in the country. Some migrants who are eligible for parole are from Afghanistan, Ukraine, Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela, among others.

The first article of impeachment argues that because of those policies, Mayorkas is responsible for the unprecedented number of migrants. For the 2024 fiscal year, which started Oct. 1, there have been more than 785,000 migrant encounters at the border, according to recent DHS data.

The articles also accuse Mayorkas of being responsible for the strain on cities that are struggling to care for migrants such as New York City. Abbott has placed migrants on buses and planes and sent them to mainly Democratic-run cities without alerting local officials.

The first article of impeachment also blamed Mayorkas for profits made by smuggling operations, backlogs of asylum cases in immigration courts, fentanyl-related deaths and migrant children found working in dangerous jobs. Republican state legislatures have moved to roll back child labor laws in industries from the food industry to roofing.

Democratic Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee introduced an amendment to eliminate the first article of impeachment.

It failed on a 15-18 party-line vote.

Another amendment by Democratic Rep. Lou Correa of California eliminated the second article of impeachment.

It also failed on a 15-18 party-line vote.

The second article of impeachment argues Mayorkas has breached public trust by making several statements in congressional testimony that Republicans argue are false.

"Mr. Mayorkas lied to Congress," Green said.

They cited statements by Mayorkas telling lawmakers the border is "secure," and saying that the Afghans placed into the humanitarian parole program were properly vetted following the Taliban takeover of the country after the U.S. evacuated.

The second article of impeachment said that another false statement Mayorkas made was about a 2021 image of U.S. Border Patrol agents on horseback with whips as Haitian migrants were running away.

Mayorkas said he was "horrified" by the image and would immediately investigate.

An internal report found that the agents did not whip the migrants but used excessive force.

The second article of impeachment also charges Mayorkas with not fulfilling his statutory duty by roll-

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ing back Trump-era policies such as terminating contracts that would have continued construction of the border wall and ending the Migrant Protection Protocols, also known as the "Remain in Mexico" policy.

"If he is changing the policies of the Trump administration, that means it's a policy decision, not a violation of the law," Democrat of New York Dan Goldman said.

Goldman was the lead counsel for the first impeachment inquiry of Trump when he was president.

Remain in Mexico policy

Florida GOP Rep. Laurel Lee said that Mayorkas was ordered to reinstate the remain in Mexico policy and failed to do so. Mayorkas was not ordered to reinstate the 2019 Trump-era policy.

In a 5-4 ruling, the Supreme Court upheld in 2022 that the Biden administration had the authority to end the remain in Mexico policy.

The remain in Mexico policy required asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases were heard in immigration court. Many immigration advocates argued this left migrants in dangerous situations.

"He's come to this Congress and he's given testimony before that was demonstrably false, stating that our border was secure, stating that he had operational control of the border when in fact, every person in this room, and I dare say the vast majority of America, knows that is not the truth," Lee said.

Democrats accused Republicans of wanting to campaign on immigration rather than fixing the problem.

"The real reason we are here, as we all know, is because Donald Trump wants to run on immigration for his number one issue in the November 2024 election," Goldman said.

Democratic Rep. Troy Carter of Louisiana said impeaching Mayorkas would set a dangerous precedent.

"So the slippery slope of 'just because we can' is a dangerous one," he said. "You have no evidence to support why a person is impeached."

Republican Carlos Gimenez of Florida said impeaching Mayorkas was not about politics and that the Biden administration is "using policy to mask unlawful behavior."

Democratic Rep. Dina Titus of Nevada said the markup was a "political stunt."

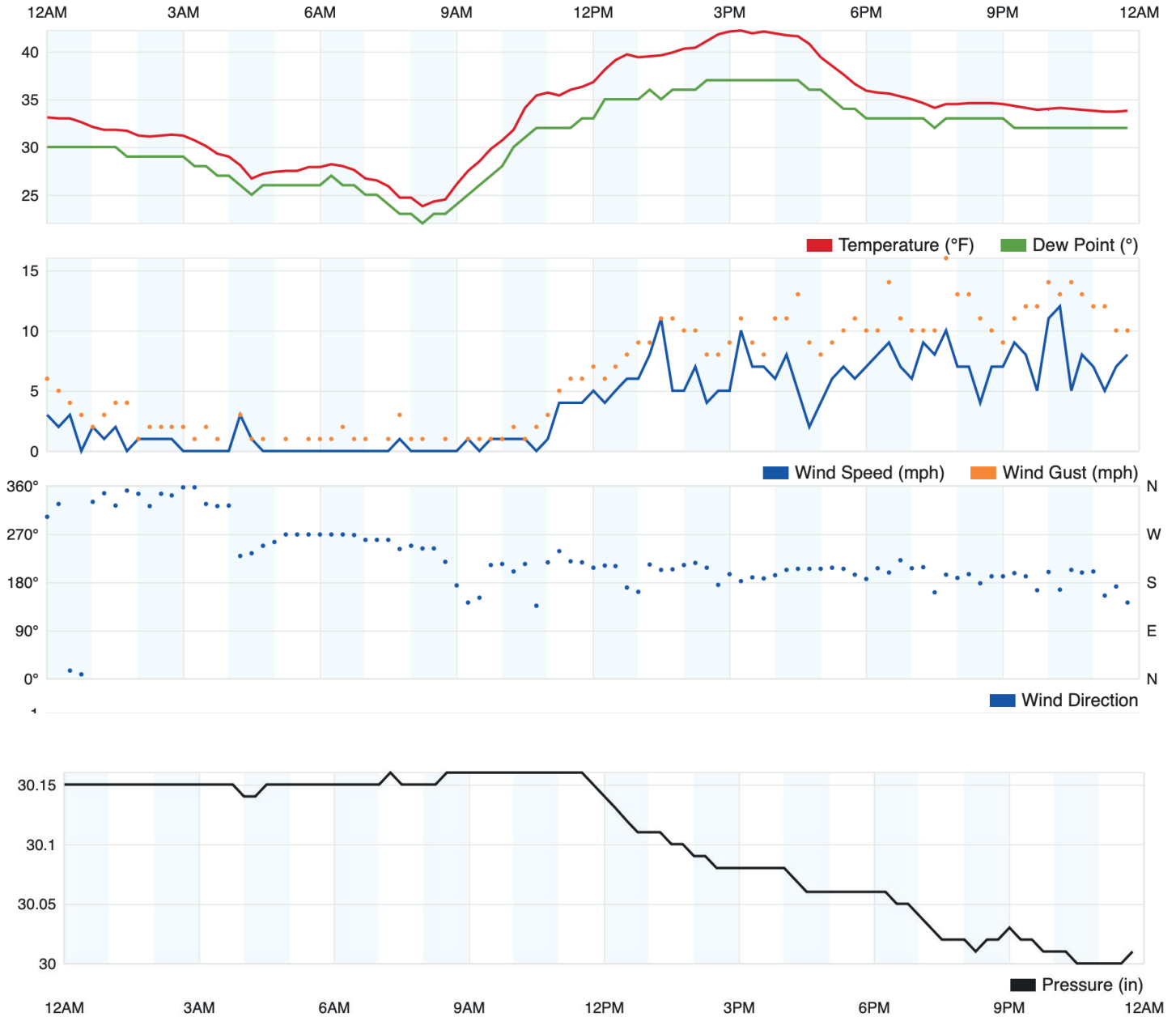
"I think another saying that appropriately describes what's going on here, and that's just shoveling the same old sh-t and calling it sugar," she said.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Thu Feb 1	Fri Feb 2	Sat Feb 3	Sun Feb 4	Mon Feb 5	Tue Feb 6	Wed Feb 7
44°F	44°F	47°F	47°F	44°F	46°F	46°F
28°F	37°F	36°F	32°F	33°F	34°F	35°F
NNE	ESE	SE	E	ESE	S	SSE
9 MPH	15 MPH	15 MPH	9 MPH	9 MPH	15 MPH	16 MPH
		20%		20%		20%



Morning Fog and Cooler Temps Through Friday

February 1, 2024

4:11 AM

Scattered Rain Showers for Central and Northeast SD This Weekend

	Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)							Probability of Precipitation Forecast (%)																					
	2/1 Thu	2/2 Fri	2/3 Sat	2/4 Sun	2/5 Mon	2/6 Tue	2/7 Wed	2/2 Fri		2/3 Sat				2/4 Sun				2/5 Mon											
	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	6am	9am							
Aberdeen	43	43	46	46	45	49	49	15	15	10	10	15	15	25	25	15	15	15	15	10	10	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	5
Britton	42	42	45	45	45	48	48	5	5	10	10	15	15	20	20	10	10	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Brookings	45	41	47	46	46	48	49	0	0	5	5	5	5	10	10	5	5	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Chamberlain	44	39	43	46	48	53	52	0	0	10	10	20	20	35	35	35	35	25	25	15	15	10	10	10	10	5	5	5	
Clark	45	42	46	46	45	48	48	5	5	5	5	15	15	20	20	10	10	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
Eagle Butte	42	39	41	42	45	49	46	5	5	10	10	25	25	50	50	55	55	40	40	30	30	30	30	25	25	15	15	5	
Ellendale	42	41	43	44	44	48	47	10	10	5	5	10	10	20	20	15	15	10	10	5	5	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	
Eureka	43	40	42	46	45	49	47	10	10	15	15	15	15	30	30	30	30	25	25	10	10	10	20	20	20	20	5	5	
Gettysburg	41	39	42	44	45	50	48	15	15	15	15	25	25	45	45	40	40	25	25	20	20	15	15	15	15	10	10	5	
Huron	44	40	46	47	45	50	51	5	5	10	10	20	20	25	25	20	20	20	20	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
Kennebec	37	40	42	44	47	53	51	0	0	10	10	20	20	40	40	40	40	25	25	20	20	15	15	10	10	5	5	5	
McIntosh	47	41	43	45	46	49	46	15	15	5	5	15	15	45	45	55	55	30	30	20	20	30	30	35	35	20	20	10	
Milbank	46	44	46	46	47	50	51	0	0	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	
Miller	39	39	42	44	45	50	49	10	10	15	15	20	20	35	35	30	30	25	25	15	15	10	10	10	10	10	5	5	
Mobridge	46	42	44	46	46	49	49	10	10	10	10	15	15	35	35	40	40	25	25	20	20	20	20	20	20	15	15	5	
Murdo	40	40	42	42	47	53	52	0	0	10	10	30	30	50	50	55	55	35	35	30	30	25	25	15	15	5	5	5	
Pierre	42	42	44	46	48	53	52	5	5	10	10	25	25	45	45	45	45	30	30	25	25	20	20	15	15	10	10	5	
Redfield	41	41	45	46	45	49	49	10	10	15	15	15	15	25	25	20	20	20	20	10	10	5	5	5	5	10	10	5	
Sisseton	42	42	44	46	46	50	49	0	0	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
Watertown	45	43	46	45	45	48	49	0	0	5	5	10	10	10	10	5	5	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
Webster	43	41	44	44	44	47	48	0	0	5	5	10	10	15	15	5	5	10	10	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
Wheaton	44	43	46	47	45	48	49	0	0	0	0	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	5	



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Patchy to Areas of Fog will be problematic for some of us this morning and again late tonight into Friday morning. Some locally dense fog will be possible. Some sunshine will be possible this afternoon but a cooler northeast wind will mean temps won't be quite as warm today as they were on Wednesday. Clouds will start to thicken up on Friday and persist through the upcoming weekend. Rainfall will be possible by Saturday morning through Sunday morning, especially across Central South Dakota.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 48 °F at 4:23 PM

Low Temp: 30 °F at 7:57 AM

Wind: 14 mph at 2:55 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 48 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1931

Record Low: -42 in 1893

Average High: 25

Average Low: 2

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.02

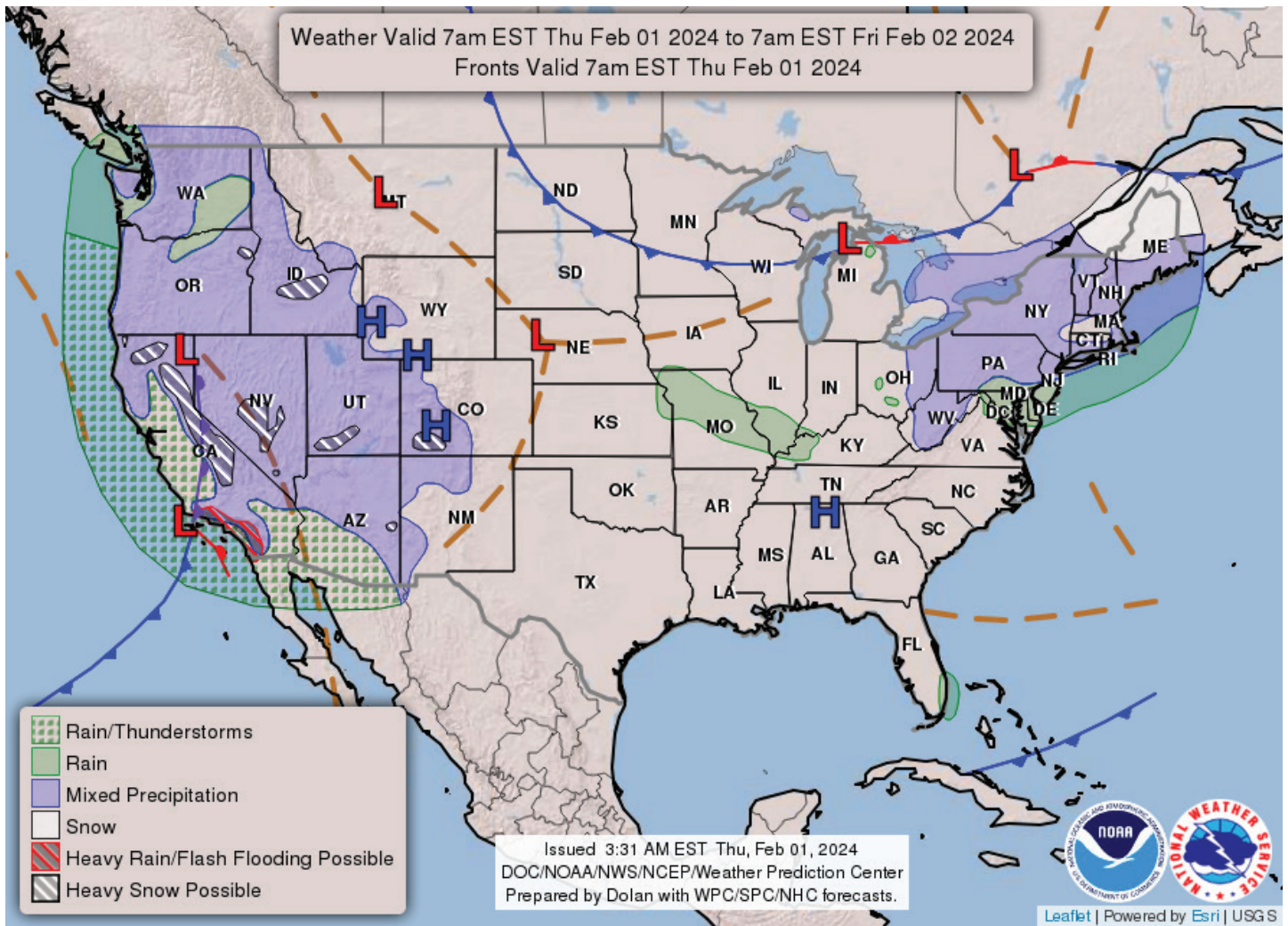
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.57

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:40:04 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:50:35 am



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Today in Weather History

February 1, 1969: Across central and eastern South Dakota, February 1969 contained a variety of winter weather causing many difficulties. Glazing due to dense fog and drizzle periodically formed on utility lines creating numerous broken power lines. Strong winds caused widespread blowing and drifting snow resulting in many closed roads. Snowplows would open the streets, and often drifting snow would close the roads again. Frequent uses of pusher-type snowplows piled banks of snow 20 to 30 feet along the roads, and it became impractical to open routes with this type of snowplow. Several rotary snowplows were flown in from military airbases outside the state to open some of the roads in the eastern part of the state. Many school closings occurred during the month due to snow blocked roads.

February 1, 1989: Four to eight inches of snow fell across western and northern South Dakota. Winds of 25 mph and subzero temperature produced wind chills in the 50 to 80 below zero range. Several schools were closed across the area due to the dangerous wind chills. The storm continued into the 2nd.

1893 - Thunder and lightning accompanied sleet and snow at Saint Louis MO during the evening hours, even though the temperature was just 13 degrees above zero. (The Weather Channel)

1916: Seattle, Washington, was buried under 21.5 inches of snow, their most significant 24-hour snowfall. A total of 32.5 inches of wet snow accumulated over three days. The Seattle cathedral dome collapsed under the snow's weight.

1947: January 30th through February 8th, a great blizzard occurred in Saskatchewan, Canada. All highways into Regina were blocked. Railway officials declared the worst conditions in Canadian rail history. One train was buried in a snowdrift over a half-mile long and 36.7 feet deep.

1951 - The greatest ice storm of record in the U.S. produced glaze up to four inches thick from Texas to Pennsylvania causing twenty-five deaths, 500 serious injuries, and 100 million dollars damage. Tennessee was hardest hit by the storm. Communications and utilities were interrupted for a week to ten days. (David Ludlum)

1951 - The temperature at Taylor Park Dam plunged to 60 degrees below zero, a record for the state of Colorado. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1955: Seen first as a "well-defined cone-shaped funnel" over the Mississippi River, this F3 tornado cut a path from Commerce Landing to Clark in northeastern Mississippi. This tornado killed 20 and injured at least 141 individuals. Most of the deaths were in a plantation school. The following is from Thomas Grazulis, "Significant Tornadoes 1680-1991" book: "Despite the fact that a funnel was seen, that heavy objects were thrown long distances, and that the tornado was in a forecast box, the event was not officially called a tornado. A survey team state that since all debris was thrown in one direction, the event should not be listed as a tornado."

1985 - Snow, sleet and ice glazed southern Tennessee and northern sections of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. The winter storm produced up to eleven inches of sleet and ice in Lauderdale County AL, one of the worst storms of record for the state. All streets in Florence AL were closed for the first time of record. (1st-2nd) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the Pacific Northwest produced wind gusts to 100 mph at Cape Blanco OR, and up to six inches of rain in the northern coastal mountain ranges. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thirty cities in the eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Richmond VA with a reading of 73 degrees. Thunderstorms in southern Louisiana deluged Basile with 12.34 inches of rain. Arctic cold gripped the north central U.S. Wolf Point MT reported a low of 32 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - While arctic cold continued to invade the central U.S., fifty-four cities in the south central and eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. Russell KS, the hot spot in the nation with a high of 84 degrees the previous day, reported a morning low of 12 above. Tioga ND reported a wind chill reading of 90 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

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1990 - Thunderstorms associated with an upper level weather disturbance produced severe weather across the eastern half of Texas during the late afternoon and evening. Four persons were injured at Waco TX where thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 80 mph. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 97 mph at Cotulla TX injuring two other persons. Golf ball size hail was reported at Whitney and northeast of Whitsett. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2011 - One of the most significant events of the 2010-2011 winter season affected a widespread region from Texas to the Midwest and Northeast from February 1st to 3rd 2011. The system produced widespread heavy snow with blizzard conditions and significant freezing rain and sleet to other locations. Snowfall amounts of 10 to 20 inches were common from northeast Oklahoma to lower Michigan. The storm produced 20.2 inches at Chicago, the third heaviest snowfall in the city since their records began in 1886, along with a peak wind of 61 mph. Kansas City received just under 9 inches of snow. The high temp was 17 degrees.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

WHEN DO WE START GETTING SMALLER?

When he was a child, Little Tommy was fascinated as he stood in the back yard and watched airplanes get smaller and smaller as they disappeared over the horizon. He would stand motionless, sometimes even holding his breath, as he watched this amazing sight time after time. Day after day, he would beg his grandmother to "take me flying on one of those airplanes."

Finally, the day came when his grandmother took him on his first flight. After he was buckled in his seat and the aircraft sped down the runway and began to ascend into the clouds, a puzzled look came across his face. Anxiously, he turned to his grandmother and asked quietly, "Grandmother, when do we start getting smaller?"

This question of Little Tommie is an essential question for all Christians! John the Baptist played a most significant role in the ministry of Jesus. He realized that God gave Him a crucial role that no other person could fulfill: introduce His Son Je sus to the world. It was his primary purpose in life – and he did it well. God rewarded and blest him for his faithfulness in fulfilling the role he was assigned. But, when Jesus appeared, John realized that his role in doing God's work changed. Not only does his willingness to decrease in importance describe an example of what humility is, but it prescribes the role of every Christian today. We are to present God's Message, the gift of His Son, our Savior, to others without drawing attention to ourselves.

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

Scripture For Today: He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less. John 3:30-36



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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.30.24

3 5 16 58 59 11

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$333,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 20 Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

3 30 38 39 48 8

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,750,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 35 Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

2 28 38 43 46 1

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 50 Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

1 19 22 25 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$36,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 50 Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

13 15 18 21 58 25

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 19 Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.31.24

15 18 19 41 43 14

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$206,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 19 Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

South Dakota man charged in 2013 death of girlfriend takes plea offer, avoiding murder charge

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — More than a decade after a tourist found the decomposing body of 38-year-old woman in the Black Hills of South Dakota, the boyfriend accused of her murder took a plea offer the day before trial.

Meshell Will was reported missing in August 2013 and was discovered four days later. Richard Schmitz, 55, was arrested nearly eight years later in 2021 and was charged with second-degree murder.

On Tuesday, Schmitz entered an Alford plea — acknowledging the state has enough evidence to convict him while maintaining his innocence — to second-degree manslaughter, a felony with up to 10 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine, the Rapid City Journal reported.

In exchange, the state agreed to drop the second-degree murder charge, which carries a mandatory life sentence. Second-degree manslaughter is the reckless killing of another person.

Deputy Pennington County State's Attorney Roxanne Hammond said that Schmitz "at the very minimum" recklessly caused Will's death.

The autopsy conducted on Will's body in September 2013 listed the cause of death as undetermined. Schmitz remained a person of interest for eight years before he was ultimately arrested.

Law enforcement has not stated what piece of evidence ultimately tipped the scales towards Schmitz's arrest. However, a case summary requesting a warrant for his arrest referenced a 2021 pathology report that ruled out natural, suicide, or accidental manner of death. "Thus, the manner of death is either undetermined or homicide," the report stated, the Rapid City Journal reported.

According to the investigator's summary, the forensic pathologist concluded there was sufficient evidence to argue strongly that the manner of death was homicide, as Will died shortly after she was last seen alive with Schmitz, and her body was dumped off of the slope within hours of her death.

The state had intended to introduce information about three of Schmitz's past relationships — three women who said Schmitz had been violent with them — at trial, according to the Rapid City Journal.

Presiding Judge Craig Pfeifle has ordered a standard presentencing investigation report and a domestic violence report to help inform Schmitz's sentencing, which is scheduled for March 8.

Noem looking to further bolster Texas security efforts at US-Mexico border

By JACK DURA Associated Press

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said Wednesday that her administration is considering boosting its support for Texas' efforts to deter immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border, such as sending razor wire and security personnel.

The second-term Republican governor blasted conditions at the border in a speech to a joint session of the Legislature, a gathering she requested Monday after visiting the border last week. Noem, once seen as a potential 2024 presidential candidate, has made the border situation a focus during her tenure.

"The United States of America is in a time of invasion," Noem said. "The invasion is coming over our southern border. The 50 states have a common enemy, and that enemy is the Mexican drug cartels. They are waging war against our nation, and these cartels are perpetuating violence in each of our states, even right here in South Dakota."

Border security has taken center stage in numerous states and in Congress, where Republicans are conditioning aid to Ukraine on a border security deal, and pushing to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. Even President Joe Biden has said that he would shut down the border if given the emergency authority to do so, as part of a deal.

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Noem cited illegal drugs, including fentanyl, and violent crime affecting communities and tribal reservations. She said she plans to "very publicly" support the Oglala Sioux Tribe in its lawsuit filed last week against the federal government, seeking more law enforcement support.

In November, Tribal President Frank Star Comes Out declared a state of emergency on the Pine Ridge Reservation due to increasing crime. A federal judge ruled last year that the federal government has a treaty duty for law enforcement support on the reservation, but he declined to rule on the funding level the tribe sought.

The governor also said South Dakota is willing to send razor wire to Texas. Her administration is "exploring various legal options on how we can support Texas and force (the) federal government to do their job," she said, and also is considering options to provide personnel.

Democratic state Sen. Shawn Bordeaux said Noem "should focus on South Dakota."

He added, "I think it's a shame that she's using the Mexican border for her own political purposes to try to advance her own agenda and align it with former President Trump, and she's doing it at the expense of the tribes."

He said Noem has previously paid little attention to area tribes during his 10 years as a state lawmaker and two years as a Rosebud Sioux tribal councilman.

"I'm just a little perturbed that we haven't heard nothing until now and all of a sudden it's a big thing in the middle of our session to interrupt us with whatever this ploy is to get a little more attention, in my view," Bordeaux said.

Republican House Majority Leader Will Mortenson said Noem "painted a pretty vivid picture of the situation on the border and made a compelling case, need for action at the border." Lawmakers will look for specific proposals she might put forth during the ongoing session, he said.

Noem has deployed South Dakota National Guard troops three times to the border, including last year, and she has visited several times, including on Friday. Other Republican governors have deployed troops and visited the border too.

In 2021, Noem drew criticism for accepting a \$1 million donation offered by a wealthy Republican donor to help cover the cost of a two-month deployment of 48 troops to the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas.

Georgia governor signs bill that would define antisemitism in state law

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp on Wednesday signed a law defining antisemitism in state law, proclaiming support for Jewish residents despite concerns the measure would hamper people opposing the actions of Israel.

The Republican governor said by enacting the law, he was "reaffirming our commitment to a Georgia where all people can live, learn and prosper safely, because there's no place for hate in this great state."

Kemp likened it to when he signed a measure in 2020 that allows additional penalties to be imposed for crimes motivated by a victim's race, religion, sexual orientation or other factors. That hate crimes law was spurred by the killing of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man pursued and fatally shot while running near Brunswick, Georgia.

The antisemitism definition measure had stalled in 2023, but was pushed with fresh urgency this year amid the Israel-Hamas war and a reported surge in antisemitic incidents in Georgia. Sponsors say adopting the 2016 definition put forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance will help prosecutors and other officials identify hate crimes and illegal discrimination targeting Jewish people. That could lead to higher penalties under the 2020 hate crimes law.

The definition, which is only referred to in the bill, describes antisemitism as "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

Kenneth Stern, the author of IHRA's definition, told The Associated Press that using such language in law is problematic, because an increasing number of Jews have adopted an antizionist position in opposition to Israeli actions.

Lawmakers in more than a half-dozen additional U.S. states are pushing laws to define antisemitism.

Opponents of the Georgia law warned it would be used to censor free speech rights with criticism of Israel equated to hatred of Jewish people. A coalition of organizations, including Jewish Voice for Peace and CAIR, issued a joint statement saying that the Georgia bill "falsely equates critiques of Israel and Zionism with discrimination against Jewish people."

But supporters say the definition will only come into play after someone has committed a crime. State Rep. John Carson, a Marietta Republican who was one of the bill's sponsors, said he believed the measure would be challenged in court the first time it is used, but predicted it would be upheld.

"I'm very confident this will stand up, like it has in other states," Carson said.

What to know about how lawmakers are addressing deepfakes like the ones that victimized Taylor Swift

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Even before pornographic and violent deepfake images of Taylor Swift began widely circulating in the past few days, state lawmakers across the U.S. had been searching for ways to quash such nonconsensual images of both adults and children.

But in this Taylor-centric era, the problem has been getting a lot more attention since she was targeted through deepfakes, the computer-generated images using artificial intelligence to seem real.

Here are things to know about what states have done and what they are considering.

WHERE DEEPFAKES SHOW UP

Artificial intelligence hit the mainstream last year like never before, enabling people to create ever-more realistic deepfakes. Now they're appearing online more often, in several forms.

There's pornography — taking advantage of celebrities like Swift to create fake compromising images.

There's music — A song that sounded like Drake and The Weeknd performing together got millions of clicks on streaming services — but it was not those artists. The song was removed from platforms.

And there are political dirty tricks, this election year — Just before January's presidential primary, some New Hampshire voters reported receiving robocalls purporting to be from President Joe Biden telling them not to bother casting ballots. The state attorney general's office is investigating.

But a more common circumstance is porn using the likenesses of non-famous people, including minors.

WHAT STATES HAVE DONE SO FAR

Deepfakes are just one area in the complicated realm of AI that lawmakers are trying to figure out whether and how to handle.

At least 10 states have enacted deepfake-related laws already. Scores of more measures are under consideration this year in legislatures across the country.

Georgia, Hawaii, Texas and Virginia have laws on the books that criminalize nonconsensual deepfake porn.

California and Illinois have given victims the right to sue those who create images using their likenesses.

Minnesota and New York do both. Minnesota's law also targets using deepfakes in politics.

ARE THERE TECH SOLUTIONS?

University at Buffalo computer science professor Siwei Lyu said work is being done on several approaches, none of them perfect.

One is deepfake detection algorithms, which can be used to flag deepfakes on places like social media platforms.

Another — which Lyu said is in development but not yet being used widely — is to embed codes in content people upload that would signal if they're reused in AI creation.

And a third mechanism would be to require companies offering AI tools to include digital watermarks to identify content generated with their applications.

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He said it makes sense to hold those companies accountable for how people use their tools, and companies in turn can enforce user agreements against creating problematic deepfakes.

WHAT SHOULD BE IN A LAW?

Model legislation proposed by the American Legislative Exchange Council addresses porn, not politics. The conservative and pro-business policy group is encouraging states to do two things: Criminalize possession and distribution of deepfakes portraying minors in sex acts, and allow victims to sue people who distribute nonconsensual deepfakes showing sexual conduct.

"I would recommend to lawmakers to start with a small, prescriptive fix that can solve a tangible problem," said Jake Morabito, who directs the communications and technology task force for ALEC. He warns that lawmakers should not target the technology that can be used to create deepfakes, as that could shut down innovation with important other uses.

Todd Helmus, a behavioral scientist at RAND, a nonpartisan thinktank, points out that leaving enforcement up to individuals filing lawsuits is insufficient. It takes resources to sue, he said. And the result might not be worth it. "It's not worth suing somebody that doesn't have any money to give you," he said.

Helmus calls for guardrails throughout the system and says making them work probably requires government involvement.

He said OpenAI and other companies whose platforms can be used to generate seemingly realistic content should make efforts to prevent deepfakes from being created; social media companies should implement better systems to keep them from proliferating, and there should be legal consequences those who do it anyway.

Jenna Leventoff, a First Amendment lawyer at the ACLU, said that while deepfakes can cause harm, free speech protections also apply to them, and lawmakers should make sure they don't go beyond existing exceptions to free speech, such as defamation, fraud and obscenity, when they try to regulate the emerging technology.

Last week, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre addressed the issue, saying social media companies should create and enforce their own rules to prevent the spread of misinformation and images like the ones of Swift.

WHAT'S BEING PROPOSED?

A bipartisan group of members of Congress in January introduced federal legislation that would give people a property right to their own likeness and voice — and the ability to sue those who use it in a misleading way through a deepfake for whatever reason.

Most states are considering some kind of deepfake legislation in their sessions this year. They're being introduced by Democrats, Republicans and bipartisan coalitions of lawmakers.

The bills getting traction include one that would make it a crime to distribute or create sexually explicit depictions of a person without their consent in GOP-dominated Indiana. It passed in the House unanimously in January.

A similar measure introduced this week in Missouri is named "The Taylor Swift Act." And another one cleared the Senate this week in South Dakota, where Attorney General Marty Jackley said some investigations have been handed over to federal officials because the state does not have the AI-related laws needed to file charges.

"When you go into somebody's Facebook page, you steal their child and you put that into pornography, there's no First Amendment right to do that," Jackley said.

WHAT CAN A PERSON DO?

For anyone with an online presence, it can be hard to prevent being a deepfake victim.

But RAND's Helmus says that people who find they have been targeted can ask a social media platform where images are shared to remove them; inform the police if they're in a place with a law; tell school or university officials if the alleged perpetrator is a student; and seek mental health help as needed.

Some Republican leaders are pushing back against the conservative Freedom Caucus in statehouses

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — On the first day of Missouri's new legislative session, Senate President Pro Tem Caleb Rowden tried to cajole colleagues into congeniality with a rhetorical question: "Will we focus on principled progress or political pandemonium?"

Progress was intended. But pandemonium ensued.

Within days, a newly formed Freedom Caucus — modeled after one in Washington, D.C. — ground the chamber to a halt with demands that Republican leaders act faster on GOP priorities. Tempers flared. Insults flew. And Rowden penalized prominent Freedom Caucus members by stripping them of their committee chairmanships and prime Capitol parking spots.

In state capitols around the country, Republican legislative leaders are pushing back against a growing network of conservative lawmakers attempting to pull the party further to the right with aggressive tactics aimed not at Democrats but at members of their own party. The infighting has put a spotlight on Republican fissures heading into the November elections, even as former President Donald Trump has been consolidating party support.

The conservative Freedom Caucus gained attention in the fall — when some of its members helped topple U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy — but it's been active in the U.S. House since 2015.

An outgrowth of the group, the State Freedom Caucus Network, launched in 2021 in Georgia. With the recent addition in Missouri, it now counts chapters in 11 states, with designs to keep expanding. Unlike the loose affiliations of like-minded lawmakers that exist in many states, new State Freedom Caucus chapters are founded only by invitation from the national group — and come bankrolled with staff to help screen legislation, craft strategy and generate publicity.

Caucus members portray themselves as the Republican Party's true conservatives, often pressing colleagues into uncomfortable votes on amendments, blocking or slowing debate to make a point and clashing with Republican legislative leaders.

"We're willing to stand up and not be silenced by these guys," said Missouri state Sen. Bill Eigel, a Freedom Caucus member running for governor who has rankled Senate leaders with his lengthy and impassioned rhetoric.

In Missouri, the Freedom Caucus has pushed a measure that would make it harder to amend the state constitution with citizen ballot initiatives, such as one backing abortion rights. Eigel and other caucus members stalled the Senate from working for a month while seeking to force the proposal to be brought up for debate.

Elsewhere, Freedom Caucus members have backed restrictions on transgender medical procedures and called for state National Guard troops to be sent to the Texas-Mexico border to help deter migrants.

But it's their tactics, rather than their policies, that have ruffled GOP leaders.

Frustrated by their obstruction, Rowden recently denounced Missouri's Senate Freedom Caucus members as "a small group of swamp creatures" trying to "destroy the institution" while announcing he was stripping some of their parking perks and committee leadership.

Like in Missouri, Idaho's top Republican senator removed certain Freedom Caucus members from committee leadership posts last November and denounced their disparaging rhetoric against other senators.

For a year now in South Carolina, Freedom Caucus members have been excluded from the House Republican caucus — since they refused to go along with party rules that bar them from campaigning against other Republican members.

Meanwhile in Georgia, the Senate Republican caucus booted an outspoken Freedom Caucus member who tried to pressure colleagues into impeaching a Democratic prosecutor for indicting Trump. The Georgia Senate GOP caucus said in a statement last September that Sen. Colton Moore had caused "unnecessary tension and hostility" and put his colleagues "at risk of personal harm" through his public pressure campaign.

Moore remains excluded from the Republican caucus, though the Senate has since launched an inves-

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tigation into whether Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis misspent state money in her prosecution of Trump and others. Moore said the investigation validates his efforts, which he said probably are "a lot more aggressive" than those used in the past.

In various states, Freedom Caucus members are exposing "that there are a lot of Republicans in state legislatures who are enabling bigger government and locking arms with the Democrats to do so," said Andrew Roth, president of the State Freedom Caucus Network. "And when they're finally being called out on it, they react punitively."

Despite such conflicts, Roth said Freedom Caucus members have had a hand in passing anti-abortion legislation in Wyoming, changing Louisiana's congressional primaries and blocking Democratic Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs' nominee to lead the Department of Health Services, among other things.

But some Freedom Caucus' actions have failed. In Montana, the group's petition to call a January special session on property tax cuts recently fell short of the needed threshold. A chapter in Mississippi folded after most of its members either retired or ran for other offices.

Still, Freedom Caucus chapters remain active in politically divided Pennsylvania, Democratic-led Illinois and Republican-led South Dakota.

In the early weeks of South Carolina's legislative session, group members have been at the center of Republican tensions. Freedom Caucus members accused Republican colleagues of watering down a bill restricting treatments for transgender youths by tabling amendments like one requiring immediate parental notification from teachers when children change gender identities. Other Republicans saw the Freedom Caucus amendments as a bad-faith effort to grab attention and force difficult votes.

In a new twist, the South Carolina Freedom Caucus issued its own response to the Republican governor's State of the State address last week. Republican Rep. Adam Morgan, the chair of the 16-person group, railed against what he called the state's "liberal Republicans." Morgan, who recently announced a bid for Congress, also derided a House GOP caucus rule barring campaigns against fellow Republicans as a "crony loyalty pledge."

Some Republicans, including state Rep. Micah Caskey, have fought back — at least rhetorically. Caskey accused the Freedom Caucus of "political terrorism for their own selfish narrow ambitions."

"They have bamboozled people into believing that their fiery rhetoric and preference for anarchy is conservative," Caskey said. "The reality is that they are an obstruction and an annoyance to achieving conservative policy aims."

European Union agrees on a new 50 billion-euro aid package for Ukraine

By LORNE COOK and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Council President Charles Michel says the 27 EU countries have sealed a deal on aid to Ukraine just over an hour into a summit of the bloc's leaders and despite threats from Hungary to veto the move.

"We have a deal," Michel said in a post on X, formerly known as Twitter. He wrote that all "27 leaders agreed on an additional 50-billion-euro (\$54 billion) support package for Ukraine within the EU budget."

The announcement came despite staunch objections from Hungary in December and in the days leading up to Thursday's summit in Brussels.

Michel said that the move "locks in steadfast, long-term, predictable funding for Ukraine," and demonstrates that the "EU is taking leadership and responsibility in support for Ukraine; we know what is at stake."

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders lashed out at Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban on Thursday, accusing him of blackmail and playing political games that undermine support for Ukraine as his nationalist government holds up EU financial aid for the country's war-ravaged economy.

Almost two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the war has ground to a halt and Ukraine's economy desperately needs propping up. But political infighting in the EU and in the United States is depriving Kyiv

of a long-term source of funding. More than \$100 billion is being held up.

Concern has mounted that public support to keep pouring money into Ukraine has started to wane, even though a Russian victory could threaten security across Europe.

"There is no problem with the so-called Ukraine fatigue issue. We have Orban fatigue now in Brussels," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk told reporters at an EU summit. "I can't understand. I can't accept this very strange and very egoistic game of Viktor Orban."

In December, the 26 other leaders agreed on an aid package worth 50 billion euros (\$54 billion) for this year through 2027. They also agreed to make Ukraine a candidate for EU membership, which Orban reluctantly accepted.

But the financial package is part of a review of the EU's continuing seven-year budget, which must be approved unanimously.

Orban, the EU leader with the closest ties to Russia, is angry at the European Commission's decision to freeze his government's access to some of the bloc's funds. The executive branch did so over concerns about possible threats to the EU budget posed by democratic backsliding in Hungary.

In response, Hungary vetoed statements at the EU on a range of issues. Orban's also exported the problem to NATO, by blocking high level meetings with Ukraine until only recently. Budapest is also holding up Sweden's bid for membership in the military organization.

"I don't want to use the word blackmail, but I don't know what other better word" might fit, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas told reporters as she arrived at EU headquarters.

"Hungary needs Europe," she said, highlighting the country's own economic problems and high interest rates. "He should also look into what it is in it for Hungary, being in Europe."

Tusk insisted that there could be "no room for compromise on our principles, like rule of law. And for sure there is no room for compromise on the Ukraine question." The recently elected Polish leader added: "If his position will dominate in Europe, then Ukraine will lose for sure."

Orban did not speak to reporters as he entered the meeting.

The real question is whether the 26 leaders in favor of the aid package should press on without Hungary. They could set up a special fund separately from the EU budget, but this would be more expensive and time consuming because national parliaments may have to approve such an action.

Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar said it was important for the leaders to try to seal a deal supported by all 27 member countries but that in any case "we can't go away without an agreement."

"That war is now raging for two years. Ukraine will not be able to continue to defend itself without the support of the European Union, and we can't leave them short," Varadkar told reporters.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that "we want to finish what we started in December" and stressed that the planned 50 billion euros for Ukraine is "urgently necessary."

"I will make a great deal of effort, together with many others, to make a decision by 27 (member states) possible," Scholz said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is scheduled to address the leaders via video link.

UK judge dismisses Trump's lawsuit over dossier containing 'shocking and scandalous claims'

LONDON (AP) — A judge in London on Thursday threw out a lawsuit by former U.S. President Donald Trump accusing a former British spy of making "shocking and scandalous claims" that were false and harmed his reputation.

Judge Karen Steyn said the case Trump filed against Orbis Business Intelligence should not go to trial. The company was founded by Christopher Steele, who created a dossier in 2016 that contained rumors and uncorroborated allegations that caused a political storm just before Trump's inauguration.

Steele, who once ran the Russia desk for Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, also known as MI6, was paid by Democrats to compile research that included salacious allegations that Russians could potentially use to blackmail Trump. Trump said the dossier was fake news and a political witch hunt.

The former president sought damages from Orbis for allegedly violating British data protection laws. The firm sought to have the case thrown out.

Israel and Lebanon are prepping for a war neither wants, but many fear it's becoming inevitable

By ABBY SEWELL and MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The prospect of a full-scale war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militia terrifies people on both sides of the border, but some see it as an inevitable fallout from Israel's ongoing war against Hamas in Gaza.

Such a war could be the most destructive either side has ever experienced.

Israel and Hezbollah each have lessons from their last war, in 2006, a monthlong conflict that ended in a draw. They've also had four months to prepare for another war, even as the United States tries to prevent a widening of the conflict.

Here's a look at each side's preparedness, how war might unfold and what's being done to prevent it.

WHAT HAPPENED IN 2006?

The 2006 war, six years after Israeli forces withdrew from south Lebanon, erupted after Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers and killed several others in a cross-border raid.

Israel launched a full-scale air and ground offensive and imposed a blockade that aimed to free the hostages and destroy Hezbollah's military capabilities — a mission that ultimately failed.

Israeli bombing leveled large swaths of south Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs. Hezbollah fired thousands of unguided rockets into northern Israel communities.

The conflict killed some 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers.

A United Nations resolution ending the war called for withdrawal of Israeli forces from Lebanon and a demilitarized zone on Lebanon's side of the border.

Despite the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers, Hezbollah continues to operate in the border area, while Lebanon says Israel regularly violates its airspace and continues to occupy pockets of Lebanese land.

HOW PROBABLE IS WAR?

An Israel-Hezbollah war "would be a total disaster," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned last month, amid a flurry of shuttle diplomacy by the U.S. and Europe.

Iran-backed Hezbollah seemed caught off-guard by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, a regional ally. Since then, Hezbollah and Israel have exchanged daily cross-border strikes, escalating gradually. Israel also carried out targeted killings of Hezbollah and Hamas figures in Lebanon.

More than 200 people, mostly Hezbollah fighters but also more than 20 civilians, have been killed on Lebanon's side, and 18 on Israel's.

Tens of thousands have been displaced on both sides. There are no immediate prospects for their return.

Israeli political and military leaders have warned Hezbollah that war is increasingly probable unless the militants withdraw from the border.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah hasn't threatened to initiate war but warned of a fight "without limits" if Israel does. Hezbollah says it won't agree to a ceasefire on the Israel-Lebanon border before there's one in Gaza and has rebuffed a U.S. proposal to move its forces several kilometers (miles) back from the border, according to Lebanese officials.

Despite the rhetoric, neither side appears to want war, said Andrea Tenenti, spokesperson for the U.N. peacekeeping mission in south Lebanon. However, "a miscalculation could potentially trigger a wider conflict that would be very difficult to control," he said.

HOW PREPARED ARE THEY?

Both Hezbollah and the Israeli military have expanded capabilities since 2006 — yet both countries also are more fragile.

In Lebanon, four years of economic crisis have crippled public institutions, including its army and electrical grid, and eroded its health system. The country hosts more than 1 million Syrian refugees.

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Lebanon adopted an emergency plan for a war scenario in late October. It projected the forcible displacement of 1 million Lebanese for 45 days.

About 87,000 Lebanese are displaced from the border area. While the government is relying on international organizations to fund the response, many groups working in Lebanon can't maintain existing programs.

The U.N. refugee agency has provided supplies to collective shelters and given emergency cash to some 400 families in south Lebanon, spokesperson Lisa Abou Khaled said. The agency doesn't have funds to support large numbers of displaced in the event of war, she said.

Aid group Doctors Without Borders said it has stockpiled some 10 tons of medical supplies and backup fuel for hospital generators in areas most likely to be affected by a widening conflict, in anticipation of a blockade.

Israel is feeling economic and social strain from the war in Gaza, which is expected to cost over \$50 billion, or about 10 percent of national economic activity through the end of 2024, according to the Bank of Israel. Costs would rise sharply if there's war with Lebanon.

"No one wants this war, or wishes it on anyone," said Tal Beerli of the Alma Research and Education Center, a think tank focusing on northern Israel security. But he said he believes an armed conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is inevitable, arguing that diplomatic solutions appear unlikely and would only allow Hezbollah's strategic threats to increase.

Israel has evacuated 60,000 residents from towns nearest the border, where there's no warning time for rocket launches because of the proximity of Hezbollah squads.

In a war, there would be no point in additional evacuations since the militia's rockets and missiles can reach all of Israel.

After the Oct. 7 attack, the war in Gaza had broad domestic support, even if there's now a growing debate over its direction. Around half of Israelis would support war with Hezbollah as a last resort for restoring border security, according to recent polling by the think tank Israel Democracy Institute.

In Lebanon, some have criticized Hezbollah for exposing the country to another potentially devastating war. Others support the group's limited entry into the conflict and believe Hezbollah's arsenal will deter Israel from escalating.

HOW WOULD WAR PLAY OUT?

A full-scale war would likely spread to multiple fronts, escalating the involvement of Iranian proxies in Syria, Iraq and Yemen — and perhaps even draw in Iran itself.

It could also drag the U.S., Israel's closest ally, deeper into the conflict. The U.S. already has dispatched additional warships to the region.

Hezbollah has 150,000 to 200,000 rockets and missiles of various ranges, said Orna Mizrahi of the Israeli think tank Institute for National Security Studies. This arsenal is at least five times larger than that of Hamas and far more accurate, she said.

The militia's guided projectiles could reach water, electricity or communications facilities, and densely populated residential areas.

In Lebanon, airstrikes would likely wreak havoc on infrastructure and potentially kill thousands. Netanyahu has threatened to "turn Beirut into Gaza," where Israel's air and ground incursion has caused widespread destruction and killed more than 26,000 people, according to Hamas-controlled Gaza's Health Ministry.

Israel is far more protected, with several air defense systems, including the Iron Dome, which intercepts rockets with a roughly 90% success rate. But it can get overwhelmed if a mass barrage of rockets is fired.

Some 40% of Israel's population live in newer homes with private safe rooms fortified with blast protection to withstand rocket attacks. Israel also has a network of bomb shelters, but a 2020 government report says about one-third of Israelis lack easy access to them.

Lebanon has no such network, and shelters would be of little use against massive "bunker buster" bombs Israel has dropped in Gaza.

Hezbollah has limited air defenses, while those of the Lebanese army are outdated and insufficient be-

cause of budget shortfalls, said Dina Arakji, with the UK-based risk consultancy firm Control Risks.

The Lebanese army has remained on the sidelines over the past four months. In 2006, it entered fighting in a limited capacity, but it's unclear how it would react in the event of a new Israel-Hezbollah war.

3 people killed and 9 injured in hangar collapse on grounds of Boise, Idaho, airport

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — A hangar under construction on the grounds of the airport in Boise, Idaho, collapsed Wednesday, killing three people and injuring another nine, officials said.

Five of those injured in the collapse at the Boise Airport are in critical condition, the city said in a statement released Wednesday night.

Authorities responded at about 5 p.m. to the privately owned steel-framed hangar, which suffered a "catastrophic" collapse, Boise Fire Department Operations Chief Aaron Hummel said during an earlier news briefing. Everyone who had been at the site had been accounted for as of Wednesday evening, he said.

The city statement said that the three people killed died at the scene. It said that responding fire crews worked to stabilize the scene and rescued multiple victims.

"It was a very chaotic scene," Hummel said, describing the incident as a "large-scale collapse" of the framework of the building. "I don't know what caused it, but I can tell you it was a pretty global collapse," he said.

Boise Airport operations were not impacted, officials said.

Terra Furman was driving on Interstate 84 at about 5:30 p.m. when she spotted at least 20 police cars, ambulances and firetrucks about a quarter mile (400 meters) from the entry to the airport. They were around what she described as a crane folded in half and a building collapsed into the shape of an 'M.'

"The walls were still up at a point and the middle collapsed in on either side," she said.

Hummel said some of the victims were on a hoist or other elevated platform at the time the structure fell, and that required some specialized rescue efforts. He confirmed that a crane also collapsed in the incident.

Leticia Ramirez, a spokesperson for Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center in Boise, said emergency and trauma teams were working with first responders to treat patients who arrived from the scene.

Authorities are investigating what caused the collapse. It happened next to Jackson Jet Center, which offers private airplane charters and maintenance.

Boise city permitting records show the contractor Big D Builders had obtained permits to build a 39,000-square-foot (3,623-square-meter) jet hangar for Jackson Jet Center.

The \$6.2 million project was to include the construction of a concrete foundation and a metal building. Messages left by phone and email seeking comment from Big D Builders were not immediately returned.

Jessica Flynn, CEO of Jackson Jet Center, said in a statement that their "hearts go out to everyone affected by this horrific event."

Flynn said the collapse happened just west of the existing Jackson Jet Center at a site where the company's new hangar was under construction. She said dozens of people were working on the site.

"We do not know exactly what caused the hangar collapse," Flynn said. "Our focus now is on supporting our team and partners during this difficult time."

James Quintana was driving to the airport when he saw emergency vehicles rushing past him. He said he immediately thought it was a plane crash. He then saw the collapsed hangar and paramedics tending to victims.

"I'm retired law enforcement and when there is that much commotion, that many emergency personnel and vehicles, there is something huge that has taken place," he said. "It was a scary sight."

Cody McGowan was working about 100 yards (91 meters) from the building when he said he heard something that sounded like a loud dog whine. When he looked up, he saw a hangar as tall as 3 ½ to 4 stories tall collapsing in on itself and part of the crane on top.

"When I walked up there, you're just kind of like, 'Wow,'" he said. "It's shocking to see a building falling in on itself."

AP-NORC poll finds an uptick in positive ratings of the US economy, but it's not boosting Biden

By JOSH BOAK and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Stocks are near record highs. Growth was surprisingly strong last year. And once-hot inflation has begun to cool. But so far, U.S. adults are feeling only slightly better about the economy.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that 35% of U.S. adults call the national economy good. That's an uptick from 30% who said so late last year and up from 24% who said so a year ago. While 65% still call the economy poor, that's also an improvement from a year ago, when 76% called it poor.

Voters' confidence in the economy could be a pivotal factor in this year's presidential election as it is consistently rated as a top issue. Recent data on the economy has shown that growth accelerated last year even as inflation returned closer to the Federal Reserve's 2% target, proving wrong a multitude of Wall Street and academic economists who said a recession would be the consequence of efforts to lower inflation.

President Joe Biden and his aides have taken to highlighting the economic positives as consumer sentiment has rebounded. Biden is also drawing an open contrast with former President Donald Trump, the Republican front-runner. Trump supporters remember his tenure with pride for how the economy fared, but his term was marred by job losses tied to the coronavirus pandemic.

The evidence of a stronger economy has yet to spill over into greater support for Biden. The new poll puts his approval rating at 38%, which is roughly where that number has stood for most of the past two years. Biden's approval rating on handling the economy is similar, at 35%.

Respondents interviewed for the survey often expressed their views on the economy through a personal lens. Some judged it based on their grocery bills and prices at the gasoline pump. Others assessed the economy based on their appreciating investments. Housing prices mattered, and so did job prospects for their adult children and the upward trajectory of the federal debt.

Molly Kapsner, 58, lives on a farm in Wisconsin and thinks the economy is doing "pretty well" because she has three children finishing college this year and all of them have job options. She voted for Biden in 2020 and plans to do so again.

"He has a lot on his plate right now and he's doing quite well," she said. "He's just putting his head down and doing his job and not trying to create a circus in our country."

David Veksler, who voted for the libertarian candidate, Jo Jorgenson, in 2020, said he's worried about the rising federal debt. The 43-year-old software engineer manager from Denver said the borrowing will hurt growth in the long term, even if his investments are doing well now.

"I think he's similar to his predecessors in furthering unsustainable deficits," Veksler said of Biden. "I'm as negative on him as I was on Trump."

Harry Broadnax, a 62-year-old retiree, said he increasingly thinks about the economy in relation to the increase in migrants illegally crossing the U.S. southern border. He feels their presence is diverting financial resources from U.S. citizens.

"I would like to see them block up the border like Trump wanted," said Broadnax, who is from North Carolina, adding for emphasis, "I'm a Democrat."

Broadnax doesn't see himself voting for Biden or Trump, whose criminal indictments worry him.

The Biden administration has tried to put a greater focus on the big numbers used to assess the overall economy, making its case through hard data.

Lael Brainard, director of the White House National Economic Council, told a group of reporters last week that skeptics about the economy had overlooked how Biden's policies boosted the labor market and repaired supply chains wrecked by the pandemic.

"The big miss here was not to understand how much, by surging back into the workforce, by address-

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ing supply chains that were completely broken, those inflationary pressures would come down," she said.

Trump has said that the economy is "fragile" and "running off the fumes of what we did." The Republican front-runner has said on social media that stocks are rising because he is likely to return to the White House. That claim overlooks the influence of the Fed, as well as the fact that average annual growth has been higher under Biden so far than it was during Trump's term.

There continues to be a political split in how people think about the economy. As a consequence, there might be a limit on how much Biden's approval numbers can climb even if the economy keeps thriving as it did last year.

Democrats remain far more likely than Republicans to describe the economy as good, 58% to 15%. Still, views have improved at least slightly since the same time last year, when 41% of Democrats and 8% of Republicans called the economy good.

Sixty-five percent of Democrats, but just 7% of Republicans, say they approve of Biden's handling of the economy, both largely unchanged since late last year.

However, the poll did show a brighter outlook on the economy from some key voter demographics. Since a year ago, a disproportionate increase in sentiment has come from college graduates and older adults — two groups that tend to turn out to vote at higher rates. There is also the possibility that voters will care more about the personalities of the Democratic and Republican nominees than they do about the state of the economy.

Deborah Shields, 70, who works in direct sales, said she's noticed an improvement in the economy as her investments have improved. Yet she said her opposition to Trump will determine her vote in November.

"I would never, never, ever vote for Trump," said Shields, who lives in Orlando, Florida. "He's a megalomaniac."

Richard Tunnell, an Air Force veteran on disability, voted for Trump in 2020 and would do so again if the former president is on the ballot. The 30-year-old from Huntsville, Texas is a hard "no" on Biden.

"He's just a puppet," Tunnell said. "They'll boot people out like Trump who give a crap, but they'll put in people like Biden who they can put on strings and manipulate."

Secret US spying program targeted top Venezuelan officials, flouting international law

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A secret memo obtained by The Associated Press details a yearslong covert operation by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration that sent undercover operatives into Venezuela to surreptitiously record and build drug-trafficking cases against the country's leadership — a plan the U.S. acknowledged from the start was arguably a violation of international law.

"It is necessary to conduct this operation unilaterally and without notifying Venezuelan officials," reads the 15-page 2018 memo expanding "Operation Money Badger," an investigation that authorities say targeted dozens of people, including Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

While there's no clear mechanism to hold the United States accountable legally, the revelation threatens to roil already fraught relations with Maduro's socialist government and could deepen resentment of the U.S. across Latin America over perceived meddling. It also offers a rare window into the lengths the DEA was willing to go to fight the drug war in a country that banned U.S. drug agents nearly two decades ago.

Some of Maduro's closest allies were ensnared in the investigation, including Alex Saab, the businessman recently freed in a prisoner swap for 10 Americans and a fugitive defense contractor. But until now, it was not clear that U.S. probes targeting Venezuela involved legally questionable tactics.

"We don't like to say it publicly but we are, in fact, the police of the world," said Wes Tabor, a former DEA official who served as the agency's country attaché in Venezuela well before the investigation described in the memo was launched.

Tabor, who would not confirm the existence of any such operations, said unilateral, covert actions can be an effective tool when conducted with proper limits and accountability, particularly in a country like

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Venezuela, where the blurred lines between the state and criminal underworld have made it an ideal transit point for up to 15% of the world's cocaine.

"We're not in the business of abiding by other countries' laws when these countries are rogue regimes and the lives of American children are at stake," he said. "And in the case of Venezuela, where they're flooding us with dope, it's worth the risk."

The DEA and Justice Department declined to answer questions from the AP about the memo, how frequently the U.S. conducts unilateral activities and the makeup of the panel that approves such operations.

Venezuela's communications ministry did not respond to requests for comment. But in recent days Maduro accused the DEA and the CIA — a regular target he uses to rally supporters — of undertaking efforts to destabilize the country. The CIA declined to comment.

"I don't think President Biden is involved," Maduro said in a televised appearance this month. "But the CIA and the DEA operate independently as imperialist criminal organizations."

TARGETING MADURO

The never-before-seen document was authored at the cusp of Republican President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign to remove the Venezuelan president.

Maduro had just taken an authoritarian turn, prevailing in what the Trump administration decried as a sham re-election in 2018. Within weeks, senior DEA officials plotted to deploy at least three undercover informants to surreptitiously record top officials suspected of converting Venezuela into a narco state.

But because the plan appeared to run roughshod over Venezuelan and international law, it required the approval of what is known as the Sensitive Activity Review Committee, or SARC, a secretive panel of senior State and Justice Department officials that is reserved for the most sensitive DEA cases involving tricky ethical, legal or foreign policy considerations.

It marked an aggressive expansion of "Money Badger," which the DEA and prosecutors in Miami created in 2013 and would go on to investigate around 100 Venezuelan insiders, according to two people familiar with the operation who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss law enforcement details.

By authorizing otherwise illicit wire transfers through U.S.-based front companies and bank accounts, the DEA aimed to unmask the Colombian drug traffickers and corrupt officials leveraging Venezuela's tightly controlled foreign currency exchange system to launder ill-gotten gains. But it expanded over time, homing in on Maduro's family and top allies, although the president would end up being indicted elsewhere, by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan, on drug trafficking charges.

None of the indictments of Venezuelans either before or after the 2018 memo made any mention of U.S. spying. And "to limit or mitigate the exposure of the unilateral activities," the document advised DEA officials to protect their informants and curtail in-person meetings with targets.

It is not clear if "Money Badger" is still ongoing.

Since Democratic President Joe Biden took office in 2021, his administration has rolled back sanctions and brought few new prosecutions of Maduro insiders as the Justice Department's attention has turned to Russia, China and the Middle East. The Biden administration has also sought to lure Maduro back into negotiations with the U.S.-backed opposition, threatening to re-impose crippling oil sanctions if the OPEC nation doesn't abide by an agreement to hold fair and free elections this year.

The operation targeting Maduro's inner circle is not the first time the United States has conducted law enforcement operations overseas without notifying a host country.

In 1998, Mexico castigated the United States for keeping it in the dark about a three-year money laundering sting known as "Operation Casablanca" — partly conducted on Mexican soil — that implicated some 160 people, including several bank executives.

Notably, legal experts say no international court or tribunal has jurisdiction to hold the United States or its agents accountable for covert law enforcement actions in other countries, and the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld arrests and evidence collected on such missions.

Evan Criddle, a law professor at William & Mary in Virginia, said international law forbids undercover operations such as those described in the memo that take place in another country's territory without

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consent. He expects the release of the memo to "cause some embarrassment to the United States, prompt Venezuelan diplomats to register their objections and potentially inhibit future cooperation."

Several current and former DEA officials who examined the memo told the AP they were surprised less by the brazenness of the plan than the agency's acknowledgement of it in internal documents.

"It's very rarely done simply because there's always that potential of it blowing up in the U.S. government's face," said Mike Vigil, the DEA's former chief of international operations. "But Venezuela had already become a rogue state. I think they figured they had nothing to lose."

RELEASED BY ACCIDENT

The Operation Money Badger memo was never intended to be made public.

It was inadvertently uploaded among dozens of government exhibits to a file share website by the U.S. Attorney's Office in Manhattan during the bribery conspiracy trial late last year of two former DEA supervisors who helped spearhead the agency's offensive against the Maduro government. It would be removed hours after an AP reporter started asking about it.

A few days later, over the AP's objections, the federal judge presiding over the bribery trial took the highly unusual step of sealing the courtroom while the document was discussed, saying that doing so in open court would have "serious diplomatic repercussions." Neither he nor prosecutors explained what those might be.

Former DEA supervisors Manny Recio and John Costanzo Jr. were eventually convicted of leaking sensitive law enforcement information to Miami defense attorneys as part of a bribery conspiracy. One case they discussed was that of Saab, a Colombian-born businessman who himself would be targeted by "Money Badger" for the alleged siphoning of \$350 million from state contracts.

Recio, who later worked as a private investigator recruiting new clients for the defense attorneys, emailed the Venezuelan plans to his personal email account days before his 2018 retirement. He approved the plans as an assistant special agent in charge, while Costanzo, an expert on Venezuela, oversaw the covert sting. Both men are expected to serve federal prison time, joining a growing list of DEA agents behind bars.

"Information like this should never leave government servers," Michael Nadler, a former federal prosecutor in Miami who also helped coordinate the overseas sting, testified behind closed doors, according to a redacted transcript. "It contains information that provides identifying information regarding people who have agreed to cooperate with the United States in pretty dangerous situations."

The AP is not publishing the actual memo or identifying the informants to avoid putting them in danger. 'A SPECIAL RISK'

The memo harkens back to an earlier era of rising hostilities between the U.S. and Venezuela when ambitious federal investigators in several districts – New York, Miami, Houston and Washington – were competing to see who could penetrate deepest into Venezuela's criminal underworld.

As part of that undeclared race, the DEA Miami Field Division's Group 10 recruited a dream informant: a professional money launderer accused of fleecing \$800 million from Venezuela's foreign currency system through a fraudulent import scheme.

The informant's illicit activity in Venezuela positioned him to help the DEA collect evidence against the chief target of the unilateral operation: Jose Vielma, an early acolyte of the late Hugo Chávez who in two decades of service to the Bolivarian revolution cycled through a number of top jobs, including trade minister and the head of Venezuela's IRS.

Vielma's alleged partner in crime, according to the DEA document, was another former military officer: Luis Motta, then electricity minister. The DEA memo authorized three informants to secretly record undercover meetings with the targets.

"There is a special risk that the (confidential sources) would be in danger if their cooperation with the DEA is exposed to host country officials," the memo states. "Potential penalties include imprisonment."

Whether the risks were worth it remains an open question.

Vielma and Motta were indicted on money laundering charges tied to bribery — not drug trafficking. Both remain in Venezuela and loyal to Maduro, with Vielma serving as a senior lawmaker and Motta's wife

the governor of a major state. But like dozens of Maduro insiders wanted in the U.S., neither is likely to be brought to justice – despite a \$5 million reward for Motta’s arrest — unless they travel outside Venezuela.

Zach Margulis-Ohnuma, an attorney for retired Gen. Hugo Carvajal, a former Venezuelan spy chief awaiting trial in the U.S. on narco-terrorism charges in a separate investigation, said “the DEA’s reputation for lawlessness is well-earned.”

“A program that institutionalizes lawbreaking by authorizing DEA agents and informants to violate foreign laws,” he said, “does little to stop drugs from coming into the U.S. while undermining the integrity of the DEA and the reputation of America abroad.”

Horns blaring and engines roaring, hundreds of tractors bring farmers’ plight to an EU summit

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Convoys with hundreds of angry farmers driving heavy-duty tractors arrived at European Union headquarters, bent on getting their complaints about excessive costs, rules and bureaucracy heard and fixed by EU leaders at a summit Thursday.

After warming their limbs at burning piles of pallets overnight, the farmers mounted their vehicles and entered the Belgian capital with the rumble of engines, firecrackers and blaring horns piercing the early morning slumber in a culmination of weeks of protests around the bloc.

Even if the EU summit was supposed to be laser-focused on providing financial aid to Ukraine for its war against invading Russia, the farmers already squeezed their plight onto the 27 leaders’ agendas, said Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo.

“We also need to make sure that they can get the right price for the high quality products that they provide. We also need to make sure that the administrative burden that they have remains reasonable,” said De Croo, whose country currently holds the presidency of the EU.

Even if concrete, immediate concessions were unlikely to emerge, though not for lack of trying by the farmers.

Jean-Francois Ricker, a farmer from southern Belgium, braved the winter night close to EU headquarters and said he expected 1,000 to 1,400 vehicles. “There will be a lot of people. ... We are going to show that we do not agree and that it is enough, but our aim is not to demolish everything.”

Farmers pelted police with firecrackers, eggs, beer bottles and burning bales of hay, and security forces replied with a water cannons to douse fires and keep a farmer from felling a tree on the steps of the European Parliament.

Most of the protesters have been young farmers supporting families, who feel ever-more squeezed by higher energy prices, cheaper foreign competition that does not have to abide by strict EU rules, inflation, and climate change that either withered, flooded or burned crops.

Similar protests have been held across the EU for most of the week. Farmers blocked more traffic arteries across Belgium, France and Italy on Wednesday, as they sought to disrupt trade at major ports and other economic lifelines.

While the days of mushrooming discontent have been largely peaceful, French police arrested 91 protesters who forced their way into Europe’s biggest food market Wednesday, the Paris police chief said. Armored vehicles block entrances to the sprawling site at Rungis, south of the French capital.

Farmers coming to Brussels on Thursday have been insisting their protest will be peaceful and security forces have handled the protests lightly so far.

The protests have already had an impact: The European Commission, the EU’s executive branch, announced plans Wednesday to shield farmers from cheap exports from Ukraine during wartime and allow farmers to use some land that had been forced to lie fallow for environmental reasons.

The plans still need to be approved by the bloc’s 27 member states and European Parliament, but they amounted to a sudden and symbolic concession.

On Thursday, some leaders coming in said they would not approve a deal with South American nations

unless any imports would meet the same regulatory standards that EU farmers face, a key demand from the sector. And many promised to ease the red tape that often keeps farmers off their fields or out of their barns.

"I'd be among one of quite a number of heads of government here who understand the pressures that our farmers are under now, whether it's increased energy costs or fertilizer costs and new environmental regulations," said Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar.

"The priority for us should be implementing existing rules and regulations and not imposing new additional ones on farmers over the next couple of years," Varadkar said, adding to a chorus of soothing words from leaders showing understanding for the farmers.

In France, 79 protesters were still being held by police Thursday morning after they forced their way into Europe's biggest wholesale food market in Rungis, south of Paris, according to Creteil prosecutor.

The president of the Rural Coordination union, Véronique Le Floc'h, called on farmers to head individually to Paris — but not with their tractors — to meet with French lawmakers.

French farmers were maintaining traffic blockades Thursday on eight highways around Paris amid large police presence, as well as on other major roads across the country.

Mark Zuckerberg's long apology tour: A brief history

By DAVID HAMILTON AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — When Mark Zuckerberg turned at a Senate hearing to address the parents of children exploited, bullied or driven to self harm via social media, it felt like a time-worn convention had sprung back to life.

"I'm sorry for everything you've been through," the Meta CEO said Wednesday. "No one should go through what you and your families have suffered." Then he returned to corporate mode, noting Meta's continued investments in "industry-wide" efforts to protect children.

Zuckerberg has accumulated a long history of public apologies, often issued in the wake of crisis or when Facebook users rose up against unannounced — and frequently unappreciated — changes in its service. It's a history that stands in sharp contrast to most of his peers in technology, who generally prefer not to speak publicly outside of carefully stage-managed product presentations. But it's also true that Facebook has simply had a lot to apologize for.

Whether or not the public always buys his apologies, there's little doubt that Zuckerberg finds it important to make them himself. Here's a quick, and by no means comprehensive, compendium of some notable Zuckerberg apologies and the circumstances that brought them on.

BLINDED BY BEACON

Facebook's first big privacy blow-up entailed a service called Beacon, which the platform launched in 2007. Intended to usher in a new age of "social" advertising, Beacon tracked user purchases and activities on other sites and then published them on friends' newsfeeds without requesting permission. After a huge backlash — well, it was huge at the time — Zuckerberg wrote in a blog post partially transcribed by TechCrunch that "we've made a lot of mistakes building this feature, but we've made even more with how we've handled them." Beacon didn't last much longer.

MOCKING FACEBOOK'S EARLY USERS

In one of the earliest stories of Facebook's founding, a 19-year-old Mark Zuckerberg mocked the roughly 4,000 students who'd joined his nascent service, bragging to friends in text messages about the vast amount of personal information he'd collected thanks to the misplaced trust of his users. Zuckerberg called them "dumb" and punctuated the word with profanity. When Silicon Alley Insider, a predecessor to Business Insider, published those messages in 2010, Zuckerberg apologized during an interview for a New Yorker article, saying he "absolutely" regretted those remarks.

BURYING A FEDERAL SETTLEMENT

On Nov. 9, 2011, the Federal Trade Commission subjected Facebook to stricter privacy oversight after finding that the company arbitrarily made private information public without notice, failed to limit data

sharing with apps when users activated restrictive settings, shared personal information with advertisers after saying it wouldn't, and more.

The same day, Zuckerberg posted a 1,418 word essay grandly titled "Our Commitment to the Facebook Community" that didn't mention the FTC action until a third of the way in and described blunders like Beacon as "a bunch of mistakes."

VR TOUR OF A DISASTER ZONE

Zuckerberg's fascination with virtual reality long predated his decision to rename the company Facebook as Meta Platforms. On Oct. 9, 2017, he and a Facebook employee starred in a live VR tour of Puerto Rico in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Maria. The pair beamed themselves into prerecorded 3-D footage of the damage and recovery efforts; Zuckerberg described the you-are-there feeling as "one of the really magical things about virtual reality," especially given, as he said, that "it's a really tough place to get to now."

He later expounded on Facebook's own recovery efforts, but the dissonant video drew so many complaints that Zuckerberg posted a brief apology in the video chat, explaining that his attempt to showcase Facebook's efforts at disaster recovery weren't very clear and apologizing to anyone who was offended.

CAMBRIDGE ANALYTICA

In 2018, news broke that Facebook had allowed apps to scrape large amounts of data from user accounts and those of their friends without oversight. While hundreds of apps were involved, attention soon focused on one that captured data from 87 million Facebook users and forwarded it to a U.K. political data-mining firm called Cambridge Analytica that had ties to then-President Trump's political strategist Steve Bannon. That data was reportedly used to target voters during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign that resulted in Trump's election.

Zuckerberg first apologized for the scandal on CNN, saying that Facebook has a "responsibility" to protect its users' data, and that if it fails, "we don't deserve to have the opportunity to serve people." He gave a version of that apology later that year in testimony before Congress, saying that "we didn't take a broad enough view of our responsibility" while also failures in cracking down on fake news and hate speech, poor data privacy controls and not adequately addressing foreign interference in the 2016 elections on Facebook.

6 killings in likely cannabis dispute spotlight violence and risk in California's illegal pot market

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The slayings of six men last week at a remote desert crossroads that authorities believe stemmed from a soured illegal cannabis deal spotlighted a longstanding problem in California: a thriving underground marijuana market despite years of legal sales that were expected to stamp it out.

The killings provided a tragic reminder of the violence that can come with illicit cannabis activity, including unlicensed growing operations, brash robberies from legal businesses and furtive illegal shipments to out-of-state vendors.

"The violence is getting worse. The stakes are getting higher," said dispensary owner Jerred Kiloh, who also heads the United Cannabis Business Association, a Los Angeles-based trade group. He said many of the organization's members have seen their dispensaries robbed one or more times, sometimes by the same thieves.

"We keep talking about what we know the problem is," Kiloh said, "but we are not doing anything about it."

Authorities found the bodies Jan. 23 in the Mojave Desert outside the sparsely populated community of El Mirage. Five suspects were arrested, and each face multiple charges, including six felony counts of murder. Two pleaded not guilty, and the remaining three were still scheduled to be arraigned. They were held without bail.

The area the bodies were found in, about 50 miles (80 km) northeast of Los Angeles, is known for illicit cannabis operations.

"This is a problem that is not really being talked about," San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus lamented, calling on legislators to reform cannabis laws to "keep legalization but revert to harsher penal-

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ties for users of illegal pot.”

The killings occurred at a time when California’s heavily regulated legal cannabis industry continues to struggle while underground businesses sometimes operate in plain sight.

California has long been the nation’s largest cannabis producer, prized for its fragrant, powerful buds. Voters in 2016 approved Proposition 64 to legitimize and tax the multibillion-dollar industry, and the law stated boldly that the broad legal sales would “incapacitate the black market.” Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, who was lieutenant governor at the time, called the law a “game changer.”

Legal adult-use sales faced challenges from the start. The state’s illegal market had flourished for decades, anchored in the storied “Emerald Triangle” region in the northern end of the state. Not since the end of Prohibition in 1933 had an attempt been made to reshape such a vast illegal economy into a legal one.

Most consumers have continued to purchase pot in the illegal marketplace, where they avoid taxes that can approach 50% in some communities. Many California cities did not establish legal marijuana markets or banned commercial marijuana activity. Law enforcement, meanwhile, has been unable to keep up with the spread of illicit sales and growing.

Proposition 64 reduced potential criminal penalties for growing and selling cannabis from felonies to misdemeanors, punishable by up to a \$500 fine and six months in jail. There are no active proposals in the Legislature this year to increase criminal penalties.

Dicus said in 2023 his department served 411 search warrants for illegal marijuana grow sites county-wide and recovered \$370 million. Deputies found 655,000 plants and 74,000 pounds (33,565 kilograms) of processed marijuana and 14 labs producing honey oil, a potent cannabis concentrate. Eleven search warrants were served directly in the desert area where the slayings occurred, he said.

“The reality is that Proposition 64, in the fine print, took illicit marijuana and moved it from a felony to a misdemeanor. And the reality of this is by allowing that we’ve unleashed a plague in California,” Dicus said at a news conference Monday.

Cannabis attorney Griffen Thorne noted that in 2023, state investigators served 24 search warrants against illegal operations between October and December and 188 for the year, far too little to disrupt a vast underground market that dwarfs the legal one.

He said violence is a predictable consequence of illegal activity and “that kind of thing is going to continue to happen so long as the state allows the illegal market to fester out of control.”

A legislative proposal that just passed the state Senate aims to expand the state and local agencies’ power to seize property and equipment associated with illegal grows.

The desert killings weren’t the first from cannabis disputes. In 2020, seven people were fatally shot at an illegal marijuana growing operation in a rural town in neighboring Riverside County. More than 20 people lived on the property, which had several makeshift dwellings used to manufacture honey oil.

While marijuana remains a controlled substance under federal law, 38 states have legalized medicinal marijuana and 24 have legalized broad, adult-use sales.

Kiloh and other industry experts predict the problems will get worse as legitimate operators unable to make money pull out of the industry. Leading cannabis companies have previously warned that the state’s legal industry could collapse without tax cuts and an expansion of retail sales.

“It’s tragic, and I think it’s a direct reflection of what this industry and this government have done,” Kiloh said. “We’ve invited organized crime to come back into California and compete for an illicit market.”

Why European Union officials are taking angry farmers so seriously before Thursday’s summit

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

HALLE, Belgium (AP) — The writing of angry farmers was on the Paris-to-Brussels highway in giant yellow letters visible from up high: “Ursula, We are here!”

It was chalked onto the road with an equal measure of defiance and desperation, warning European Commission Ursula von der Leyen not to ignore farmers’ concerns for better prices and less bureaucracy.

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The European Union is holding a summit on Thursday — and von der Leyen or any other EU leader in attendance can only disregard the plight of farming at their peril.

Here's why European farmers are taking their anger to the streets:

THE HISTORY

World War II had spread hunger on a bountiful continent. When the war ended, Western European leaders knew that the way to people's hearts was through their stomachs. So farming became a profession that stood at the cradle of what is now the EU.

Agriculture was promoted and heavily subsidized to eradicate any thought of famine.

Because of it, many family farmers escaped poverty. Some major land owners turned into global food giants.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

Today's harvest for small and family farmers doesn't look like anything which was sown then, with all too many facing financial plight or worse.

Instead of a benefactor, the EU is now seen as the enemy for many, aloof in an ivory tower imposing bureaucratic rules on small-time farmers, while leaders are seen happily relaxing import restrictions for global farming powerhouses or the likes of wartime Ukraine.

"Ursula has the audacity to go to Kyiv, but she doesn't have the courage to come and see us," complained farmer Jean-Francois Deflandre from beside the chalked highway message in Halle, close to Brussels.

WHY ANGER IS SPREADING?

The same anti-EU message can be seen from Lithuania and Belgium to France, Spain and Italy.

At a motorway exit near Rome, farmer Paolo Pepponi was part of a crowd that blocked the road.

"It's not the Europe of the people, it's not the Europe of those who work," Pepponi said. "It's the multinational corporations that rule Europe. That's why we are all in the middle of the road."

The vision of EU farming from early on was economy of scale — bigger farms, bigger holdings, setting standard rules across borders. And as long as subsidies were aplenty, complaints were contained. Instead of hunger, there was waste with "butter mountains" and "wine lakes" created, because farm produce was paid for regardless of customer demand.

But there quickly was an undercurrent of unease between farmers who lived by the fickleness of seasons and climate, and EU officials who had rulers and calculators at the ready.

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Every revision of the EU's so-called Common Agricultural Policy stirred grumblings as small farmers felt ever more alienated from new policies, but were forced to adapt if they wanted to survive.

In 1971, 100,000 farmers converged on EU headquarters in Brussels, and during a violent protest, one person died and dozens were injured.

Then pollution, much from industry but some from farming itself, also started to play tricks on them over the past few decades. Because of farming, nitrates were seeping into the earth and cattle pumped methane into the skies. Again more rules, involving more costs, were imposed on farmers and widened the gap further between the pastures and political offices.

TECHNOCRATS AND GLOBALIZATION

Benoit Laqueue, a farmer from Sedan in northern France, pointed towards the EU offices during a protest last week and railed "The technocrats are the problem and they listen too much to the ecologists." Instead, he said, "It is us who have the farming common sense."

As if there weren't enough problems from within, increasing globalization opened doors to ever more, and cheaper, imports from places like New Zealand and Chile. People feel they have to farm with their hands tied behind their back. When they are faced with all kinds of stringent, expensive rules, importers don't necessarily have to abide by those same regulations and make it much easier to undercut prices.

"They can flood our markets with products that are really not of the same quality," said Nicolas Abbeloos, a farmer from southern Belgium. "We are forced to sell our products at a very low price."

WHY NOW?

Over the past two years, problems reached a critical mass for farmers.

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Unprecedented droughts, fires and floods blamed on climate change lay waste to crops. The COVID-19 pandemic hit the economy. Russia's war in Ukraine sent energy prices sky high. There was runaway inflation, with farm produce often failing to keep pace.

"European farmers have found themselves under increasing pressure from many sides," European Commission Vice President Maroš Šefčovič said. He said in southern Spain that some water reservoirs stood at only 4% capacity. Wildfires wiped out about 20% of Greek annual farm revenue.

In hard cash, Šefčovič said that the value of cereal production dropped by 30 % last year — from 80 billion euros to less than 60 billion euros. "So you have to reflect on the fact that incomes for the farmers are getting lower," he said.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

One thing is working in favor of the farmers. The EU has parliamentary elections across the bloc in June, so this is a golden opportunity.

The continent is struggling with threats to democracy, and the EU in particular with inroads of the far right into the political mainstream. Hard-right politicians are seen at many farm protests, and the generations-old link between farmers and the conservative traditional parties are under strain.

So things are moving. On Wednesday, the European Commission made two key proposals — one to shield EU farmers from cheap Ukrainian imports and one to sidestep an environmental measure. On Tuesday, France came with promises of help, from emergency cash aid to controls on imported food. President Emmanuel Macron has promised to stop a trade deal with South American nations if it hurts farmers too much.

Compared to the violent clashes of 1971, these protests are handled with kid gloves. In Belgium, authorities even let a fries stand set up shop on a main highway that farmers had blocked to keep them well fed.

Out of options, Rohingya are fleeing Myanmar and Bangladesh by boat despite soaring death toll

By KRISTEN GELINEAU Associated Press

SYDNEY (AP) — Across a treacherous stretch of water, the Rohingya came by the thousands, then died by the hundreds. And though they know the dangers of fleeing by boat, many among this persecuted people say they will not stop — because the world has left them with no other choice.

Last year, nearly 4,500 Rohingya — two-thirds of them women and children — fled their homeland of Myanmar and the refugee camps in neighboring Bangladesh by boat, the United Nations' refugee agency reported. Of those, 569 died or went missing while crossing the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, the highest death toll since 2014.

The numbers mean one out of every eight Rohingya who attempted the crossing never made it, the UNHCR said last week.

Yet despite the risks, there are no signs the stream of Rohingya is ebbing. On Thursday, Indonesian officials said another boat carrying Rohingya refugees landed in the country's northern province of Aceh.

Fishermen provided food and water to 131 Rohingya, mostly women and children, who had been on board, said Marzuki, the leader of the local tribal fishing community, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

Some passengers told officials they had been at sea since last month and their boat's engine had broken down, leaving them adrift, said Lt. Col. Andi Susanto, commander of the navy base in Lhokseumawe.

"Southeast Asian waters are one of the deadliest stretches in the world and a graveyard for many Rohingya who have lost their lives," says Babar Baloch, UNHCR's spokesman for Asia and the Pacific. "The rate of Rohingya who are dying at sea without being rescued — that's really alarming and worrying."

Inside the squalid refugee camps in Bangladesh, where more than 750,000 ethnic Rohingya Muslims fled in 2017 following sweeping attacks by Myanmar's military, the situation has grown increasingly desperate. Not even the threat of death at sea is enough to stop many from trying to traverse the region's waters in

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a bid to reach Indonesia or Malaysia.

"We need to choose the risky journey by boat because the international community has failed their responsibility," says Mohammed Ayub, who is saving up money for a spot on one of the rickety wooden fishing boats traffickers use to ferry passengers 1,800 kilometers (1,100 miles) from Bangladesh to Indonesia.

Global indifference toward the Rohingya crisis has left those languishing in the overcrowded camps with few alternatives to fleeing. Because Bangladesh bans the Rohingya from working, their survival is dependent upon food rations, which were slashed last year due to a drop in global donations.

Returning safely to Myanmar is virtually impossible for the Rohingya, because the military that attacked them overthrew Myanmar's democratically elected government in 2021. And no country is offering the Rohingya any large-scale resettlement opportunities.

Meanwhile, a surge in killings, kidnappings and arson attacks by militant groups in the camps has left residents fearing for their lives. And so, starving, scared and out of options, they continue to board the boats.

Ayub has lived in a sweltering, cramped shelter for more than six years in a camp where security and sanitation are scarce, and hope even scarcer. There is no formal schooling for his children, no way for him to earn money, no prospects for returning to his homeland and no refuge for his family amid spiraling gang violence.

"Of course I understand how dangerous the boat journey by sea is," Ayub says. "We could die during the journey by boat. But it depends on our fate. ... It's better to choose the dangerous way even if it's risky, because we are afraid to stay in the camps."

Two hundred of the people who died or went missing at sea last year were aboard one boat that left Bangladesh in November. Eyewitnesses on a nearby boat told The Associated Press that the missing vessel, which was crowded with babies, children and mothers, broke down and was taking on water before it drifted off during a storm as its passengers screamed for help. It has not been seen since.

It was one of several distressed boats that the region's coastal countries neglected to save, despite the UNHCR's requests for those countries to launch search and rescue missions.

"When no action is taken, lives are lost," says UNHCR's Baloch. "If there is no hope restored in Rohingya lives either in Myanmar or in Bangladesh, there are no rescue attempts, (then) sadly we could see more desperate people dying in Southeast Asian seas under the watch of coastal authorities who could act to save lives."

Six of Mohammed Taher's family members were aboard the boat that vanished in November, including his 15-year-old brother, Mohammed Amin, and two of Taher's nephews, aged 3 and 4. Their ultimate destination was Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country where many Rohingya seek relative safety.

Taher and his parents now struggle to sleep or eat, and spend their days agonizing over what became of their loved ones. Taher's mother saw a fortune teller who said her relatives were still alive. Taher, meanwhile, dreamed that the boat made it to shore, where his relatives took refuge in a school and were able to bathe in warm water. But he remains unconvinced their journey ended so happily.

And so he has vowed to tell everyone to stay off the boats, no matter how unbearable life on land has become.

"I will never leave by boat on this difficult journey," Taher says. "All the people who reached their destination are saying that it's horrific traveling by boat."

Yet such warnings are often futile. Ayub is now preparing to sell his daughter's jewelry to help pay for his spot on a boat. While he is frightened by the stories of those who didn't make it, he is motivated by the stories of those who did.

"Nobody would consider taking a risk by boat on a dangerous journey if they had better opportunities," he says. "Fortunately, some people did reach their destination and got a better life. I am staying positive that Allah will save us."

Maine commission to hear from family members of mass shooting victims

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) — An independent commission investigating events leading up to the deadliest mass shooting in Maine history is ready to hear the heart-wrenching stories from some of the family members of victims on Thursday.

Seven family members were expected to publicly address the panel, putting a human face on their sorrow and suffering.

The shootings happened Oct. 25 when an Army reservist opened fire with an assault rifle at a bowling alley and at a bar that was hosting a cornhole tournament in Lewiston. Eighteen people were killed and 13 injured.

The speakers were expected to include survivors Kathleen Walker and Stacy Cyr, who lost their partners, childhood friends Jason Walker and Michael Deslauriers, who charged at the gunman; Elizabeth Seal, who is caring for four children after the death of her husband, Joshua; and Megan Vozzella, whose husband, Steve, died two weeks shy of their one-year anniversary.

The commission was established by Democratic Gov. Janet Mills and state Attorney General Aaron Frey to review events leading up to the tragedy to establish the facts that can inform policies and procedures to avoid future tragedies.

The gunman, Robert Card, 40, was experiencing a mental health breakdown before the shooting, and police were aware of his deteriorating mental health.

His son and ex-wife told police in May that Card was becoming paranoid and hearing voices, and a fellow reservist explicitly warned in September that he was going to commit a mass killing. In between, Card was hospitalized for two weeks for erratic behavior while his Maine-based Army Reserve unit was training in West Point, New York.

More than a month before the shootings, police went to Card's home for a face-to-face assessment required under the state's yellow flag law, which allows a judge to order the removal of guns from someone who is experiencing a psychiatric emergency. But Card refused to answer the door, and police said they couldn't legally force the issue.

Tens of thousands of residents in Lewiston and neighboring communities were under a lockdown order after the shootings. Card's body was found two days later. The medical examiner ruled that he died by suicide.

The governor isn't waiting for the commission to wrap up its work to begin making policy changes to prevent such tragedies in the future.

This week she proposed allowing police to petition a judge to start the process of removing weapons from someone in a psychiatric crisis — skipping the face-to-face meeting — along with boosting background checks for private gun sales and bolstering mental crisis care.

The commission is chaired by Daniel Wathen, former chief justice of the Maine Supreme Judicial Court. Other members include former U.S. Attorney Paula Silsby and Debra Baeder, the former chief forensic psychologist for the state.

Inside Donald Trump's curious relationship with Fox News — and what it means for other candidates

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — At this moment in the 2024 election cycle, complaining about Fox News — even if for different reasons — may be what unites Donald Trump, Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis the most.

At conservative America's favorite news source, the Republican nomination process is essentially over and has been for awhile, leaving DeSantis and Haley annoyed at perceived favoritism to Trump. Hardly grateful, the former president regularly tears into Fox for what he sees as disloyalty, even ripping his

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former White House press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, now a Fox contributor.

The discontent illustrates the ongoing importance of Fox News as an agenda-setter that frequently drives, and not simply reflects, Republican politics. No one can get to the top of the GOP's hill without it.

It's also a testament to Fox's power and influence, said Brian Stelter, media critic and author of two books about Fox News.

In a "Fox & Friends" appearance, Haley suggested her questioners seemed eager to "coronate" Trump. Shortly before DeSantis ended his own campaign, he said that conservative media outlets like Fox are afraid to challenge the ex-president for fear of losing their audience.

The past few months were a hard fall for DeSantis, once the beneficiary of so much attention that the Florida governor signed bills for the network's cameras. He's made 47 appearances on Fox since last September. Haley had 45 appearances in that time, and Trump six.

"I think they were ready to move on from Trump, but the base of the party was not," said Erick Erickson, whose conservative talk show airs on 45 stations across the country. "At the end of the day, these are their viewers and they don't want to alienate them."

LONGTIME COMPLAINTS FROM DESANTIS

The DeSantis campaign was upset about Fox's town hall with Trump before the Iowa caucuses, when anchors Bret Baier and Martha MacCallum received criticism for treating their subject gently.

Trump had demanded — and received — a 9 p.m. Eastern time slot on Fox for a Jan. 10 town hall to blunt the impact of DeSantis and Haley, appearing in their only one-on-one debate the same time on CNN. Fox held separate pre-Iowa town halls for DeSantis and Haley, but at 6 p.m. before prime time.

The DeSantis team felt Trump received little pushback from Fox when he decided to skip debates. They were angry that surrogates for the former president showed up at post-debate "spin rooms" even with the candidate absent, said a person close to the campaign who spoke candidly on condition of anonymity.

Frustration boiled over when DeSantis' campaign manager, James Uthmeier, felt that a Fox graphic didn't show the extent of the candidate's appearances in Iowa. "Fox has turned into full-blown Trump TV," Uthmeier wrote on X, formerly Twitter.

Fox did not make an executive available for an interview for this story. But a representative said that Trump surrogates were on scene post-debate because they had been booked for appearances by other networks. The 6 p.m. town halls weren't as much a disadvantage as it seemed, since they followed "The Five," Fox's most-watched show.

On Jan. 16, the day after the Iowa caucus, Fox's Laura Ingraham urged both DeSantis and Haley to clear the field for Trump.

"If she drops out today, if she came to terms with the fact that the GOP is a populist party, if she started vigorously campaigning for Trump, she could perhaps rebuild some of the trust that she's lost with the GOP base," Ingraham said.

During her testy "Fox & Friends" appearance on the morning of the New Hampshire primary, Haley rebuffed host Brian Kilmeade when he asked what would constitute a strong showing for her that day. Asked by Ainsley Earhardt if she would withdraw if she lost New Hampshire, Haley said she would not. Kilmeade later repeated the same question.

"I don't care how much y'all want to coronate Donald Trump," Haley said. "At the end of the day, that's not what America wants. America wants a choice."

Kilmeade told her, "I really wonder why you think we're the enemy."

One possibility: she had watched Trump give Kilmeade a tour of his plane earlier in New Hampshire. "You look like you're in fightin' shape," Kilmeade said as he greeted the former president. "How much weight did you lose?"

"I get their annoyance," Erickson said. "They've got a right to be annoyed by it, (with Fox) essentially pushing them to bow to a reality that they were not prepared to acknowledge."

A Fox spokeswoman noted that, in response to Kilmeade's "enemy" comment, Haley said "because I've looked at the media," implying a broader criticism. She and DeSantis aren't staying away, though; both accepted invitations to appear on Fox after making their criticisms.

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During an interview with New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu, a Haley surrogate, Fox's Harris Faulkner pushed back when Sununu questioned whether Trump's age had affected his cognitive abilities — a frequent Fox topic when President Joe Biden is the subject.

"The guy is nearly 80 years old," Sununu said.

"He's 77," Faulkner replied.

"Yes, that's nearly 80," Sununu said. "We'll do the math later."

Faulkner admonished Sununu for calling Trump a coward for not debating. "No name calling," she said. "We don't do name calling."

NEW ELECTION, SAME FOX MANAGEMENT

This is the first presidential campaign since the Dominion Voting Systems lawsuit against the network for spreading lies in its post-2020 election coverage, which Fox settled for \$787 million last year. Reams of internal documents released as part of that case showed how Fox executives and personalities greatly feared losing Trump fans in their audience by telling them things they didn't want to hear.

The same management is in place now.

Last week, a half hour after a New York jury ordered Trump to pay writer E. Jean Carroll \$83.3 million for defaming her, Fox's "The Five" didn't mention the news. The same hour, MSNBC talked of nothing else. The New York Times put the verdict on its front page Saturday, although not as the lead story.

Meanwhile, Trump has maintained a steady stream of invective about Fox on his Truth Social website.

His attack on his former press secretary came after she noted on Fox that Biden had a fairly good night in New Hampshire and that Trump should turn his attention to the general election. "I don't need any advice from RINO Kayleigh McEnany on Fox," Trump wrote on Truth Social, referencing the conservative slur Republican in Name Only. "Just had a GIANT victory ... and she's telling me what I could do better."

Trump frequently targets "Fox & Friends" host Steve Doocy for the host's occasional fact checks. "Whatever happened to this guy???" Trump wrote.

"Hard to believe how one-sided Fox is," Trump wrote in one post. "What a difference from past ... No wonder the Republican base no longer cares about them."

Fox had no comment on Trump's posts.

"The key for Fox is, are they going to silence the voices that have raised some concerns and skepticism, which they haven't done so far, and credit to them for doing that," Erickson said. "Trump is trying to bully and cajole and get people to fall in line so they don't utter anything critical."

Republican lawsuits challenge mail ballot deadlines. Could they upend voting across the country?

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO, EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS and JACK DURA Associated Press

Republicans are challenging extended mail ballot deadlines in at least two states in a legal maneuver that could have widespread implications for mail voting ahead of this year's presidential election.

A lawsuit filed last week in Mississippi follows a similar one last year in North Dakota, both brought in heavily Republican states before conservative federal courts. Democratic and voting rights groups are concerned about the potential impact beyond those two states if a judge rules that deadlines for receiving mailed ballots that stretch past Election Day violate federal law.

They say it's possible such a decision would lead to a nationwide injunction similar to one last year when a Texas judge temporarily paused the FDA's approval of the abortion pill mifepristone.

"This effort risks disenfranchising Mississippi voters, but we don't want that to also be precedent for other states," Abhi Rahman, communications director of the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, said in response to the most recent lawsuit.

Mississippi and North Dakota are among 19 states that accept late-arriving mailed ballots as long as they are postmarked on or before Election Day, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. That includes political swing states such as Nevada and North Carolina. Some, including Colorado, Oregon and Utah, rely heavily on mail voting.

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Former President Donald Trump has long railed against the use of mail voting, in particular when many states expanded its use during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when he lost his reelection bid to Democrat Joe Biden. He has falsely claimed that changing vote tallies after Election Day are an indication of widespread fraud. And in the wake of his loss, several Republican-controlled states moved to tighten rules around mail voting.

The Republican National Committee, the Mississippi Republican Party, a member of the state Republican Executive Committee and an election commissioner in one county filed a federal lawsuit on Friday against Secretary of State Michael Watson and six local election officials.

The suit challenges a Mississippi law that says absentee ballots in presidential elections will be counted if they are postmarked by Election Day and received within five days. It argues that Mississippi improperly extends the federal election beyond the election date set by Congress and that, as a result, "timely, valid ballots are diluted by untimely, invalid ballots."

"Federal law is very clear – Election Day is the Tuesday after the first Monday in November," RNC Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel said in a statement announcing the lawsuit. "However, some states accept and count ballots days and days after Election Day, and we believe that practice is wrong."

RNC spokesperson Gates McGavick said the group hopes to obtain a judicial precedent before November's presidential election that state deadlines allowing ballots to be received after Election Day violate federal law.

"This case could have major ramifications in future elections — not just in Mississippi but across the country," he said.

Democratic state Rep. Bryant Clark called the Mississippi lawsuit "another effort to try to stifle votes and stop the votes of a certain segment of the population." He said the suit may also lead to similar efforts across the country.

Thessalia Merivaki, a political science professor at Mississippi State University, said the state's mail voting process is already difficult to navigate and that eliminating the five-day window would "unfairly punish" voters.

In North Dakota, a similar federal lawsuit against the state election director was filed by the conservative Public Interest Legal Foundation on behalf of a county auditor, Mark Splonskowski, who cited what he said is a conflict between state and federal law. A court is expected to decide soon whether he has standing to bring the lawsuit.

Foundation spokesperson Lauren Bowman said while the lawsuit deals with North Dakota's law, a ruling that finds extended ballot deadlines violate federal law would affect other states with similar policies.

State Election Director Erika White has asked the case to be dismissed. Her attorneys characterized the county auditor's lawsuit as "a bid to overthrow longstanding North Dakota law and rewrite it according to his own preference." Attorneys with the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division filed a statement of interest in the case defending the existing state law, saying it was consistent with federal law and ensures that military and overseas ballots would be counted.

North Dakota Republican Secretary of State Michael Howe declined to comment, citing the pending litigation.

Republican state Sen. Kristin Roers said the lawsuit could have unintended consequences, such as for military voters, and would effectively penalize voters who live in areas with slow postal service.

"I don't see that this is something that is a huge, glaring issue in our election system," she said.

Richard L. Hasen, a University of California, Los Angeles law professor and election law expert, criticized the legal basis of the lawsuits. In the Mississippi case, he said the RNC appears to be trying to gain a political advantage because it "believes late-arriving mail ballots are more likely to favor Democrats."

He noted that the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which includes Mississippi, has historically been quite conservative "and not protective of voting rights."

"It would be a far reach for a challenge to Mississippi law to lead to a national injunction against this," he said. "But it's possible."

A Turkish family is still afraid to go home one year after deadly earthquake

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANTAKYA, Turkey (AP) — A year after a powerful earthquake in southern Turkey reduced hundreds of thousands of homes to rubble, Fatma Kirici lives in a tent with her husband and two grown children, afraid to return to the multistory house they fled that somehow still stands.

"Our house is at the edge of a precipice," said Kirici, 50, whose 20-year-old daughter and son-in-law died in the quake when their house collapsed. "I don't want to put my other kids at risk."

As Turkey marks the first anniversary of the 7.8-magnitude quake that struck last Feb. 6, people living in the hardest-hit regions are grieving deceased family and friends, struggling to rebuild livelihoods and grasping for closure in cases where loved ones are still missing. Unemployment is rampant and roughly a quarter of families in the affected region rely on charity, according to the Red Cross.

A massive rebuilding effort is underway in areas devastated by the quake, which killed more than 50,000 in Turkey and at least 6,000 in northern Syria. The Turkish government is rushing to build more than 300,000 homes for displaced families, most of whom are living in temporary homes made from shipping containers.

Because Kirici's house was only "slightly damaged," according to the government, the family does not qualify for either the subsidized housing under construction or a container home.

So they are spending another winter exposed to the elements: Cold rain regularly soaks the ground under their tent and the mattresses where they sleep, and every so often an aftershock rattles southern Turkey and the family's nerves.

"As a family, our psychology has completely deteriorated," said Kirici, whose tent is pitched by the side of a road, along with a half dozen other families struggling with similar circumstances. Kirici is not sure how long the family will live in a tent, but she remains hopeful that the government will come to their aid.

To compensate for the death of Kirici's daughter, the government gave her 100,000 Turkish lira (\$3,307), which her son used to purchase a container home for his wife and three young children.

Kirici's lingering fears about going home are not unreasonable. In the immediate aftermath of the quake, experts said the high level of death and destruction was at least partly due to lax enforcement of building codes in a country that sits atop two major geological fault lines.

Those same experts warn that, in the haste to rebuild without first updating building codes, the government may repeat the mistakes of the past and leave people vulnerable to the next major natural disaster.

"We have warned that the codes need to be changed, but they believe that will take time, so they are building the homes after improving the ground a little and taking some other precautions," said Mustafa Ozcelik, who is head of a trade group for engineers and architects in Hatay province, where Antakya is located.

In October, his group criticized an alleged effort by the government to hasten the return of families like the Kiricis to buildings designated as undamaged or slightly damaged, arguing that many of them weren't safe to live in.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has pledged to deliver some 319,000 new homes by next month, ahead of key local elections in March. His promise to rebuild quickly helped him get reelected last May despite widespread anger at the government's initial slow response to the earthquake.

Government officials say the new homes being built are designed to withstand strong earthquakes.

"The sites are selected with great sensitivity and meticulousness," said Osman Alan, a civil engineer at the government agency leading the construction of new homes in Gulderen, a town 15 kilometers (9.5 miles) north of Antakya. He said homes built by his agency before last year's quake are still standing, without significant damage.

"All of the citizens were able to vacate the homes without even a nosebleed," he said.

Some who survived the quake and have a place to live nevertheless remain traumatized by uncertainty. Sevda Kose, 22, is among the estimated dozens of people still searching for a trace of family members

who never emerged from the rubble. Her brother, sister-in-law and baby nephew lived on the seventh floor of an eight-story apartment building that was engulfed in flames as it came crashing down.

Most of the building's 100 residents died, while 25 – including her relatives – are listed as missing.

Kose's family has searched morgues, cemeteries, and hospitals in several provinces. They submitted DNA samples, but none have yielded a match with unidentified victims.

She hasn't lost hope of finding them alive. "We are thinking about every possibility."

Roads leading to Antakya, the city once known as Antioch, are lined with rows and rows of container homes – just one of the many so-called container cities housing an estimated 430,000 people across 11 hard-hit provinces, according to the Red Cross.

The city center is Antakya is almost deserted. An old parliament building, an Orthodox church and churches and mosques await reconstruction. Many of the collapsed or seriously damaged buildings have been torn down, although some abandoned buildings with cracked or collapsed walls remain. Very few buildings stand unscathed.

A few businesses have reopened but they are struggling.

Orhan Ozturk reopened his small gold shop two weeks ago after the rubble out front was cleared, yet he hasn't had many customers.

"We have thought about (leaving) but where would we go? This is our homeland," he said.

The Red Cross says hundreds of thousands of people in the quake zone who lost their source of income are still relying on support. "The road to rebuilding and recovery is long, requiring sustained international support," said Jesse Thomson, who leads the relief agency in Turkey.

Cevdet Donmez, 30, was lucky enough to get a container home from the government, but his job as a window installer is gone. To support his mother, wife and three children, Donmez got a job removing furniture from damaged buildings earmarked for demolition.

"We are in a bad situation," he said. "We lost everything suddenly. How will we be able to recover? How can we provide a good future for the children? I don't know."

Emre Ceylan lost nine family members in the quake, and his barbershop was destroyed. He recently purchased a container and transformed it into a barbershop, which he's eager to open as soon as he can get electricity installed.

"We didn't realize how good our lives were," he said, "until the earthquake took everything away from us."

Fears grow that dam across Mekong River in Laos could harm World Heritage site of Luang Prabang

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

LUANG PRABANG, Laos (AP) — Landlocked Laos doesn't have the famous beaches of its neighbors to attract tourists, but instead relies on the pristine beauty of its mountains and rivers and historical sites to bring in visitors.

The crown jewel is Luang Prabang, a UNESCO World Heritage Site where legend has it that Buddha once rested during his travels. It brings all the elements together, with its mix of historic Laotian and French colonial architecture on a peninsula at the confluence of the Mekong and the Nam Khan rivers.

But a multibillion-dollar dam project underway 25 kilometers (15 miles) upstream has prompted concerns that it could result in the city losing its UNESCO status, and broader questions about what the government's ambitious plans to build multiple dams across the Mekong will do to the river, the lifeblood of Southeast Asia.

"When the Luang Prabang Dam is complete, and it's already well under construction, the river is going to trickle into a dead body of water," said Brian Eyler, director of the Washington-based Stimson Center's Southeast Asia Program and its Energy, Water and Sustainability Program.

"The people going to Luang Prabang as tourists to see the mighty Mekong and see how the Lao people interact with the river, all those interactions are going to be gone — all the fishing, meaningful local boating and commerce done by locals on relatively small boats will end."

The dam is also being built near an active fault line, and though studies of the design conclude it could

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withstand an earthquake, local residents are worried.

For Som Phone, a 38-year-old tour boat operator and lifelong Luang Prabang resident, memories of the 2018 collapse of another dam in Laos that killed dozens and displaced thousands, blamed on shoddy construction, are still fresh.

"Many people died," he said.

Luang Prabang is not yet on UNESCO's list of endangered World Heritage sites, but the Paris-based agency has outlined a series of concerns, including the protection of historic buildings and the effect of the dam project on protected wetlands and the city's riverbanks, and is awaiting a report back from Laos.

"Previous studies carried out by the authorities have not yet established whether or not the project could have a negative impact," UNESCO said in an emailed response to questions from The Associated Press.

The issue is to be discussed by UNESCO in July during its meetings in New Delhi, but in the meantime, the construction continues.

The site is a hive of activity, with backhoes tearing shovelfuls of deep red soil from the hills along the river, which are then dumped along with loads of stone into the Mekong to form a foundation.

The dam site is within view of the Pak Ou caves, home to hundreds of Buddha statues and a popular side trip for tourists visiting Luang Prabang.

Once completed, the project is expected to displace more than 500 families and impact 20 villages.

Luang Prabang's World Heritage Office referred queries on the status of its response to UNESCO to the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, which referred questions to the Foreign Ministry.

The Foreign Ministry refused to comment on the telephone and did not respond to the emailed questions it requested.

Nestled among the mountains of northern Laos, Luang Prabang was the capital from the 14th to the 16th century before it was moved to Vientiane.

Its historic center has numerous Buddhist temples, a former royal palace, buildings from the French colonial era and a mountaintop shrine built around what is said to be Buddha's footprint. Several picturesque waterfalls are within a short drive from the city.

A bustling night market boasts stalls selling traditional Lao handicrafts, locally made whisky, as well as trinkets made from fragments of some of the millions of American bombs dropped on the country during the Vietnam conflict in a campaign to try to disrupt communist supply lines. At a vibrant morning market, vendors sell brightly colored peppers, spices, fish and more exotic foods.

Many visitors arrive on small river cruise boats, or by train on a new high-speed rail system, built with funding from China as part of its Belt and Road project, which connects Vientiane with the Chinese city of Kunming.

It was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995 for its "unique, remarkably well-preserved townscape" combined with its "natural spaces located in the heart of the city and along the riverbanks and wetlands."

The Luang Prabang dam is one of nine that Laos plans across the Mekong. Two others already exist, and Laos has also constructed dozens of dams on Mekong tributaries, moving at a rapid pace over about the last 12 years as part of an ambitious government plan to make the country the "battery of Southeast Asia" by supplying its neighbors with electricity.

Laos has relied heavily on foreign funding, primarily from China and Thailand, for the construction, part of the reason it now owes a crippling debt to China that it is struggling to repay.

"When we think about the Laos' 'battery of Southeast Asia,' program, that was really Laos flinging its doors wide open to foreign investors to come in and build dams," said Eyster, who also co-leads the Stimson Center's Mekong Dam Monitor program.

Approval of dam projects moves quickly, often without thorough consideration of their impact, and the electricity is largely exported to Laos' neighbors like Thailand, he added.

"This dam won't generate a lot of power for Laos, it's going to power new shopping malls in Bangkok," Eyster said of the Luang Prabang project. "So there's a mismatch of those who are negatively affected and those who are beneficiaries."

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The first mainstream dam was the Xayaburi dam, just downstream from Luang Prabang, which began operating in 2019 and has already affected the city, said Philip Hirsch, a professor emeritus of human geography at Sydney University.

"It's already become a lakeside town rather than a riverside town ... due to the effects of the Xayaburi dam downstream," he said.

Plans are to allow a constant flow of water through the new Luang Prabang dam, as a so-called run-of-the-river dam, but the waters will be further starved of sediment, affecting traditional fishing and farming of the banks.

In a report commissioned by Laotian authorities, British consultancy CBA concluded that "key issues relating to catastrophic flooding due to dam failure and changes to water levels on the Mekong have been addressed," but seismologists and others remain concerned about it being built near an active fault line.

"When you have a reservoir 78 kilometers long and you've raised the water level about 40 meters, you'd just have a wall of water and given how low-lying some of the parts of Luang Prabang are along the river, it'd be devastating," Hirsch said.

The Mekong River Commission, an organization formed for cooperation on issues regarding the river by the countries through which it flows — Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam — said its technical review of the project showed ground movement in recent earthquakes was "significantly below the design limit" of the dam.

In a written response to questions from the AP, it noted that Laos' government has established an independent panel to monitor the issue of dam safety.

The Mekong River supports the largest inland fishery in the world, and the river commission also examined the dam's potential impact on hydrology, sediment, water quality, fish and other issues.

It concluded that the dam, when taken into consideration with others already built or planned by Laos, could cause harm downstream in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, confirming concerns those countries have voiced.

"In isolation, the potential transboundary harmful effects due to the Luang Prabang hydropower project may not be substantial," the river commission said. "But on top of the other existing and planned development it may have considerable impact on the other riparian states."

For tourist Barbara Curti who came to Luang Prabang to see "the real people, the real life" of Laos, a new dam could significantly impact the appeal of the city as a destination.

"For me, it's a problem, the construction of the dam, because they would change too much of the life and the real character of the city," said the 46-year-old Italian, sitting on the banks of the Mekong with a friend.

"In my opinion, we have to preserve the traditions."

Live updates | South Africa alleges Israel is ignoring court ruling as more are killed in north Gaza

By The Associated Press undefined

South Africa's foreign minister alleged Israel is ignoring the ruling by the United Nations' top court last week, which ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, by killing hundreds more civilians in a matter of days in Gaza.

Gaza's Health Ministry says more than 150 people were killed and an additional 313 wounded as Israeli forces continued to battle militants Wednesday in the northern part of the territory, the initial target of Israel's ground offensive into the Gaza Strip that has seen entire neighborhoods flattened. Israel's military said its forces killed more than 15 Hamas militants in northern Gaza in the past day and targeted militant infrastructure in a school.

The latest deaths bring the Palestinian death toll from Israel's offensive to 26,900, according to the Hamas-controlled Health Ministry. It does not distinguish between civilian and combatant deaths but says most of those killed were women and children.

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Hamas' Oct. 7 attack in southern Israel killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and about 250 people were taken hostage, according to Israeli authorities.

Currently:

- U.N. agencies rally around the agency for Palestinian refugees in Gaza as some top donors cut funding.
- South Africa says Israel is already ignoring a U.N. court ruling ordering it to prevent deaths in Gaza.
- Chicago becomes the latest U.S. city to approve a cease-fire resolution in the Israel-Hamas war.
- The U.S. blames a group of Iran-backed militias for the deadly drone attack in Jordan.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

US SAYS ISLAMIC RESISTANCE IN IRAQ IS RESPONSIBLE FOR DRONE ATTACK

WASHINGTON — The United States has attributed the drone attack that killed three U.S. service members in Jordan to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Iran-backed militias that includes the militant group Kataib Hezbollah.

National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said Wednesday the U.S. believes the attack was planned, resourced and facilitated by the group.

The Sunday drone attack on a military base in Jordan killed the three troops and injured at least 40 others. Kirby says President Joe Biden will continue to weigh response options to the attack but "the first thing you see won't be the last thing."

NETANYAHU MEETS WITH A GROUP OF UN AMBASSADORS

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has told a group of ambassadors to the United Nations from primarily European countries that Hamas has "infiltrated" the main aid provider to Palestinians in Gaza and that it must be shut down.

Netanyahu's remarks on Wednesday follow Israel's allegations that 12 employees with the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, participated in Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks in Israel that sparked the war in Gaza.

Those allegations prompted several countries to freeze funding to the agency, which fired nine of the workers. UNRWA said the agency, which employs 13,000 workers in Gaza, should not be punished for the alleged actions of a dozen employees.

Netanyahu told the group of eight visiting ambassadors that an alternative and impartial aid provider should be found.

Israel has long railed against UNRWA, accusing it of tolerating or even collaborating with Hamas and of perpetuating the 76-year-old Palestinian refugee crisis. The Israeli government has accused Hamas and other militant groups of siphoning off aid and using U.N. facilities for military purposes.

RELATIVE OF HOSTAGE SAYS ISRAEL'S LEADERS SHOULDN'T PUT POLITICS ABOVE CAPTIVES' FATE

TEL AVIV, Israel — A relative of a hostage being held in Gaza says he is concerned Israeli leaders are putting their political fortunes above the fate of the captives.

The families of hostages have been following with hope and anguish reports about a potential agreement emerging between Israel and Hamas that could set roughly 100 hostages free and bring about a halt in the war. They have also watched with trepidation as political considerations have seeped into the deliberations, with far-right members of Israel's governing coalition vowing to topple the government if the deal makes too many concessions to Hamas.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday confirmed that talks were underway.

Gil Dickmann, whose cousin Carmel Gat was abducted on Oct. 7 from southern Israel, said he feels "insecure" about the chances for a deal. At the same time, he said the current talks appeared serious and were the first chance at progress since the one previous deal in late November.

He said he hoped Netanyahu wouldn't prioritize his political survival over the hostages' freedom.

"The life of the coalition should not come before the lives of the hostages," Dickmann told The Associated Press.

ISRAELI PROTESTERS TRY TO BLOCK AID TRUCKS

JERUSALEM — Dozens of Israeli protesters have tried to block humanitarian aid from entering Gaza,

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despite an order barring them from approaching a border crossing the trucks are using.

According to video released by an activist group behind the demonstrations, police, including mounted officers, scuffled with the protesters Wednesday.

The protesters have been gathering near the Kerem Shalom crossing for several days, saying aid should not be allowed into Gaza while hostages are still being held there. They say the aid could act as leverage to force Hamas to release the hostages.

Activists said up to 40 people were detained, a figure that could not be independently confirmed. Police did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Israeli military this week sealed the area to prevent such protests from recurring. It was not immediately clear how close the crowd got to the crossing, and deliveries into Gaza did not appear to be disrupted.

Kerem Shalom is the main goods crossing between Israel and Gaza.

Israel imposed a siege on Gaza in the first days of the war barring the entry of aid. While it relented under U.S. pressure, the amount of aid has been a fraction of what went into the territory before the war.

UN HUMANITARIAN AID CHIEF SAYS RELIEF TO GAZA IS 'GROSSLY INADEQUATE'

UNITED NATIONS — In a passionate address to the U.N. Security Council, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths called for Israel to allow more aid into Gaza.

Griffiths frequently broke from his prepared remarks as he made his address Wednesday.

"The relief remains grossly inadequate. And to say it's grossly inadequate, as it says here, is grossly inadequate. It's much, much more difficult," Griffiths said. "It's the congestion, it's the rain, it's the lack of certainty about what tomorrow will bring."

NETANYAHU SAYS EFFORTS UNDERWAY TO TRY TO SECURE RELEASE OF HOSTAGES

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has told the families of hostages held in the Gaza Strip that efforts were underway to bring about the captives' release.

Netanyahu told the representatives of 18 families that efforts were being made "at these moments" to return the hostages. In a statement about the meeting from his office Wednesday, he did not disclose details on talks on a new hostage release agreement.

Netanyahu met the families as Qatar, Egypt and the U.S. were mediating talks meant to strike a deal between Israel and Hamas that could free the roughly 100 remaining hostages and usher in a temporary cease-fire in Gaza.

Hamas-led militants captured about 250 people, including children, women and older people, in their Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, an assault that triggered the war.

More than 100 captives, mostly women and children, were released during the first and only deal between the sides in late November.

WHO SAYS GAZA HEALTH SYSTEM IS USING DONKEY CARTS TO TRANSPORT PATIENTS

GENEVA — The head of the World Health Organization said the destroyed health system in Gaza has resorted to using donkey carts to transport injured patients, and that one major hospital has only one functional ambulance.

At a press briefing Wednesday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said more than 100,000 Gaza residents are either dead, injured, missing or presumed dead in the war with Israel.

Tedros added that the risk of famine is high, with many medical staff and patients receiving only one meal per day.

He warned that decisions by donor countries to pause funds for UNWRA, the biggest supplier of humanitarian aid in the crisis, will have "catastrophic consequences" for the people of Gaza.

The United States and more than a dozen other countries have announced plans to suspend contributions to UNRWA after Israel alleged that 12 of its workers participated in the Oct. 7 attacks in Israel. U.N. officials fired most of the workers and vowed an investigation.

US SANCTIONS COMPANIES AND PERSON IN LEBANON AND TURKEY

BEIRUT — The U.S. slapped sanctions Wednesday on three companies and one person in Lebanon and

Turkey, accusing them of funneling funds to Iran's Revolutionary Guard and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

The U.S. Treasury announced sanctions on Turkish company Mira Ihracat Ithalat Petrol (Mira), which it said "purchases, transports, and sells Iranian commodities on the global market;" on its chief executive, Ibrahim Talal al-Uwayr; and on Lebanon-based Yara Offshore SAL and Hydro Company for Drilling Equipment Rental, both of which it said have sold large quantities of Iranian goods to Syria.

The sanctioned companies "generated hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of revenue from selling Iranian commodities, including to the Syrian government," the U.S. Treasury said in a statement.

The move comes as the region is waiting for Washington's response to a strike, likely launched by one of the region's Iranian-back militias, that killed three U.S. troops Sunday at a base in Jordan near the Syrian border.

UN SECRETARY-GENERAL AGAIN CALLS FOR A CEASE-FIRE

UNITED NATIONS — U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres called again for a cease-fire in Gaza.

Speaking to the U.N.'s Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, Guterres said he condemned "the horrifying attacks by Hamas and other groups" but "at the same time, nothing can justify the collective punishment of the people in Gaza."

"The ongoing conflict and relentless bombardment by Israeli forces across Gaza have resulted in killings of civilians and destruction at a pace and scale unlike anything we have witnessed in recent years," Guterres said. "I am horrified by incessant military strikes that have killed and maimed civilians and protected personnel, and that have damaged or destroyed civilian infrastructure."

EU AIMS TO LAUNCH A RED SEA NAVAL MISSION WITHIN 3 WEEKS

BRUSSELS — The European Union plans to launch a naval mission in the Red Sea within three weeks to help defend cargo ships against attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen that are hampering trade and driving up prices, the bloc's top diplomat said Wednesday.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said he wants the mission to be up and running by Feb. 17. Officials say that seven EU countries are ready to provide ships or planes. Belgium has already committed to send a frigate. Germany is expected to do the same.

Last week, U.S. and British forces bombed multiple targets in eight locations used by the Iranian-backed Houthis. It was the second time the two allies have conducted coordinated retaliatory strikes on the rebels' missile-launching capabilities.

The Houthis have waged a persistent campaign of drone and missile attacks on commercial ships since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in October, but Borrell insisted that the EU mission will not take part in any military strikes.

Federal judge dismisses case seeking to force US to pressure Israel to stop bombing Gaza

OAKLAND, Calif. (AP) — A U.S. district judge in California dismissed a lawsuit Wednesday that sought to force the Biden administration to do all it could to make Israel stop bombing Gaza.

U.S. District Judge Jeffrey White said he didn't have jurisdiction over the matter, but he still offered harsh criticism of the administration and said Israel's actions may amount to genocide.

White heard testimony last Friday in federal court in Oakland in the unusual lawsuit filed in November on behalf of Palestinian human rights organizations and people whose family members are among the more than 26,000 people killed by Israeli forces following the Oct. 7 assault by the militant group Hamas.

The complaint sought an order requiring that President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin "adhere to their duty to prevent, and not further, the unfolding genocide of Palestinian people in Gaza."

White declined to issue a preliminary injunction and dismissed the case. But he was critical of the administration, writing, "There are rare cases in which the preferred outcome is inaccessible to the Court.

This is one of those cases.”

He conceded the plaintiffs’ point that “it is plausible that Israel’s conduct amounts to genocide,” and he implored the White House “to examine the results of their unflagging support of the military siege against the Palestinians in Gaza.”

The lawsuit asked the court to declare that the defendants have violated their duties to prevent genocide and to not be complicit in the commission of genocide. It sought immediate relief, including ordering the president and other U.S. officials to exert their influence over Israel to stop its bombing and to lift the siege in Gaza and to stop providing or facilitating the sales of weapons and arms to Israel.

It also asked the court to order defendants to stop obstructing attempts by the international community to call for a cease-fire in Gaza. The United States vetoed in December a United Nations resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian cease-fire.

Plaintiffs included Defence for Children International, based in Ramallah, West Bank, and Palestinians in Gaza and in the U.S., including Waeil Elbhassi, a U.S. citizen of Palestinian origin who lives in San Ramon, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) from Oakland.

Last week’s hearing came the same day as the top court of the United Nations rebuked Israel’s wartime conduct and ordered its government to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide but stopped short of ordering an end to the military offensive.

The political branches of the U.S. government have wide authority over foreign policy, as the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled when the family of U.S. college student Rachel Corrie tried to sue U.S. bulldozer maker Caterpillar of aiding Israel in war crimes. Corrie was run over and killed in 2003 while trying to stop the demolition of a house in Gaza.

Still, the lawsuit has brought fresh attention to the thousands of Palestinian Americans and other advocates calling for a cease-fire. They have repeatedly taken to the streets calling for the U.S. to stop supplying weapons to Israel and have demanded local city and county governments adopt cease-fire resolutions despite local U.S. officials having little sway over foreign policy.

After listening to hours of testimony Friday, White called the issue before him “the most difficult judicial decision that I’ve ever made,” according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

Plaintiff Laila El-Haddad, a journalist in Maryland, said she had lost nearly 90 members of her extended family to Israeli attacks, the newspaper reported.

Dr. Omar Al-Najjar, also a plaintiff, said he works at a hospital in the southern Gaza city of Rafah where more than 2,000 new patients a day require treatment for severe injuries or illnesses, but there is little to no medicine, the newspaper reported.

Israeli authorities say the Oct. 7 assault by Hamas resulted in about 1,200 people dead and another 250 kidnapped as hostages.

US blames group of Iran-backed militias for deadly drone attack in Jordan as it weighs reprisals

By JON GAMBRELL, AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States on Wednesday attributed the drone attack that killed three U.S. service members in Jordan to the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group of Iran-backed militias, as President Joe Biden weighs his options to respond to the strike.

Iran threatened to “decisively respond” to any U.S. attack on the Islamic Republic after the U.S. said it held Tehran responsible. The U.S. has signaled it is preparing for retaliatory strikes in the Mideast in the wake of the Sunday drone attack that also wounded more than 40 troops at Tower 22, a secretive base in northeastern Jordan that’s been crucial to the American presence in neighboring Syria.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Wednesday the U.S. believes the attack was planned, resourced and facilitated by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella group that includes the militant group Kataib Hezbollah. He said Biden “believes that it is important to respond in an appropriate way.”

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He said Biden was continuing to weigh his options, but Kirby said "the first thing you see won't be the last thing," adding it "won't be a one-off."

Kirby dismissed a statement by Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah announcing "the suspension of military and security operations against the occupation forces in order to prevent embarrassment to the Iraqi government." He said the group can't be taken at face value, and he added, "they're not the only group that has been attacking us."

As of Wednesday, Kataib Hezbollah and other Iran-aligned militias had launched 166 attacks on U.S. military installations since Oct. 18, including 67 in Iraq, 98 in Syria and the one in Jordan, according to the U.S. military.

The U.S. has struck back at the militias a few times over the past three months. On Oct. 27, U.S. fighter jets struck two weapons and ammunition storage sites in eastern Syria near Boukamal that were used by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iranian-backed groups.

Also in Syria, fighter jets dropped bombs on an IRGC weapons storage facility near Maysulun in Deir el-Zour on Nov. 8. And U.S. airstrikes targeted a training facility and a safe house in the Bulbul district of Mayadin on Nov. 12.

On Dec. 26, the U.S. launched strikes on three locations in Iraq used by Kataib Hezbollah and affiliated groups, and on Jan. 23, the U.S. struck three sites in Iraq, again targeting Kataib Hezbollah.

Any additional American strikes could further inflame a region already roiled by Israel's ongoing war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The war began with Hamas attacking Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people and taking about 250 hostage. Since then, Israeli strikes have killed more than 26,000 Palestinians and displaced nearly 2 million others from their homes, arousing anger throughout the Muslim world.

Violence has erupted across the Mideast, with Iran striking targets in Iraq, Pakistan and Syria, and the U.S. carrying out airstrikes targeting Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels over their attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. Some observers fear a new round of strikes targeting Iran could tip the region into a wider war.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss military operations, said American F/A-18 fighter jets on Wednesday struck and destroyed 10 Houthi drones that were prepared to launch.

The U.S. military's Central Command said later Wednesday that the guided missile destroyer USS Carney had shot down one anti-ship ballistic missile fired from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen toward the Gulf of Aden. The Carney also shot down three Iranian drones, Central Command said.

The Iranian warnings first came from Amir Saeid Iravani, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations in New York. He gave a briefing to Iranian journalists late Tuesday, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

"The Islamic Republic would decisively respond to any attack on the county, its interests and nationals under any pretexts," IRNA quoted Iravani as saying. He described any possible Iranian retaliation as a "strong response," without elaborating.

The Iranian mission to the U.N. did not respond to requests for comment or elaboration Wednesday on Iravani's remarks.

Iravani also denied that Iran and the U.S. had exchanged any messages over the last few days, either through intermediaries or directly. The pan-Arab satellite channel Al Jazeera, which is based in and funded by Qatar, reported earlier that such communication had taken place. Qatar often serves as an intermediary between Washington and Tehran.

But Iran's government has taken note of the U.S. threats of retaliation for the attack on the base in Jordan.

"Sometime, our enemies raise the threat, and nowadays we hear some threats in between words by American officials," Revolutionary Guard commander Gen. Hossein Salami, who answers only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said at an event Wednesday. "We tell them that you have experienced us, and we know each other. We do not leave any threat without an answer."

"We are not after war, but we have no fear of war," he added, according to IRNA.

Kirby, for his part, said the U.S. doesn't "seek a war with Iran. We're not looking for a broader conflict."

On Saturday, a general in charge of Iran's air defenses described them as being at their "highest defensive readiness." That raises concerns for commercial aviation traveling through and over Iran as well. After a U.S. drone strike killed a top general in 2020, Iranian air defenses mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian pas-

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senger plane, killing all 176 people on board.

Meanwhile, attacks by the Houthis and counterattacks by the U.S. continue in the Red Sea.

The private security firm Ambrey reported Wednesday night that a ship was targeted with a missile southwest of Aden, Yemen, near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Houthis claimed an attack on a vessel at the time called the Koi, a Liberian-flagged container ship. The ship's managers could not be immediately reached for comment. It was unclear if the reported missile attack caused any damage or injuries.

A missile launched Tuesday night targeted the USS Gravelly, a guided missile destroyer, Central Command said in a statement. No injuries or damage were reported.

A Houthi military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement Wednesday morning, calling it "a victory for the oppression of the Palestinian people and a response to the American-British aggression against our country."

Saree claimed the Houthis fired "several" missiles, something not acknowledged by the U.S. Navy. Houthi claims have been exaggerated in the past, and their missiles sometimes crash on land and fail to reach their targets.

Since November, the rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea over Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza. But they have frequently targeted vessels with tenuous or no clear links to Israel, imperiling shipping in a key route for global trade between Asia, the Mideast and Europe.

The Houthis hit a commercial vessel with a missile on Friday, sparking a fire that burned for hours.

The U.S. and the United Kingdom have launched multiple rounds of airstrikes targeting the Houthis as allied warships patrol the waterways affected by the attacks. The European Union also plans to launch a naval mission in the Red Sea within three weeks to help defend cargo ships against the Houthi attacks, the bloc's top diplomat said Wednesday.

How Taylor Swift and Travis Kelce became the focus of baseless political conspiracy theories

By MELISSA GOLDIN Associated Press

The budding love story featuring music superstar Taylor Swift and Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce took an unexpected turn into the world of political conspiracy theories this week after the team advanced to the Super Bowl.

Myriad baseless rumors emerged on social media — everything from claims that Swift has played a part in Pentagon psychological operations to the idea that she and her two-time Super Bowl champion boyfriend are key assets in a secret plot to help President Joe Biden get reelected in 2024. Another variant: That the Chiefs' success was rigged as part of the plan for the game on Feb. 11 in Las Vegas.

Political and media figures on the right, including former Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy, political activist Laura Loomer and One America News Network host Alison Steinberg, have amplified the allegations.

The claims are ludicrous and may well reflect the fear on the right that someone as famous as Swift, whose landmark Eras Tour is the first tour to cross the billion-dollar mark, could indeed influence the presidential race should she urge her legion of fans in one direction.

Pop culture and politics have long been entwined. The entertainment industry has been a deep well of political contributions. And candidates often try to draft on the celebrity of stars to add to their own allure.

The potency of the impact is less clear. In Swift's case, there is some proof that she can at minimum generate more voter registration.

In September, Swift posted a short message on her Instagram account encouraging her 272 million followers to register to vote. The post led to more than 35,000 registrations on the nonpartisan nonprofit Vote.org.

Swift's massive fan base gives her a powerful voice. An SSRS poll conducted in October 2023 found that

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about 6 in 10 U.S. adults called themselves at least casual fans of the singer, with 8% saying they're big fans. The poll also found that 8 in 10 U.S. adults said they had heard of her relationship with Kelce and the majority of those familiar with it considered it a real relationship, rather than a publicity stunt.

"Pop culture people identify with this stuff, they pay attention to it. And that's what moves politics now. It's attention and identity," Joel Penney, an associate professor at Montclair State University whose research includes the intersection of politics and pop culture, said. Indeed, Donald Trump's improbable march to the presidency in 2016 was propelled in part from the celebrity he gained as a reality television star.

But the false claims about Swift are of such an extreme nature that they will test the limits of how potent a conspiracy theory can be. Penney sees the recent deluge of posts aimed at Swift as an attempt to preemptively blunt her impact by discrediting her.

Penney said Swift's influence could prove a difficult force to contend with, especially if she publicly supports Biden, as she did in the 2020 race.

The attacks on Swift could also galvanize young voters who want to rally around her.

"Young people are fighting their political battles through a language drawn from pop culture," said Henry Jenkins, a professor at the University of Southern California who also studies politics and pop culture. "That's what connects them. That's what they're engaged with."

Both Swift and Kelce have made public statements about politics and other issues that put them at odds with the far-right.

Swift broke her long-standing refusal to discuss her political views in 2018 when she announced in an Instagram post that she would be voting for Tennessee's Democratic Senate candidate Phil Bredesen and Democratic House incumbent Rep. Jim Cooper. She also slammed then-U.S. Rep. Marsha Blackburn, the Republican candidate, citing Blackburn's opposition to certain LGBTQ+ rights and her vote against the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act in 2013. Blackburn won election to the Senate.

In 2020, Swift endorsed Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in an interview with V Magazine, noting that "under their leadership, I believe America has a chance to start the healing process it so desperately needs."

Kelce faced criticism in September for appearing in an ad promoting the double dose of the flu and COVID-19 vaccines, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The ad was part of a partnership with Pfizer, the pharmaceutical company that developed a vaccine in response to the pandemic and has since become a common mark for anti-vaccine activists and conspiracy theorists.

Pop culture figures and the industry that surround them have been enmeshed in political campaigns long before the duo some fans refer to as Swelce. Former President Bill Clinton first appeared on MTV during his 1992 campaign while he was still governor of Arkansas. Major stars including Johnny Cash, Mary Tyler Moore and Willie Nelson endorsed former President Jimmy Carter more than 40 years ago when he made his second run for the White House. Ronald Reagan got his start in politics after a career as an actor.

"That question of, does this stuff work in pop culture? It absolutely can," Penney said. "And it does. And history has shown that."

Meta, TikTok and other social media CEOs testify in heated Senate hearing on child exploitation

By BARBARA ORTUTAY and HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

Sexual predators. Addictive features. Suicide and eating disorders. Unrealistic beauty standards. Bullying. These are just some of the issues young people are dealing with on social media — and children's advocates and lawmakers say companies are not doing enough to protect them.

On Wednesday, the CEOs of Meta, TikTok, X and other social media companies went before the Senate Judiciary Committee to testify at a time when lawmakers and parents are growing increasingly concerned about the effects of social media on young people's lives.

The hearing began with recorded testimony from kids and parents who said they or their children were exploited on social media. Throughout the hourslong event, parents who lost children to suicide silently

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held up pictures of their dead kids.

"They're responsible for many of the dangers our children face online," Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, who chairs the committee, said in opening remarks. "Their design choices, their failures to adequately invest in trust and safety, their constant pursuit of engagement and profit over basic safety have all put our kids and grandkids at risk."

In a heated question and answer session with Mark Zuckerberg, Republican Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley asked the Meta CEO if he has personally compensated any of the victims and their families for what they have been through.

"I don't think so," Zuckerberg replied.

"There's families of victims here," Hawley said. "Would you like to apologize to them?"

Zuckerberg stood, turned away from his microphone and the senators, and directly addressed the parents in the gallery.

"I'm sorry for everything you have all been through. No one should go through the things that your families have suffered," he said, adding that Meta continues to invest and work on "industrywide efforts" to protect children.

But time and time again, children's advocates and parents have stressed that none of the companies are doing enough.

One of the parents who attended the hearing was Neveen Radwan, whose teenage daughter got sucked in to a "black hole of dangerous content" on TikTok and Instagram after she started looking at videos on healthy eating and exercise at the onset of the COVID lockdowns. She developed anorexia within a few months and nearly died, Radwan recalled.

"Nothing that was said today was different than what we expected," Radwan said. "It was a lot of promises and a lot of, quite honestly, a lot of talk without them really saying anything. The apology that he made, while it was appreciated, it was a little bit too little, too late, of course."

But Radwan, whose daughter is now 19 and in college, said she felt a "significant shift" in the energy as she sat through the hearing, listening to the senators grill the social media CEOs in tense exchanges.

"The energy in the room was, very, very palpable. Just by our presence there, I think it was very noticeable how our presence was affecting the senators," she said.

Hawley continued to press Zuckerberg, asking if he'd take personal responsibility for the harms his company has caused. Zuckerberg stayed on message and repeated that Meta's job is to "build industry-leading tools" and empower parents.

"To make money," Hawley cut in.

South Carolina Sen. Lindsay Graham, the top Republican on the Judiciary panel, echoed Durbin's sentiments and said he's prepared to work with Democrats to solve the issue.

"After years of working on this issue with you and others, I've come to conclude the following: Social media companies as they're currently designed and operate are dangerous products," Graham said.

The executives touted existing safety tools on their platforms and the work they've done with nonprofits and law enforcement to protect minors.

Snapchat broke ranks ahead of the hearing and is backing a federal bill that would create a legal liability for apps and social platforms that recommend harmful content to minors. Snap CEO Evan Spiegel reiterated the company's support on Wednesday and asked the industry to back the bill.

TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew said the company is vigilant about enforcing its policy barring children under 13 from using the app. CEO Linda Yaccarino said X, formerly Twitter, doesn't cater to children.

"We do not have a line of business dedicated to children," Yaccarino said. She said the company will also support Stop CSAM Act, a federal bill that makes it easier for victims of child exploitation to sue tech companies.

Yet child health advocates say social media companies have failed repeatedly to protect minors.

Profits should not be the primary concern when companies are faced with safety and privacy decisions, said Zamaan Qureshi, co-chair of Design It For Us, a youth-led coalition advocating for safer social media. "These companies have had opportunities to do this before they failed to do that. So independent

regulation needs to step in.”

Republican and Democratic senators came together in a rare show of agreement throughout the hearing, though it's not yet clear if this will be enough to pass legislation such as the Kids Online Safety Act, proposed in 2022 by Sens. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut and Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee.

“There is pretty clearly a bipartisan consensus that the status quo isn't working,” said New Mexico Attorney General Raúl Torrez, a Democrat. “When it comes to how these companies have failed to prioritize the safety of children, there's clearly a sense of frustration on both sides of the aisle.”

Meta is being sued by dozens of states that say it deliberately designs features on Instagram and Facebook that addict children to its platforms. New Mexico filed a separate lawsuit saying the company has failed to protect them from online predators.

New internal emails between Meta executives released by Blumenthal's office show Nick Clegg, the company's president of global affairs, and others asking Zuckerberg to hire more people to strengthen “wellbeing across the company” as concerns grew about effects on youth mental health.

“From a policy perspective, this work has become increasingly urgent over recent months. Politicians in the U.S., U.K., E.U. and Australia are publicly and privately expressing concerns about the impact of our products on young people's mental health,” Clegg wrote in an August 2021 email.

The emails released by Blumenthal's office don't appear to include a response, if there was any, from Zuckerberg. In September 2021, The Wall Street Journal released the Facebook Files, its report based on internal documents from whistleblower Frances Haugen, who later testified before the Senate. Clegg followed up on the August email in November with a scaled-down proposal but it does not appear that anything was approved.

“I've spoken to many of the parents at the hearing. The harm their children experienced, all that loss of innocent life, is eminently preventable. When Mark says ‘Our job is building the best tools we can,’ that is just not true,” said Arturo Béjar, a former engineering director at the social media giant known for his expertise in curbing online harassment who recently testified before Congress about child safety on Meta's platforms. “They know how much harm teens are experiencing, yet they won't commit to reducing it, and most importantly to be transparent about it. They have the infrastructure to do it, the research, the people, it is a matter of prioritization.”

Béjar said the emails and Zuckerberg's testimony show that Meta and its CEO “do not care about the harm teens experience” on their platforms.

“Nick Clegg writes about profound gaps with addiction, self-harm, bullying and harassment to Mark. Mark did not respond, and those gaps are unaddressed today. Clegg asked for 84 engineers of 30,000,” Béjar said. “Children are not his priority.”

Federal judge dismisses Disney's free speech lawsuit against DeSantis

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday dismissed Disney's free speech lawsuit against Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, dealing a setback to the company's hopes of regaining control of the district that governs Walt Disney World after it was taken over by the governor's appointees.

U.S. District Judge Allen Winsor in Tallahassee said in his decision that Disney lacked standing in its First Amendment lawsuit against the Republican governor and the secretary of the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity. The judge also said Disney's claim against DeSantis' appointees to the Disney World governing district lacked merit.

Disney said it plans to appeal the federal judge's decision. A separate lawsuit over who controls the district is still pending in state court in Orlando.

Disney had argued that legislation signed by DeSantis and passed by the Republican-controlled Legislature that transferred control of the Disney World governing district from Disney supporters to DeSantis appointees was in retaliation for the company publicly opposing the state's “Don't Say Gay” law. The 2022

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law banned classroom lessons on sexual orientation and gender identity in early grades and was championed by DeSantis, who had used Disney as a punching bag in speeches on the campaign trail until he recently suspended his campaign for the 2024 GOP presidential nomination.

Disney supporters had run the district, which provides municipal services such as firefighting, planning and mosquito control, for more than five decades after the Legislature created it in 1967.

Winsor, who was appointed to the bench by President Donald Trump in 2019, said in his decision that Disney didn't have standing to sue the governor because DeSantis already had picked the appointees to the board of the governing district.

"Because Disney seeks injunctive relief, it must allege an imminent future injury ... and it has not alleged facts showing that any imminent future appointments will contribute to its harm," the judge wrote.

In dismissing the claim against the DeSantis appointees to the district's board, Winsor wrote that when a law on its face is constitutional, plaintiffs can't make free-speech claims challenging it because they believe lawmakers acted with unconstitutional motives. The law that revamped Disney World's district didn't single out Disney by name but rather special districts created before the ratification of the Florida Constitution, a group that included the Disney district and a handful of other districts, he said.

"Here, similarly, no one reading the text of the challenged laws would suppose them directed against Disney," the judge wrote. "The laws do not mention Disney."

The DeSantis-appointed chairman of the revamped district, Martin Garcia, called the lawsuit a distraction. He said now that it is behind them, board members can focus on making appropriate changes to the district's operations "to promote transparency and accountability while bringing more prosperity to more people in Florida."

Disney said the case was too important for it to end, with serious implications for the rule of law.

"If left unchallenged, this would set a dangerous precedent and give license to states to weaponize their official powers to punish the expression of political viewpoints they disagree with," Disney said in a statement.

The governor's press secretary, Jeremy Redfern, said the judge's decision supported DeSantis' belief that Disney doesn't have a right to its "own special government."

"The days of Disney controlling its own government and being placed above the law are long gone," Redfern said.

Before control of the district changed hands from Disney allies to DeSantis appointees early last year, the Disney supporters on its board signed agreements with Disney shifting control over design and construction at Disney World to the company. The new DeSantis appointees claimed the "eleventh-hour deals" neutered their powers, and the district sued the company in state court in Orlando to have the contracts voided.

Disney has filed counterclaims that include asking the state court to declare the agreements valid and enforceable.

Since the takeover of the district by the DeSantis appointees, about 50 of its 370 employees have departed, with many complaining that the district has become politicized and the backgrounds of the five DeSantis appointees have been distracting.

Disney, which employs more than 75,000 workers in central Florida, has said it plans to make \$17 billion in investments at Disney World over the next decade that will create an additional 13,000 jobs.

But Disney CEO Bob Iger last year described the actions taken by DeSantis and the Florida Legislature as "anti-business" and "anti-Florida." Last year, Disney scrapped plans to build a new campus in central Florida and relocate 2,000 employees from Southern California to work in digital technology, finance and product development following a year of attacks by DeSantis and Republican lawmakers.

Alec Baldwin pleads not guilty to involuntary manslaughter charge in fatal film set shooting

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Actor Alec Baldwin has pleaded not guilty to an involuntary manslaughter charge

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in the fatal shooting of a cinematographer during a rehearsal on a Western movie set in New Mexico.

Court documents filed Wednesday show Baldwin entered the plea in state district court in Santa Fe, waiving an arraignment that had been scheduled to take place remotely by video conference the next day.

Baldwin, the lead actor and a co-producer on the Western movie "Rust," was pointing a gun at cinematographer Halyna Hutchins during a rehearsal outside Santa Fe in October 2021 when the gun went off, killing her and wounding director Joel Souza.

A grand jury in Santa Fe indicted Baldwin in January after prosecutors received a new analysis of that gun, renewing a charge that prosecutors originally filed and then dismissed in April 2023. Baldwin faces up to 18 months in prison if convicted.

Baldwin remains free pending trial under conditions that include not possessing firearms, consuming alcohol or leaving the country. Baldwin can have limited contact with witnesses when it comes to promoting "Rust," which has not been released for public viewing. Baldwin is prohibited from asking members of the "Rust" cast or crew to participate in a related documentary film.

Baldwin has said he pulled back the hammer — but not the trigger — and the gun fired.

"Halyna and I had something profound in common, and that is that we both assumed the gun was empty ... other than those dummy rounds," Baldwin told George Stephanopoulos in an interview broadcast in December 2021 on ABC News.

The grand jury indictment provides special prosecutors Kari Morrissey and Jason Lewis with two alternative standards for pursuing the felony charge against Baldwin.

One would be based on the negligent use of a firearm. A second alternative for prosecutors is to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Baldwin caused the death of Hutchins without due caution or "circumspection," also defined as "an act committed with total disregard or indifference for the safety of others."

An analysis of the gun conducted by Lucien and Michael Haag of Forensic Science Services in Arizona concluded that "the trigger had to be pulled or depressed sufficiently to release the fully cocked or retracted hammer of the evidence revolver."

An earlier FBI report on the agency's analysis of the revolver found that, as is common with firearms of that design, it could go off without pulling the trigger if force was applied to an uncocked hammer, such as by dropping the weapon. The gun eventually broke during testing.

Morrissey and Lewis dismissed the earlier charge after they were informed the gun might have been modified before the shooting and malfunctioned.

The grand jury heard from a "Rust" crew member who was a few feet (meters) from the fatal shooting and another who walked off the set before the shooting in protest of working conditions. Weapons forensics expert Michael Haag, a Mississippi-based movie armorer and a detective with the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office also testified.

"Rust" weapons supervisor Hannah Gutierrez-Reed also has been charged with involuntary manslaughter, with a jury trial scheduled to start Feb. 22. She has pleaded not guilty to that charge and a second charge of tampering with evidence in Hutchins' death.

Gutierrez-Reed also was charged with carrying a gun into a downtown Santa Fe bar days before she was hired to work as the armorer on "Rust." She has pleaded not guilty to that charge, too.

The fatal shooting of Hutchins resulted in a series of civil lawsuits, including wrongful death claims filed by members of Hutchins' family, centered on accusations that Baldwin and producers of "Rust" were lax with safety standards. Baldwin and other defendants have disputed those allegations.

"Rust" assistant director and safety coordinator David Halls pleaded no contest to unsafe handling of a firearm last March and received a suspended sentence of six months of probation. He agreed to cooperate in the investigation of the fatal shooting.

A court rejected Elon Musk's \$55.8B pay package. What is he worth to Tesla?

By STAN CHOE and TOM KRISHER AP Business Writers

Even when compared with other CEOs, who routinely get paid roughly 200 times more than their typical employees, Elon Musk's pay package was eye-opening.

A judge in Delaware on Tuesday struck down the package that Tesla established for Musk in 2018, ruling that the process was "flawed" and the price "unfair." Chancellor Kathaleen St. Jude McCormick called the package "the largest potential compensation opportunity ever observed in public markets by multiple orders of magnitude."

So, if Musk isn't worth the maximum \$55.8 billion value of the package, how much is he worth? It's a thorny question without an easy answer in the notoriously complex world of executive compensation.

McCormick's ruling bumped Musk out of the top spot on the Forbes list of wealthiest people. The magazine on Wednesday lopped \$25 billion off his net worth, reducing it to \$185.3 billion, putting him behind fashion and cosmetics magnate Bernard Arnault and family.

Critics have argued for years that CEO pay packages are exorbitant. The median compensation for a CEO of an S&P 500 company was valued at \$14.8 million, according to the latest AP CEO pay survey for 2022 conducted with the executive compensation research firm Equilar. It would take the typical worker at one of those companies more than 185 years to earn what their chief executive reaped in just 12 months.

In 2018, Tesla estimated the value of Musk's compensation package at \$2.28 billion, topping the previous highest package of \$1.39 billion given to Blackstone's Steven Schwarzman 10 years earlier, according to Equilar. The value of Musk's package has grown as Tesla's stock price increased. By comparison, in 2022 the median worker at Tesla made \$34,084.

Under Musk's pay plan, he received a chunk of stock options each time Tesla's market value rose by \$50 billion. Ultimately, he would have the chance to buy nearly 304 million shares for \$23.34 each. Tesla has met each of the performance hurdles since the package was awarded. Its stock is trading at roughly \$191 compared with \$21 at the start of 2018.

The judge determined that Tesla's board lacked independence from Musk. His lawyers said the package needed to be rich to give Musk an incentive not to leave — a line of reasoning the judge shot down.

"Swept up by the rhetoric of 'all upside,' or perhaps starry eyed by Musk's superstar appeal, the board never asked the \$55.8 billion question: 'Was the plan even necessary for Tesla to retain Musk and achieve its goals?'" McCormick wrote.

Musk's fans would argue that he shouldn't be paid like other CEOs because he isn't like other CEOs. He and Tesla are practically inseparable, so keeping him as CEO is key to the company's growth. He built the company from an idea to the most valuable automaker in the world, last year selling more electric vehicles than any other company. His star power gets free publicity, so the company spends little on advertising. And he has forced the rest of the auto industry to accelerate plans for electric vehicles to counter Tesla's phenomenal growth.

To figure out how much to pay their CEO, corporate boards often start by looking at how much their rivals are paying theirs: They need to pay enough to attract and keep the talent.

General Motors, for example, considers executive salaries at 3M, Boeing, Ford, IBM and other huge companies, and uses complex formulas to determine CEO compensation. For GM CEO Mary Barra, part of that depends on how GM's stock return compares to its peers and how much progress the company makes on electric vehicles.

In 2022, Barra earned total compensation that GM valued at \$29 million. That included \$2.1 million in salary. Ford CEO Jim Farley's compensation was valued at \$22 million that year.

Even though Tesla makes automobiles, investors often lump its stock in with Big Tech stocks. They're the companies disrupting industries and people's ways of life.

Plus, Musk is closely identified with Tesla the way Meta Platforms' Mark Zuckerberg or Apple's Tim Cook are with their companies. Pay packages at Big Tech companies are among the largest in the U.S.

Cook's compensation was valued at \$63.2 million for 2023, mainly due to stock awards valued at nearly

\$47 million. A year earlier, he earned total compensation valued at roughly \$99 million.

In the nuanced world of executive compensation, these numbers don't indicate how much a CEO actually takes home, they're just an estimate of the compensation package's value. The final value may exceed or fall far below those figures because it is tied to stock.

Corporate law experts say any new compensation package for Musk will likely be challenged in court unless Tesla's board either resigns en masse or follows a meticulous process to protect shareholders by passing a substantially smaller package.

"This is just a mess for them," said Charles Elson, a retired corporate law professor and founder of the corporate governance center at the University of Delaware. "They kowtowed to this apparent superstar with poor results."

Elson, who has followed the court for more than three decades, said this is the first time he can remember a judge invalidating an executive compensation plan at a public company.

Lawyers for Musk and the directors had countered that the plan was fairly negotiated by a compensation committee whose members were independent, and that it was blessed by a shareholder vote.

Shareholders who approved Musk's deal, Elson said, were unaware that Musk essentially was negotiating with himself. "If the shareholders were aware of that, they may well have not approved it."

PGA Tour strikes \$3 billion deal with Fenway-led investment group. Players to get equity ownership

By DOUG FERGUSON AP Golf Writer

PEBBLE BEACH, Calif. (AP) — The PGA Tour is getting a \$3 billion investment from Strategic Sports Group in a deal announced Wednesday that would give players access to more than \$1.5 billion as equity owners in the new PGA Tour Enterprises.

The launch of PGA Tour Enterprises, with SSG as a minority partner, comes eight months after the PGA Tour signed a framework agreement with the Saudi backers of LIV Golf for a commercial venture, which ultimately led to private equity groups wanting to join.

The Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia is not part of the deal yet, though the tour said negotiations with the PIF are ongoing for it to also become a minority investor.

"The coolest thing about it is the players are now owners," said Jordan Spieth, one of six players on the PGA Tour board. "So not only do they benefit with the tour, they now are equity owners so they want to push it themselves, they want to make the product better themselves. Not that they didn't before, but you directly benefit from owning a piece."

How much of a piece remained unclear. PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan held a conference call with players from all its main tours (including the PGA Tour Champions and Korn Ferry Tour) on Wednesday morning that included Tiger Woods, whom the tour appointed to the board last summer at the players' request.

"As the tour grows, we grow," Woods told players, according to Golf.com, which obtained access to the call. "So the more we invest into the tour, the more we get the benefits of it, which has never been — it's never happened in sports history. So we're the first. Exciting for me to be able to be part of that."

Also uncertain is where this leaves the PIF.

The tour said its deal with SSG allows for a co-investment from the PIF, subject to regulatory approval. A Senate subcommittee wrote a letter earlier this week to Yasir Al-Rumayyan, governor of the PIF, that it is proceeding with its inquiry into framework agreement with the PGA Tour that was announced June 6.

"At this point if the PIF were interested in coming in on terms that our members like and/or the economic terms are at or not beyond SSG's and they feel it would be a good idea, I think that's where the discussions will start," Spieth said. "I understand it could take some time to even come to those kind of terms, and then beyond that the Department of Justice and a regulatory review would be intact."

LIV Golf starts its third season this week in Mexico and is likely to be around through all of next year depending on the timing of any investment by the PIF in the PGA Tour. How the fractured landscape of

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golf gets repaired remains as cloudy as how specifically equity ownership is distributed.

The PGA Tour plans several player meetings over the next month to work through details.

"By making PGA Tour members owners of their league, we strengthen the collective investment of our players in the success of the PGA Tour," Monahan, who will be CEO of PGA Tour Enterprises, said in the formal announcement.

He said a partnership with SSG — a group comprised of American owners and executives of pro sports franchises — will "enhance our organization's ability to make the sport more rewarding for players, tournaments, fans and partners."

The PGA Tour Enterprises board would be comprised of seven players, the PGA Tour commissioner, four members of SSG and an independent director who's also on the tour board.

The unique equity program in golf would give some 200 players access \$930,000 in initial grants. Starting next year, PGA Tour Enterprises would use \$600,000 for recurring grants for future players.

While specific details of the equity ownership program were not announced, the initial grants would be based on career accomplishments, recent achievements and PGA Tour status. The grants would vest over time.

SSG is led by Fenway Sports Group and includes owners Marc Attanasio (Milwaukee Brewers), Arthur Blank (Atlanta Falcons), Steven Cohen (New York Mets), Wyc Grousbeck (Boston Celtics), Tom Werner and John Henry (Boston Red Sox), and Marc Lasry (Milwaukee Bucks). Others in the group include Alec Scheiner, former Cleveland Browns president and co-founder of Otro Capital.

"Our enthusiasm for this new venture stems from a very deep respect for this remarkable game and a firm belief in the expansive growth potential of the PGA Tour," said Henry, the principal owner of Fenway Sports and manager of SSG.

SSG is investing an initial \$1.5 billion into PGA Tour Enterprises and will concentrate on maximizing revenue for the benefit of the players and on finding opportunities to enhance golf across the world. Another \$1.5 billion would go toward PGA Tour business.

The deal was unanimously approved by the PGA Tour board.

"It was incredibly important for us to create opportunities for the players of today and in the future to be more invested in their organization, both financially and strategically," the player directors said in a joint statement. "This not only further strengthens the tour from a business perspective, but it also encourages the players to be fully invested in continuing to deliver — and further enhance — the best in golf to our fans.

"We are looking forward to this next chapter and an even brighter future."

The tour said it was making progress in its negotiations with the Saudi national wealth fund on future investments and an ultimate agreement. Under the original framework agreement, Al-Rumayyan, the PIF governor, was to be chairman of PGA Tour Enterprises.

Now the commercial arm launches without any deal with the Saudis.

The European tour was part of the framework agreement on June 6, and it has a strategic alliance with the PGA Tour. The tour said only it is discussing how they can work together for a mutual benefit.

Key to the original deal with the Saudis was dismissing the lawsuits involving LIV Golf. Since the rival league was launched in June 2022, LIV has lured several prominent players and major champions such as Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka, Phil Mickelson and Bryson DeChambeau.

As the tour's negotiations with the PIF neared its original Dec. 31 deadline, LIV signed Masters champion Jon Rahm in a deal reported to be in the neighborhood of \$500 million. It also signed Tyrrell Hatton, currently No. 16 in the world.

Rory McIlroy, who gave up his seat on the tour board in November, said on Tuesday he didn't think there should be any punishment for a LIV player eligible to return to the tour.

Deal on wartime aid and border security stalls in Congress as time runs short to bolster Ukraine

By STEPHEN GROVES, LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With time slipping to bolster Ukraine's defenses, Senate negotiators struggled Wednesday to finalize a bipartisan deal that would pair policy changes at the U.S. southern border with wartime aid for Kyiv as their carefully negotiated compromise ran into strong resistance from House Republicans and Donald Trump.

Senate negotiators have kept a close hold on the details of a bipartisan package on border enforcement and immigration policies that was supposed to unlock Republican support in Congress for aiding Ukraine. But conservatives view the tens of billions of dollars in proposed support with growing skepticism, unmoved by arguments about the larger stakes for global security. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg was making the case for the aid on Capitol Hill Wednesday, including at the Heritage Foundation, a power center for Trump's allies in Washington.

President Joe Biden, who is pushing for a deal alongside Republican and Democratic leaders in the Senate, faces a daunting task in convincing Republicans to defy Trump's wishes and embrace the deal — especially in the midst of an election year.

Republican leaders, including House Speaker Mike Johnson, had looked to February as a potential deadline to approve another tranche of military aid for Ukraine. But the \$110 billion national security package that congressional leaders say is essential to buttressing American allies around the globe, including Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan, has been swept up in the fight over border policies.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian troops are running short of weapons, including air defenses and artillery to defend against Russia's ongoing attack. The Pentagon reported last week it is out of money for Ukraine.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer warned in a morning floor speech that "the survival of Ukraine is on the line."

"The only way we'll rise to the occasion is if both sides are serious about finding a bipartisan compromise," he said, adding, "We have not concluded negotiations so we will keep going to get this done."

Even if the Senate is able to finish the deal and pass it, resistance is strong in the House, where Trump, the likely Republican presidential nominee, holds significant sway over lawmakers. His opposition has left Republican leaders increasingly questioning whether the border legislation should be jettisoned from the package in a last-ditch effort to get the Ukraine funding through Congress.

"It's time for us to move something, hopefully including a border agreement, but we need to get help to Israel and to Ukraine quickly," said Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell.

Johnson discussed the idea of splitting up parts of the national security package in a Tuesday meeting with the speakers of the parliaments of Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania, but did not commit to any course of action, according to a person familiar with the meeting who spoke anonymously about the private discussion.

The speaker has long been skeptical of sending economic assistance to Kyiv, though he has also said he wants to halt Russian President Vladimir Putin's advance in Europe. But a large portion of Johnson's conference in the House is more firmly against the aid.

Stoltenberg, the longest-serving chief in NATO's history, pleaded Wednesday for lawmakers to act. In a speech Wednesday at the Trump-aligned Heritage Foundation, he warned that Putin's ambitions don't just end with Ukraine. He said the Russian president is intent on "reestablishing Russia's sphere of influence and shaping an alternative world order."

As Russian forces and drone attacks pummel the region, the Ukrainians will face increasingly difficulty defending their cities and populations from incoming assaults.

Yet Republicans also want to cut portions of the package that would not go directly to Ukraine's defenses. Of the \$61 billion in the package for Ukraine, a portion, about \$16 billion, would go toward economic, security and operational assistance.

The U.S. economic aid has been keeping the Ukrainian government functioning, paying for public works

and employees and the services they provide, but Republicans prefer the U.S. focus its spending on military hardware to win the war.

The economic assistance for Ukraine is expected to be trimmed back in the final supplemental package, according to a person familiar with the situation and granted anonymity to discuss it. The person said changes in the amount of humanitarian aid for Gaza, which was stripped from the package by House Republicans, are also being discussed.

Senate Republicans initially insisted on pairing border policy changes with Ukraine aid as part of a strategy to push the package through Congress. But so far, compromising on border policies has only made things more difficult.

Trump has seized on a key compromise in the bill that would expel migrants seeking asylum at the border once illegal crossings rise above 5,000 daily. Speaking to reporters after a meeting with the Teamsters union in Washington Wednesday, he called the bill "terrible," but denied his opposition had anything to do with presidential politics.

"If the bill's not going to be a great bill and really solve the problem, I wouldn't do it at all," Trump said.

Johnson, who has consulted with Trump on border policy in recent weeks, also told fellow Republicans in a closed-door meeting on Tuesday morning that the provision is a "non-starter" in the House. While he has said he has not passed final judgement on the bill, he is poised to reject any compromise.

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who has been central to Senate talks, said the group was close to releasing text but was still working through the intricacies of writing immigration law. She urged lawmakers to keep an open mind to the legislation.

Sinema called it "factually false" for conservatives to claim that the proposal would allow 5,000 migrants to enter the country daily. The expulsion authority would be one part of a new system that includes raising the initial standard to receive asylum protection and quickly processing asylum claims.

Migrants who apply for asylum at ports of entry would be put in a "removal authority program," in which their asylum case is decided within six months, Sinema said. And migrants who seek asylum in between ports of entry would be put into detention and removed within 10 to 15 days if they fail initial interviews, known as credible fear screenings.

"It ensures that the government both has the power and must close down the border during times when our system is overwhelmed, and it creates new structures to ensure that folks who do not qualify for asylum cannot enter the country and stay here," she said. "It is a very robust package."

Sinema said Johnson's team is familiar with the details of the bill.

Still, Johnson on Wednesday used his inaugural floor speech since becoming speaker to lay blame on Biden's handling of the border and rally Republicans to insist on hardline border measures, even though those policies have virtually no chance of passing the Senate.

"If we take a step back, if we consider the current catastrophe at the border, we can all see that our country is at a critical decision," he said.

U.S. sportsbooks won't take bets on possible Taylor Swift appearance at the Super Bowl

By MARK ANDERSON AP Sports Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Fans have been wondering for days whether Taylor Swift will make it to the Super Bowl next week to cheer on boyfriend Travis Kelce and the Kansas City Chiefs and, if so, how many times she'll show up on TV during the game. They can speculate all they want, but they won't be able to bet on it legally in the United States.

Those types of wagers can be made offshore with sportsbooks such as BetUS, which is based in Costa Rica, and potentially in the Canadian province of Ontario. BetMGM public relations manager John Ewing said he was waiting for word from Canadian authorities there if such bets will be OK.

But in the U.S., where betting laws vary from state to state, the general rule is that wagering is limited to what happens on the field. A handful of states allow bets to be placed on the color of Gatorade dumped

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on the winning coach — red or pink is this year's plus-260 favorite at FanDuel Sportsbook — but even that type of wager is not allowed in Las Vegas.

Las Vegas, the longtime epicenter of sports betting in the U.S., has some of the strictest rules regarding the kinds of wagers made.

Swift's romance with Kelce became one of the prominent stories this NFL season and she has attended several Chiefs games, including their victory in the AFC championship game at Baltimore on Sunday, where she joined the team for its on-field celebration and greeted Kelce with a kiss. Since she's performing in Japan the weekend of the Super Bowl, fans began wondering whether she'll make it to Las Vegas to watch Kelce and Kansas City face the San Francisco 49ers.

It seems only natural they would be able to put money on it in Vegas.

As a matter of principle, though, Ewing said it makes sense not to allow bets on things apart from the on-field action, such as the length of the national anthem.

"We don't want any subjectivity in a prop (bet)," Ewing said. "We want it to be either it won or it didn't win or went over or went under, and that's the concern for regulators as well. That's why typically we stick to if it's in the box score, it can be posted."

Caesars Sportsbook assistant trading director Adam Pullen's position is the more bets, the merrier.

"We've come a long way, but some stuff like we're talking about here (about Swift) or betting on elections, there still might be a few years before we get to that point," Pullen said. "But I like anything that drives action and gets people to bet. But we're dependent on what the regulators in each particular state has to say."

Powell: Federal Reserve is on track to cut rates, though not likely for months

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Interest rate cuts are coming. Just not yet.

The Federal Reserve delivered that message Wednesday, first in a policy statement and then in a news conference at which Chair Jerome Powell reinforced it.

The Fed did signal that it's nearing a long-awaited shift toward cutting rates, evidence that its officials have grown confident that they're close to fully taming inflation. No longer does its policy statement say it's still considering further rate hikes.

Yet the officials made clear that the first rate cut is likely months away. Their statement said they don't think it would be time to cut rates "until it has gained greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably" to their 2% target.

Investors and some economists had been holding out the possibility that the Fed might cut as early as its next meeting in March. That now appears off the table.

"I don't think it's likely that the committee will reach a level of confidence by the time of the March meeting" to start cutting rates, Powell said at his news conference.

The central bank kept its key rate unchanged at about 5.4%, a 22-year high. But the changes to its statement — compared with its last meeting in December — show that it has moved toward considering rate reductions while still maintaining flexibility.

"There is nothing in Powell's remarks or the statement that leads us to worry about the basic story of 'good news' cuts starting soon enough," Krishna Guha, an economics analyst at investment bank Evercore ISI, said in a note to clients.

In December, the Fed's policymakers had indicated that they expected to carry out three quarter-point rate cuts in 2024. Yet they have since said little about when those cuts might begin, and some senior officials stressed that the Fed will proceed cautiously.

On Wednesday, Powell said the Fed doesn't need to see significant changes in the inflation data for it to cut rates. It just needs to see the inflation slowdown continue. Prices have increased at just a 2% annual

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rate in the past six months, according to the Fed's preferred measure.

"It's not that we're looking for better data — it's just that we're looking for a continuation of the good data that we've been getting," he said. "We just need to see more."

The central bank's message Wednesday — that it's edging closer to cutting rates but not planning to do so anytime soon — disappointed traders on Wall Street. Losses in the stock market accelerated after Powell's news conference began.

The change in the Fed's stance comes as the economy is showing surprising durability after a series of 11 rate hikes helped drastically slow inflation, which had hit a four-decade high 18 months ago. Growth remains healthy: In the final three months of last year, the economy expanded at a 3.3% annual rate, the government said last week.

The Fed is assessing inflation and the economy at a time when the intensifying presidential campaign is pivoting in no small part on voters' perceptions of President Joe Biden's economic stewardship. Republicans in Congress have attacked Biden over the high inflation that gripped the nation beginning in 2021 as the economy emerged from recession. But the latest economic data — ranging from steady consumer spending to solid job growth to the slowdown in inflation — has been bolstering consumer confidence.

At his news conference, Powell said the Fed welcomes signs of economic strength.

"We want to see strong growth and a strong labor market," the Fed chair said. "We're looking for inflation to come down, as it has been coming down for the last six months."

Most economists have said they expect the Fed to start cutting its benchmark rate in May or June. Rate cuts would eventually lead to lower borrowing costs for America's consumers and businesses, including for mortgages, auto loans and credit cards.

A year ago, many analysts were predicting that widespread layoffs and sharply higher unemployment would be needed to cool the economy and curb inflation. Yet job growth has been steady. The unemployment rate, at 3.7%, isn't far above a half-century low.

Labor costs are easing, too. On Wednesday, the government reported that pay and benefits for America's workers, which accelerated in 2022, grew in the final three months of 2023 at the slowest pace in 2 1/2 years. That slowdown reduces pressure on companies to raise prices to cover higher labor costs.

The Fed appears on the verge of achieving a rare "soft landing," in which it manages to conquer high inflation without causing a recession. Should the pace of economic growth strengthen, though, it could complicate the challenge for the Fed.

Powell said that faster growth could potentially cause inflation to stall at a rate above 2%, which could complicate the Fed's timetable for rate cuts. For now, with the economy performing well, he said, the Fed doesn't need to rush to reduce borrowing costs.

"If we saw an unexpected weakening in the labor market, that would certainly weigh on cutting sooner," Powell said.

Asked whether he thought the Fed has already achieved a soft landing, Powell suggested it would be premature to say so.

"We have a ways to go," he said. "Core inflation is still well above target on a 12-month basis. Certainly, I'm encouraged and we're encouraged by the progress, but we're not declaring victory at this point. We think we have a ways to go."

Some cracks in the job market have begun to emerge and, if they worsen, could spur the Fed to cut rates quickly. For several months, most of the nation's job growth has occurred in just a few sectors — health care, government and hotels, restaurants and entertainment. Any weakening in those areas of the economy could threaten hiring and the overall expansion.

A report Tuesday showed that the number of workers who quit in December reached its lowest level in three years. That suggested that fewer Americans are being recruited for new, higher-paying jobs or are willing to search for and take new positions. Though quits remain at a level consistent with a solid job market, they have fallen about one-third from their peak in mid-2022.

Still, the U.S. economy is outdoing its counterparts overseas. During the October-December quarter,

the 20 countries that share the euro currency barely avoided a recession, posting essentially no growth. Still, as in the United States, unemployment is very low in the euro area, and inflation has slowed to a 2.9% annual rate. Though the European Central Bank could cut rates as soon as April, many economists think that might not happen until June.

Camp Lejeune water contamination tied to a range of cancers, CDC study says

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Military personnel stationed at Camp Lejeune from 1975 to 1985 had at least a 20% higher risk for a number of cancers than those stationed elsewhere, federal health officials said Wednesday in a long-awaited study about the North Carolina base's contaminated drinking water.

Federal health officials called the research one of the largest ever done in the United States to assess cancer risk by comparing a group who live and worked in a polluted environment to a similar group that did not.

The study found military personnel stationed at U.S. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune were at higher risk for some types of leukemia and lymphoma and cancers of the lung, breast, throat, esophagus and thyroid. Civilians who worked at the base also were at a higher risk for a shorter list of cancers.

The study is "quite impressive," but cannot count as final proof that the tainted drinking water caused the cancers, said David Savitz, a Brown University disease researcher who is consulting for plaintiffs' attorneys in Camp Lejeune-related litigation.

"This is not something we're going to be able to resolve definitively," he said. "We are talking about exposures that happened (decades ago) that were not well documented."

But he said the new research will add weight to arguments made on behalf of people who got sick after living and working at the base.

Camp Lejeune was built in a sandy pine forest along the North Carolina coast in the early 1940s. Its drinking water was contaminated with industrial solvents from the early 1950s to 1985. The contamination — detected in the early 1980s — was blamed on a poorly maintained fuel depot and indiscriminate dumping on the base, as well as from an off-base dry cleaner.

Before wells were shut down, contaminated water was piped to barracks, offices, housing for enlisted families, schools and the base's hospital. Military personnel and families drank it, cooked with it and bathed in it.

The contamination has spawned a wave of litigation by law firms who have aggressively sought out clients with TV ads.

People who got sick after being at Camp Lejeune have accused the Marine Corps of failing to protect the health of its personnel and criticized the federal government for being slow to investigate. Marine Corps officials have repeatedly said that federal environmental regulations for these cancer-causing chemicals were not finalized until 1989, after the wells were shut down.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, or ATSDR, an Atlanta-based sister agency to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has done about a half-dozen studies focused on health problems in people at Camp Lejeune. Those studies were smaller than the new one, and had varied focuses, including male breast cancer rates and birth defects in children born to base personnel.

The earlier studies pointed out health risks, but the new work "more fully establishes the scope," said Richard Clapp, a Boston University emeritus public health professor who has been involved in past Camp Lejeune research.

Dr. Aaron Bernstein, the head of the ATSDR and CDC's environmental health programs, called the new study "remarkable" for being bigger and more rigorous than past research.

In the new paper, the ATSDR investigated cancer in about 211,000 people who were stationed at or worked at Camp Lejeune between 1975 and 1985 and compared them to about 224,000 people at California's Camp Pendleton — which was not known to have polluted groundwater — during the same time period.

Frank Bove, a senior epidemiologist, has led the agency's Camp Lejeune research for many years and was in charge of the latest study. He relied on staff at Battelle Memorial Institute and others to comb through cancer registries across the country to look for cases tied to either base.

They found a similar number of malignant cancers in each group, about 12,000. But the numbers — and the relative risks calculated from those numbers — were higher in the Camp Lejeune population for a number of specific types of cancer. That list included some that weren't clearly identified in some earlier studies, most notably thyroid cancer, Clapp said.

A federal law signed by President Joe Biden in August 2022 included language to address concerns of people who developed certain health problems they believe were linked to Camp Lejeune water contamination. It gave them a two-year window to file claims.

The new study may lead to inclusion of thyroid cancer to be added to the list of diseases for which Camp Lejeune personnel and their families might one day be compensated, Clapp said.

The paper, which underwent external peer review, is being submitted for publication, agency officials said.

James Biden agrees to a private interview with House Republicans investigating the president

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — James Biden will appear before House Republicans for a private interview next month as lawmakers seek to regain some momentum in their monthslong impeachment inquiry into his brother, President Joe Biden.

The House Oversight and Accountability Committee announced on Wednesday that the Democratic president's younger sibling will come to Capitol Hill on Feb. 21. The date was set after months of negotiations between the sides.

"We look forward to his interview," the committee posted on X, the website formerly known as Twitter.

James Biden's interview will take place just days before the president's son Hunter Biden will be deposed in private by the Republican-run committee, which has been investigating the Biden family's overseas finances for the past year.

Both James and Hunter Biden were subpoenaed by the committee in November. So far, the GOP investigation has failed to uncover evidence directly implicating the president in any wrongdoing.

A lawyer for James Biden said at the time that there was no justification for the subpoena because the committee had already reviewed private bank records and transactions between the two brothers. The committee found records of two loans that were made when Joe Biden was not in office or a candidate for president.

"There is nothing more to those transactions, and there is nothing wrong with them," lawyer Paul Fishman said in a statement in November. "And Jim Biden has never involved his brother in his business dealings."

Republicans say the evidence they have gathered paints a troubling picture of "influence peddling" by Biden's family in their business dealings, particularly with international clients.

In recent weeks, the committee has deposed several former Biden family associates. In nearly every interview the witnesses have stated that they have seen no evidence that Joe Biden was directly involved in his son or brother's business ventures.

Nonetheless, Republicans, led by the committee chairman, Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, are pushing ahead with an inquiry that could result in impeachment charges against Biden, the ultimate penalty for what the Constitution describes as "high crimes and misdemeanors."

There had been private discussions about bringing articles of impeachment against Biden to the House floor for a vote in February but those conversations have since stalled. House Republicans have shifted their focus, for now, on impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas over his handling of the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border.

A grainy sonar image reignites excitement and skepticism over Earhart's final flight

By JAMES POLLARD and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — A grainy sonar image recorded by a private pilot has reinvigorated interest in one of the past century's most alluring mysteries: What happened to Amelia Earhart when her plane vanished during her flight around the world in 1937?

Numerous expeditions have turned up nothing, only confirming that swaths of ocean floor held no trace of her twin-tailed monoplane. Tony Romeo now believes his new South Carolina-based sea exploration company captured an outline of the iconic American's Lockheed 10-E Electra.

Archaeologists and explorers are hopeful. But whether the tousled-haired pilot's plane lies at the roughly 16,000-foot (4,800-meter) depth remains to be seen. And debates abound about the proper handling of whatever object is discovered.

Archivists are hopeful that Romeo's Deep Sea Vision is close to solving the puzzle — if for no other reason than to return attention to Earhart's accomplishments.

Regardless, the search is on for the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean.

HOW DID DEEP SEA VISION DETECT THE OBJECT THAT COULD BE EARHART'S PLANE?

Romeo wanted more of an adventure than his commercial real estate career. His father flew for Pan American Airlines, his brother is an Air Force pilot and he has a private pilot's license himself. Hailing from an "aviation family," he'd long held interest in the Earhart mystery.

Romeo said he sold his real estate interests to fund last year's search and buy a \$9 million underwater drone from a Norwegian company. The state-of-the-art technology is called the Hugin 6000 — a reference to its ability to break into the deepest layer of the ocean at 6,000 meters (19,700 feet).

A 16-person crew began a roughly 100-day search in September 2023, scanning over 5,200 square miles (13,468 square kilometers) of seafloor. They narrowed their probe to the area around Howland Island, a mid-Pacific atoll between Papua New Guinea and Hawaii.

But it wasn't until the team reviewed sonar data in December that they saw the fuzzy yellow outline of what resembles a plane.

"In the end, we came out with an image of a target that we believe very strongly is Amelia's aircraft," Romeo told The Associated Press.

The next step is taking a camera underwater to better examine the unidentified object. If the visuals confirm the explorers' greatest hopes, Romeo said the goal would be to raise the long-lost Electra.

Ultimately, Romeo said his team undertook the costly adventure to "solve aviation's greatest unsolved mystery." An open hatch could indicate that Earhart and her flight companion escaped after the initial impact, Romeo said, and a cockpit dial could lend insight into what, exactly, went wrong.

FROM ALIEN ABDUCTION TO JAPANESE EXECUTION, THEORIES ABOUT

Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, disappeared while flying from New Guinea to Howland Island as part of her attempt to become the first female pilot to circumnavigate the globe. She had radioed that she was running low on fuel.

The Navy searched but found no trace. The U.S. government's official position has been that Earhart and Noonan went down with their plane.

Since then, theories have veered into the absurd, including abduction by aliens, or Earhart living in New Jersey under an alias. Others speculate she and Noonan were executed by the Japanese or died as castaways on an island.

"Amelia is America's favorite missing person," Romeo said.

Deep Sea Vision's is hardly the first foray. David Jourdan said his exploration company Nauticos searched in vain on three separate expeditions between 2002 and 2017, surveying an area of seafloor about the size of Connecticut. Those efforts were preceded by a \$1 million hunt in 1999 from Nevada-based Dana Timmer. As recently as 2014, Timmer had not given up and sought to raise nearly \$2 million for another go.

Between 1988 and 2002, the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery made six trips to a dif-

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ferent island in the western Pacific Ocean under the impression that Earhart crash-landed on a flat reef 1,800 miles (2,900 kilometers) south of Hawaii.

Hillary Clinton, then the U.S. Secretary of State, encouraged the group in 2012 when it launched a new search for the wreckage fueled by analysis of a 1937 photo believed to show the Lockheed Electra's landing gear jutting out of the island's shoreline.

'WE NEED TO SEE MORE'

Maritime archaeologist James Delgado said Romeo's potential find would change the narrative, but "we need to see more."

"Let's drop some cameras down there and take a look," said Delgado, senior vice president of the archaeological firm SEARCH Inc.

Delgado said Romeo's expedition employed world-class, cutting-edge technology that was once classified and is "revolutionizing our understanding of the deep ocean."

But he said Romeo's team must provide "a forensic level of documentation" to prove it's Earhart's Lockheed. That could mean the patterns in the fuselage's aluminum, the configuration of its tail and details from the cockpit.

Jourdan, of Nauticos, would have expected to see straight wings and not swept wings, like the new sonar suggests, as well as engines. But that could be explained by damage to the aircraft or reflections distorting the image, he acknowledged.

"It could be a plane. It certainly looks like a plane. It could be a geological feature that looks like a plane," he said.

Dorothy Cochrane, an aeronautics curator at the National Air and Space Museum, said Romeo's crew searched in the right place near Howland Island. That's where Earhart desperately sought a runway when she disappeared on the last leg of her flight.

If the object really is the historic aircraft, the question for Cochrane will be whether it is safe to raise. How much of the machinery is still intact would be determined in part by how smoothly Earhart landed, she added.

"That's where you have to really look at this image and say, 'What have we got here?'" said Cochrane.

WHAT IF EARHART'S LOCKHEED ELECTRA HAS BEEN FOUND?

If the fuzzy sonar images turn out to be the plane, international standards for underwater archaeology would strongly suggest the aircraft remain where it is, said Ole Varmer, a retired attorney with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and a senior fellow at The Ocean Foundation.

Nonintrusive research can still be conducted to reveal why the plane possibly crashed, Varmer said.

"You preserve as much of the story as you can," Varmer said. "It's not just the wreck. It's where it is and its context on the seabed. That is part of the story as to how and why it got there. When you salvage it, you're destroying part of the site, which can provide information."

Raising the plane and placing it in a museum would likely cost hundreds of millions of dollars, Varmer said. And while Romeo could conceivably make a salvage claim in the courts, the plane's owner has the right to deny it.

Earhart bought the Lockheed with money raised, at least in part, by the Purdue Research Foundation, according to a blog post by Purdue University in Indiana. And she planned to return the aircraft to the school.

Romeo said the team believes the plane belongs in the Smithsonian. Acknowledging the "uncharted territory" of potential legal issues, he said his exploration company will "deal with those as they come up."

South Africa says Israel is already ignoring UN court ruling ordering it to prevent deaths in Gaza

By GERALD IMRAY and SEBABATSO MOSAMO Associated Press

PRETORIA, South Africa (AP) — Israel has ignored the ruling by the U.N.'s top court last week by killing hundreds more civilians in a matter of days in Gaza, South Africa's foreign minister said Wednesday, adding that her country has asked why an arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not been issued in a case South Africa filed at the separate International Criminal Court.

Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said South Africa would "look at proposing other measures to the global community" in a bid to stop Israel killing civilians during its war in Gaza against Hamas militants, but didn't go into details.

The preliminary ruling by the U.N.'s International Court of Justice in South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide against Palestinians in the territory. It stopped short of ordering a cease-fire. It also ruled Israel must urgently get basic humanitarian aid to Gaza and submit a report on steps taken to abide by the ruling within a month.

A top official in South Africa's foreign ministry has said the country hopes that Friday's ruling, and whether Israel is abiding by it, will be discussed on a wider level at the United Nations, possibly as early as Wednesday.

Since the ruling, Israel has continued its military offensive, which it says is aimed at Hamas, and hundreds more Palestinians have been killed, according to figures from the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. The ministry said Wednesday that 150 people were killed in the territory in the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of Palestinian deaths in the war to more than 26,700.

The Health Ministry's count does not differentiate between combatants and civilians. It says the majority of the dead are women and children.

"I can't be dishonest. I believe the rulings of the court have been ignored," South Africa's foreign minister said. "Hundreds of people have been killed in the last three or four days. And clearly Israel believes it has license to do as it wishes."

Pandor said there was a danger of the world doing nothing to stop the civilian casualties in Gaza and said similar inaction contributed to the horrific death toll in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, when more than 800,000 people were slaughtered in the East African country.

"We are allowing this to happen again, right before our eyes, on our TV screens," Pandor said.

The court's ruling is binding on Israel, and the country could face U.N. sanctions if it is found to be breaching its orders, although any sanctions may be vetoed by close ally the United States.

Netanyahu has said that Israel "will continue to do what is necessary to defend our country and defend our people." Israel says the offensive is aimed at destroying Hamas after its Oct. 7 attacks on Israel that killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

Israel says it has abided by international law and is doing its best to minimize civilian casualties in Gaza. It says it has killed more than 9,000 militants and accuses Hamas of embedding in civilian areas, making it difficult to avoid civilian casualties.

South Africa's governing party, the African National Congress, has long compared Israel's policies in Gaza and the West Bank to its own history under the apartheid regime of white minority rule, which restricted most Black people to "homelands" before ending in 1994.

Pandor also said South Africa was eager to pursue the case it has lodged with the separate International Criminal Court, an indication the country will continue its legal pressure on Israel. In the ICC case, South Africa accuses Netanyahu of war crimes and asks the court to order his arrest.

The ICJ and ICC are both based in The Hague but deal with different cases. The ICJ is a U.N. court that decides disputes between countries. The ICC prosecutes individuals.

A South African delegation met with the ICC court president and prosecutor while in The Hague last week for the ICJ ruling, Pandor said, and stressed "our concern at the slow pace of action on matters that

we referred to them as urgent matters.”

South Africa filed its case against Netanyahu at the ICC in November. The ICC is the same court that issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin last year over alleged war crimes relating to the removal of children from Ukraine.

“The (ICC) prosecutor assured us the matter is in hand and being looked at by his office,” Pandor said of South Africa’s allegations against Netanyahu. “What I felt he didn’t answer me sufficiently on was, I asked him why he was able to issue an arrest warrant for Mr. Putin while he is unable to do so for the Prime Minister of Israel. He couldn’t answer and didn’t answer that question.”

Israel, like Russia, is not a signatory to the treaty that created the ICC and does not recognize the court’s authority.

From marching bands to megastars: How the Super Bowl halftime show became a global spectacle

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Underneath his umbrella, NFL legend Dan Marino stood nearly drenched on the sideline watching Prince’s epic “Purple Rain” Super Bowl halftime performance in 2007 during a torrential Miami downpour.

For Marino, Prince’s iconic show was one the greatest moments in the history of halftime shows — which was once viewed as a humdrum intermission featuring college marching bands. But in time, the midway point of the NFL’s championship game has emerged into one of sport’s biggest spectacles with superstar performances from Michael Jackson, Beyoncé, Madonna, Aerosmith and U2.

“The halftime performance has come a long way,” said the Hall of Fame quarterback who played 17 seasons with the Miami Dolphins and competed in the 1985 Super Bowl. As an NFL analyst, Marino’s had a front-row seat to several halftime shows.

“Not a lot of people really watched it,” he continued. “But now, as we head into Super Bowl 58, people love to watch the halftime show.”

In nearly six decades, the halftime festivities have transformed from a family-oriented show with patriotic tunes into entertainment’s biggest stage with top-tier performers, pyrotechnics and superb backup dancers. The 12-to-15 minute performance sometimes attracts more eyeballs than the actual championship game, consistently drawing more than 100 million viewers.

Last year, Rihanna’s performance became the most-watched in history with over 121 million viewers, barely edging Katy Perry’s 2015 show. The number from Rihanna’s set is about six million more than Fox’s broadcast of the Kansas City Chiefs’ 38-35 victory against the Philadelphia Eagles.

“I think the live element is pretty exciting for people because it’s a massive production and there’s so many moving pieces,” said actor Scarlett Johansson, who doesn’t consider herself a football enthusiast. But she’s intrigued by the unpredictability of the halftime show like Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson’s infamous “wardrobe malfunction,” Lady Gaga dropping from a stadium roof and Rihanna’s pregnancy reveal.

“You kind of watch with nervous excitement,” Johansson said. “You know at any moment something could maybe go wrong. That’s why it’s so fun to watch it because you’ve got all this anticipation. The production is so huge and so many people have come together to create this one moment. It’s kind of awesome.”

Kris Jenner agrees, calling the halftime show a “giant surprise.”

“The production level and how quickly they put it together as they’re breaking into commercial and come back with this fabulous, epic show,” said Jenner, the matriarch of “The Kardashians” reality television show. “Through all the years and technology, it gets better and better. It’s so exciting to watch and see what they come up with next and who is going to perform. It’s such a big deal.”

Usher — who last year told The Associated Press his appearance with the Black Eyed Peas during the 2011 Super Bowl taught him not to “take the moments for granted because you only get 13 of them” — will headline this year’s show in Las Vegas on Feb. 11.

His show will be vastly different than the NFL’s first Super Bowl halftime show in 1967, which featured

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marching bands from the University of Arizona and Grambling State University, a historically Black college, along with hundreds of flying pigeons, thousands of balloons and two soaring men wearing jetpacks.

After the inaugural Super Bowl, the NFL kept bringing back other marching bands, drill teams, signed Chubby Checker and Up with People, an organization that stage positive thinking through dance and song performances. However, none of those acts were considered huge draws.

But as the Super Bowl's popularity soared and game day emerged as an unofficial holiday in the U.S., the NFL wanted the halftime show to grow in the same capacity. The league tapped New Kids on the Block and Gloria Estefan the first two years of the '90s. Then it saw a huge breakthrough when Michael Jackson headlined the 1993 show at the Rose Bowl in Southern California, where the King of Pop notoriously moonwalked across the stage and performed hits including "Billie Jean," "Black or White" and "Heal the World."

Jackson's stellar performance opened the door for other stars like the Rolling Stones, Diana Ross, Jennifer Lopez and Shakira who are eager to perform.

"That certainly was the one that changed the course of pop stars and major musicians taking that stage seriously," said Seth Dudowsky, the head of music at the NFL. He's the point person for all musical activations for the league and a liaison with Jay-Z's Roc Nation, which has produced the halftime show since 2019.

The NFL handles production costs and expenses for performers — who don't get paid — but the exposure to hundreds of millions of people worldwide is considered priceless.

Dudowsky recalled when Coldplay frontman Chris Martin said the "Super Bowl of music is the Super Bowl." He said the halftime show has been able to grow thanks to the NFL's ability to adjust to the current culture and giving deserving artists the platform to express their artistry.

Some notable examples include U2's remembrance of the 9/11 victims; Beyoncé's unapologetic Blackness and political activism through her Black power anthem "Formation"; and the first show to feature hip-hop artists led by Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg in 2022.

"We really wanted to start to focus on leading into culture," said Dudowsky, who has worked at the NFL since 2013 and attended 11 Super Bowls. "Whether that's the culture of the city, what's happening in culture at large and then focusing on it so that what we're doing feels culturally relevant and using that platform for artists to be able to be themselves and show their art on stage. ... We want them to feel empowered."

Dogg praised NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and Jay-Z for pushing the halftime show forward. The league worked with Roc Nation to help its Inspire Change initiative, created by the NFL after an agreement with a coalition of players who demonstrated during the national anthem to protest social and racial injustice in this country.

"Shout out to Jay-Z for changing the climate. Roger Goodell for giving him an opportunity," Dogg said. "This is music. The music that dictates the world is what's performing at halftime now. They're starting to understand that it's about what those players want to hear, what those fans want to hear, and what's universally effective. It has no color on it now. Pop used to have a color on it. Now pop is popular. So, the most popular music is the music that we make. It makes sense to put those people on there that make that music."

Dogg said Usher perfectly "fits the mold to the fullest."

"He looks good. He dances good. He sounds good," the rapper said. "All the above. And he's got hit records. You want to see that. You want to see a performer perform. You want to see a real entertainer."

Taylor Swift, Bad Bunny and others may vanish from TikTok as licensing dispute boils over

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

Universal Music Group, which represents artists including Taylor Swift, Drake, Adele, Bad Bunny and Billie Eilish, says that it will no longer allow its music on TikTok now that a licensing deal between the two parties has expired.

UMG said that it had not agreed to terms of a new deal with TikTok, and plans to stop licensing content from the artists it represents on the social media platform that is owned by ByteDance, as well as TikTok Music services.

The licensing agreement between UMG and TikTok is expired as of Wednesday.

In a Tuesday letter addressed to artists and songwriters, UMG said that it had been pressing TikTok on three issues: "appropriate compensation for our artists and songwriters, protecting human artists from the harmful effects of AI, and online safety for TikTok's users."

UMG said that TikTok proposed paying its artists and songwriters at a rate that's a fraction of the rate that other major social platforms pay, adding that TikTok makes up only about 1% of its total revenue.

"Ultimately TikTok is trying to build a music-based business, without paying fair value for the music," UMG said.

TikTok pushed back against claims by UMG, saying that it has reached 'artist-first' agreements with every other label and publisher.

"Clearly, Universal's self-serving actions are not in the best interests of artists, songwriters and fans," TikTok said.

Yet Universal Music also called new technology a potential threat to artists and said that TikTok is developing tools to enable, promote and encourage AI music creation. UMG accused the platform of "demanding a contractual right which would allow this content to massively dilute the royalty pool for human artists, in a move that is nothing short of sponsoring artist replacement by AI."

UMG also took issue with what it described as safety issues on TikTok. UMG is unsatisfied with TikTok's efforts to deal with what it says is hate speech, bigotry, bullying and harassment. It said that having troubling content removed from TikTok is a "monumentally cumbersome and inefficient process which equates to the digital equivalent of 'Whack-a-Mole.'"

UMG said it proposed that TikTok take steps similar to what some of its other social media platform partners use, but that it was met with indifference at first, and then with intimidation.

"As our negotiations continued, TikTok attempted to bully us into accepting a deal worth less than the previous deal, far less than fair market value and not reflective of their exponential growth," UMG said. "How did it try to intimidate us? By selectively removing the music of certain of our developing artists, while keeping on the platform our audience-driving global stars."

TikTok, however said that Universal Music is putting "their own greed above the interests of their artists and songwriters."

Days of Darkness: How one woman escaped the conspiracy theory trap that has ensnared millions

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — At first his stories seemed harmless. Tales about secret organizations plotting to take over the world, about the good guys working to save it, and about the proof that, if you knew where to look, was hiding in plain sight.

To Ramona, her boyfriend Don's tales of conspiracy theories sounded like a movie. A lot of it didn't make much sense, but Ramona would nod along anyway. Don enjoyed telling his stories and showing off what he'd read online. He always knew the answer.

The pair met while still in high school. They worked at the same fast-food place in Ramona's hometown

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in western Tennessee. They started dating a few years later. Don was a big guy, good with engines, somebody who could fix anything. Ramona had always wanted to be a teacher and was enrolled at a nearby college. Sometimes she struggled with anxiety, but with Don she felt safe.

The couple moved in together as COVID-19 swept the globe. To Don, the pandemic and the global response to it were filled with clues pointing to some kind of conspiracy, orchestrated by America's leaders and the media. Maybe the virus was accidentally leaked from a lab; maybe it was a bioweapon. Don also suspected the lockdowns had a nefarious purpose, and he believed the vaccines were unsafe, perhaps designed to kill.

Don's wild stories had seemed innocent and even silly before, but in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic they suddenly seemed plausible. At a scary time, when questions about the virus outnumbered answers, the conspiracy theories filled in some of the blanks.

"I have a lot of fear about what I can't control," Ramona, now 23, said of her vulnerable mindset as COVID-19 spread. Ramona agreed to tell her story to The Associated Press after she detailed her experiences on a forum for recovering conspiracy theorists. The AP is not fully identifying Ramona or her ex-boyfriend to protect her privacy and safety. "The stuff he was telling me, it made me feel like at least we understood. He had an explanation for what was going on. I didn't realize what I was getting into."

This alternate reality nourished by these conspiracy theories would transform Ramona's life, sending her down a dark path of paranoia and loneliness that upended her life and spun her dreams of the future into turmoil. Convinced that a "New World Order" was already underway, she fell into a trap that has ensnared millions of Americans and even, at times, hijacked the nation's politics.

Isolated from friends and family, distrustful of the explanations offered by officials and the media, Ramona and Don began to prepare. The military might try to put Americans like them in concentration camps run by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA. They had to be ready to flee.

The couple began stockpiling food and supplies. Don started a "go-bag" containing survival gear. He used their modest savings to buy a rifle, a handgun and ammunition.

One cold day in January 2021, Don read about a power outage in Vatican City on one of his conspiracy theory websites. The couple discussed what it might mean: Perhaps the Pope had been secretly arrested for his role in the conspiracy to control the world. Or maybe the bad guys had knocked out the power so they could smuggle child sex victims in or out of the Vatican.

Either way, the outage meant something big was happening. There are no coincidences. Just clues to be deciphered.

A few hours later, Ramona was in the bedroom when the lights in their Tennessee home flickered and then went out. Don started yelling. Ramona says he sounded almost exhilarated.

"He comes running into the bedroom," Ramona recalled. "He says, 'Honey, we gotta go. This is it!'"

They loaded their guns and the dog into the car and drove into the darkness.

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

The AP spoke with more than a dozen people whose lives were disrupted by conspiracy theories — either because they believed them or because a close loved one did.

Many spoke of the social isolation that comes from spending more and more time on conspiracy theory websites and message boards.

They talked about money lost to investment scams or products that claimed to reverse aging or cure COVID-19. They talked about a mounting sense of paranoia and distrust as they began to lose faith in their community and their fellow Americans.

Former believers said conspiracy theories offered them meaning when they felt empty, even if those promises proved to be hollow themselves.

"I was suicidal before I got into conspiracy theories," said Antonio Perez, 45, a Hawaii man who became obsessed with Sept. 11 conspiracy theories and QAnon until he decided they were interfering with his life two years ago. Back then, when he first found other online conspiracy theorists, he was ecstatic. "It's like: My God, I've finally found my people!"

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"I think I got a sense of self-importance" from conspiracy theories, Perez said. He believed that he alone "was figuring everything out. It all ties into wanting to be a hero."

Belief in conspiracy theories is a common, and usually harmless, part of people's instinctive need to identify threats and explain the unknown. They can be an entertaining diversion for many, though for some, obsessive interest in these claims can lead to social isolation, paranoia and distrust.

Such beliefs also create their own community.

Websites, streaming podcasts, online forums and Facebook groups have created virtual refuges for conspiracy theorists. They are places to speculate and swap information without worrying about the mockery of outsiders, virtual clubs where, for a few hours at least, the unseen forces behind the headlines can be seen and understood.

Similar online communities have sprouted for the family members and loved ones left behind when someone is consumed by conspiracy theories such as QAnon.

On forums on Reddit and other sites, they mourn lost relationships and bemoan the fantasy worlds that consumed their loved ones.

"I've really been missing my mom lately," reads a post from a woman whose mother fell into QAnon. Another post mourns a relationship with a brother, lost to the conspiracy theory: "I miss his goofy laugh most of all."

People choose what to believe. They build a worldview day by day, using it to understand the past and present and to make decisions for the future. But if people pick the wrong stories, they risk lying to themselves, and to each other.

"We are the stories we tell ourselves," said John Llewellyn, a professor at Wake Forest University who studies conspiracy theories and why people believe what they believe. "We've landed on the moon, and now we've got artificial intelligence — for better or worse — but no matter how advanced we get, we still have to deal with the human brain."

But the stories people tell themselves aren't always the same as the truth, and the difference, as Ramona found, can be the difference between freedom and a prison.

RAMONA'S STORY

When Ramona was a little girl, her father worked as an auctioneer. One day he brought home an antique school desk that didn't sell.

When Ramona's friends came over, they played school, with Ramona always taking the role of teacher. When she was alone, she would line up her stuffed animals and "teach them whatever I had learned at school that day," she recalls. She didn't realize it at the time, but she was hooked.

Ramona was studying for her education degree and living in the dorms when the pandemic hit. Don was working at the local auto plant. When Ramona's classes went online, he urged her to drop out. He was making good money, enough for Ramona to quit her job and leave college. Ramona didn't want to give up on her education, so as a compromise she transferred to a smaller, local college to be closer to Don during the pandemic. Soon, she had moved in with him.

Alone and isolated because of lockdowns, Ramona read and talked more and more about conspiracy theories. Though Ramona and her boyfriend didn't use the word themselves, their views were consistent with QAnon, the sprawling conspiracy theory that claims Donald Trump is fighting a secret, satanic cult of world leaders and celebrities intent on world domination. The QAnon thinking goes that this group, known as the "Cabal," not only controls world events but also traffics children for sexual exploitation, and consumes human blood in order to extend their lives.

Initially inspired by an anonymous online poster who claimed, without evidence, to have insider government information, QAnon has become a nexus for several related conspiracy theories relating to COVID-19, Trump and U.S. elections.

As the pandemic wore on, Ramona's anxiety increased. She worried about her future, about her aging father and what a bout of COVID-19 would do to his bad lungs.

She had had many friends in college, but because of the lockdowns and her relationship with Don, she

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spoke to them less and less. Don went to work every day, leaving Ramona with little companionship. "He'd be at work for eight to nine hours a day. I'd have nothing to do," she said, but dig deeper and deeper down into the bizarre and frightening stories she found online.

The conspiracy theories didn't do much to help Ramona's anxiety, but they did offer answers. They provided an outlet for her fears and gave her the idea that if she just did enough research, perhaps she could have power over them. She joined Facebook groups dedicated to QAnon. She started visiting online chat rooms and forums dedicated to conspiracy theories.

"The world is scary enough without conspiracy theories," she said. "But when you believe them, at least they can give you answers. If you're scared of the unknown," conspiracy theories offer "an answer, no matter how farfetched it is."

TRAINING FOR ARMAGEDDON

Ramona and Don spent much of the pandemic preparing for a grim future. QAnon lore prophesied that the forces of good, led by Trump, would triumph over the forces of evil in a final battle known as the "Storm." Ahead of the Storm, QAnon believers say, all power will be cut, perhaps worldwide, as well as most means of communication.

QAnon adherents call this time the "10 Days of Darkness."

The couple began practicing for their escape with drills designed to test their readiness. When Don gave the word, they would scramble to get dressed and load their essentials into the car. Often the training exercises were prompted by something Don had read online.

"Sometimes I'd just be laying there on the couch and he'd say, 'I think we need to get the stuff ready,'" she said. "Usually he'd have been scrolling on his phone before and he'd seen something that would make the lightbulb go off."

On the night the power went off, Ramona helped load the dog, the go-bag and the guns into the car. They planned to head to Ramona's parents' house, but when they got to the main road, they saw blue lights flashing up ahead. Two police cruisers were parked along the shoulder.

Don eased the car close and put it in park. He told the others that he wanted to ask the police what was going on.

"Stay inside," he told Ramona. "Don't get out of the car. I'll be right back."

He walked to the squad car. A policeman rolled down his window. There was a quick exchange before Don turned around and walked back to the couple's car, his face set in a grim expression that to Ramona could have been anger, could have been fear.

Don said the officers told him a semitruck had hit a transformer. Power was out for a good chunk of town.

"Does this mean we should go home?" Ramona asked.

No, Don said. He didn't believe the officers' explanation. With the outage in Vatican City, it was too much of a coincidence.

"That's just what they're telling us," Don told Ramona and his brother. "That's just what they want us to believe."

They drove on and as they rounded a bend, they saw the neon glow of a strip mall up ahead. Cars were lined up at a fast-food drive-thru. People were picking up a late dinner, while she and Don were driving off to confront the end of the world.

Don turned the car around and headed home.

The next day, he dismissed the incident as just another drill and said he hadn't actually been frightened.

Ramona had a harder time moving on from the episode. Her mind went over Don's explanations. Why would the police lie about a power outage? What would an outage in rural Tennessee have to do with Vatican City?

"I started to think: Maybe this is all a hoax," she said. But when she confessed these creeping doubts to Don, he shook his head. Stay strong, he said. "Keep the faith," he'd said. "The storm is coming."

In the days and weeks that followed, Don came up with new drills. He would wake Ramona in the middle of the night and tell her they had to pack the car and leave immediately, only to tell her it had all been a test. He'd hide in closets and jump out when Ramona walked by. If she cried out in surprise, he'd get

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angry and tell her she had to harden herself if she was to survive the end times.

The drills just made her more anxious, more easily startled. To this day she hates practical jokes and sometimes worries that someone is hiding behind a door to surprise her.

"What are you going to do when the military comes to put you in a FEMA camp?" he asked her after one of his drills made her break down in tears.

ESCAPE

At first, conspiracy theories helped Ramona make sense of the world. But now her anxiety was increasing. The constant drills, the steady stream of content about child sex trafficking and satanic sacrifices were too much.

Watching funny videos on TikTok had been one of Ramona's favorite ways to relax. That diversion no longer worked. Seeing people laugh or goof off just made her sad. "I'd just think: Does this person know what's coming?"

Sometimes Ramona couldn't catch her breath. She worried about the future. She didn't sleep well.

"For hours at night, I'd just be scrolling and searching and reading. The more I read, the more anxious I got," she said.

She also began to think more and more about how none of the predictions and prophecies laid out in QAnon lore had come true. Trump wasn't reelected in a landslide in 2020. Vaccinated people weren't turning into zombies. There had been no public executions of "Cabal" members on the National Mall in Washington. The 10 days of darkness did not arrive. The storm hadn't come.

About this time, one of Ramona's friends told her she would be taking a break from social media — a "cleanser," she called it — to see if it helped her mental health. Ramona was curious. On some level, she knew her social media habits were connected to her anxiety. On a whim, she decided to join her friend. She now believes some part of her brain saw it as a way out.

"Doomscrolling is how I used to cope with it," she said, referring to her anxiety.

The "cleanser" stretched from days into weeks, and Ramona felt her mind unclench. She felt more present. Her thoughts less troubled, her mind wandered. She looked up old friends and thought more hopefully about the future.

But habits are hard to break. After weeks of ignoring her feed, Ramona logged back on to Facebook. She missed the sense of community she had found in QAnon forums — the people, not the beliefs — and wanted to reconnect.

But the Facebook group was gone, purged by Facebook. By this point, QAnon had been linked to a growing number of violent incidents, as well as Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election. After giving the conspiracy theory a free platform for years, Facebook had pulled the plug. Ramona never got to say goodbye.

"There was nowhere to go. It was just gone," she said. "At that point, I think I'd decided that I didn't need it anymore."

Don wasn't happy when Ramona told him she was done with conspiracy theories. He also wasn't pleased when she mentioned that she wanted to go back to school and finish her degree.

One day the arguments turned violent, Ramona said. Don had always made Ramona feel safe and protected, but after he hit her, she knew that would never be true.

It was the final clue she needed.

"I started to realize I had to get out," she says.

She moved out and stayed on friends' couches for a while and then a few months later reenrolled in college. She reconnected with friends and made some new ones, too. She started hanging out with an old high school friend. They started dating after a few months. They got married in 2022.

Ramona last spoke to Don about two years ago. She had just gotten vaccinated against COVID-19. When she told him, she could hear him crying softly over the phone.

"He told me: 'Well, you're going to die within a year,'" Ramona recalls.

That year passed, and then another. Ramona graduated and got a job teaching fifth grade. Her days and thoughts are filled with students and lesson plans, instead of late-night drills and go-bags, and storms

that never came.

Miracle cures: Online conspiracy theories are creating a new age of unproven medical treatments

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

BUTLER, Pa. (AP) — The hotel on the outskirts of town looks a lot like lodging one can find on any American highway. Over the years it has been a Holiday Inn and a Days Inn. The sign outside now bears the brand of a new, growing chain. One that promises a lot more than a good night's sleep.

At the Tesla Wellness Hotel and MedBed Center, about 45 minutes north of Pittsburgh, the enticements are nothing short of miraculous.

Part motel, part new-age clinic, the facility offers nightly rentals in rooms that come equipped with "BioHealers" — canisters that the company claims exude "life force energy," or biophotons. Testimonials from the company's patients speak to the devices' power to treat cancer, dementia, chronic pain and a long list of other ailments.

The center also sells the canisters for home use. Prices start at \$599 and range all the way to \$11,000 for the largest model, with slightly cheaper versions available for pets and children.

Just don't call the thousands of people who have shelled out big bucks to Tesla "patients." Dr. James Liu, the physician who founded Tesla, doesn't like the term — perhaps the first clue that what he's selling goes far beyond the abilities of traditional medicine.

"We are not a clinic, not a doctor's office," said Liu, who earned a medical degree in China and a Ph.D. in human nutrition at Penn State University. "For me, for the company, I always call them customers."

Tesla Biohealing, which has no connection to the car company, is part of a growth industry marketing unproven cures and treatments to conspiracy theorists and others who have grown distrustful of science and medicine. Experts who study such claims say they're on the increase, thanks to the internet, social media and skepticism about traditional health care.

"There have always been hucksters selling medical cures, but I do feel like it's accelerating," said Timothy Caulfield, a health policy and law professor at the University of Alberta who studies medical ethics and fraud. "There are some forces driving that: obviously the internet and social media, and distrust of traditional medicine, traditional science. Conspiracy theories are creating and feeding this distrust."

Blending the high-tech jargon of Western science with the spiritual terminology of traditional and Eastern medicine, these modern salesmen claim their treatments can reverse aging, restore mental acuity or fight COVID-19 better than a vaccine. They promise better health, but what they're really selling is the idea of insider information, the promise of a secret known only to the wealthy and the powerful.

So-called medbeds are one of the flashiest, most expensive, and least credible. "Medbeds are coming," exclaims a woman in one TikTok video. Similar videos have been seen millions of times on the platform.

According to believers of the QAnon conspiracy theory, medbeds were developed by the military (in some versions, using alien technology) and are already in use by the world's richest and most powerful families. Many accounts claim former President Donald Trump, if he wins another term in the White House, will unveil the devices and make them free for all Americans.

Whole message boards on Telegram are devoted to discussions about medbeds, and the latest rumors about when and where they will arrive.

"I'm desperately seeking any help from all to answer my prayers to a cure for my son's cancer," wrote one woman on another Telegram channel created by medbed conspiracy theorists in New Jersey.

For those waiting for medbeds to arrive, Tesla BioHealers may be tempting alternative, though one that comes with a cost.

A one-night stay in a "highly-energized" room at the Tesla complex in Butler runs for \$300. The rooms look like any other motel room, although a look beneath the bed reveals several of the biophoton devices placed underneath. The company runs seven other medbed centers in other states and its devices are used at several other "partner" facilities operated by other businesses.

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Inside the canisters? A mix of “fine naturally active stones and activated fine metal, grout, sands and proprietary polymers that are manufactured with a special technology,” according to the company.

In addition to the biophoton emitting cannisters, the company also sells bottled water — 24-packs of 16.9 ounce bottles of Tennessee spring water — for \$150. The company says the water has been imbued with “life force energy” that can increase energy and libido, improve breathing, digestion and sleep, reduce pain and lead to “vivid dreams to indicate enhanced brain activity.”

At Walmart, a 24-pack of 16.9 ounce of generic brand water bottles retails for less than \$4.

Online testimonials from Tesla’s customers speak to the life-changing power of the company’s products, with gushing superlatives such as “It worked miracles!” But experts and scientists who have studied the company’s claims say there’s no scientific evidence to support them.

Tesla acknowledges the facts in its terms of service: “Tesla BioHealing does not provide any medical advice,” the fine print says. “Our products... are not intended to replace your physicians’ care, diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease or medical condition.”

Liu told The Associated Press that he was unfamiliar with the medbed conspiracy theory when he named his company and that he isn’t trying to exploit gullible people who want to believe medbeds are real. He said 40,000 people have used his devices so far, and that he believes the cannisters can treat about 80% of all disease.

Given the primary importance of health, it’s hardly surprising that unproven medical claims and products that seem too-good-to-be-true have a long history in America. More than a century ago, hucksters peddled magic elixirs from wagons. Decades later, electricity sparked a brief craze in electric belts and magnet suits as a supposed cure for anxiety, paralysis or sexual problems. In the 1920s, a quack named John Brinkley became a household name by implanting goat testicles into the bodies of patients complaining of infertility and impotence. He later lost his medical license after he was exposed as a fraud.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the back pages of magazines were filled with ads for mail-order diet pills and supplements that made promises not backed up by the facts.

Today the same claims are made online, where they’ve found a niche audience among conspiracy theorists and others distrustful of science and traditional medicine. “Shop Now!” reads the website of conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, who sells supplements and vitamins alongside survival gear and emergency food rations.

These online communities were thriving long before the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw an explosion of false claims about vaccines, communicable diseases and even basic medical science.

And as the adherents’ suspicion of traditional medicine, the media and the government has grown, more people are willing to put their faith in untested treatments and unproven claims.

In some cases, that faith can have deadly results. Last year, a Florida preacher and members of his family were convicted for selling a COVID-19 cure that was actually toxic industrial bleach. Others have died after ingesting other unproven COVID-19 cures such as chloroquine phosphate and hydroxychloroquine, which was promoted by Trump as president. Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and immunization have also spurred opposition to the lifesaving vaccine.

The Food and Drug Administration maintains an online database of unproven or harmful treatments that it has identified, including unapproved treatments for COVID-19 that contain harmful chemicals, autism “cures” that include raw camel milk and the ingestion of dangerous heavy metals, and medications that supposedly cure all cancer.

“Distrust of government and distrust of major institutions makes people vulnerable,” said Stephen Barrett, a psychiatrist and expert in unproven medical claims who launched the organization Quackwatch in the 1970s to highlight medical scams. “But there are other factors too: Some people are desperate for help and they don’t know what to believe.”

Health care fraud is big business, and the largest source of civil fines and penalties for fraud paid to the federal government last year — more than \$5 billion. Most investigations and prosecutions focused on schemes to defraud public health programs such as Medicaid and Medicare or the billions of dollars set aside for COVID-19. As a result, low-level hucksters or those peddling unproven treatments often don’t

get as much attention.

Liu and other Tesla employees are quick to defend their work, arguing they are only giving people alternatives to a medical system many no longer trust.

Like the automotive company owned by Elon Musk, Tesla BioHealing is named for Nikola Tesla, the 19th-century inventor and early electrical pioneer who, like Musk, has become a favorite of many conspiracy theorists.

Many of Tesla Biohealing's customers have grown frustrated with the answers they get from doctors, said Seth Robinson, a chiropractor who directs Tesla's clinic in Delaware. Asked to describe a typical Tesla patient, Robinson doesn't hesitate.

"Desperate, desperate, desperate is the word," he said. "A lot of times people will come here, they will have anti-medicine thoughts, feelings. We're not anti-medicine. We believe medicine has a place. But medicine has a limitation."

Tesla's claims have attracted the interest of federal regulators. In August, the FDA wrote to the company demanding responses to questions about its devices and their supposed medical benefits. Liu said his company takes the letter seriously and is working on its response.

Among other concerns, the FDA questioned the assertions Tesla has made about its devices. The agency declined to comment on the matter. Depending on Tesla's response, the agency could levy fines or take other punitive actions, including ordering the company to remove its products from the market.

The AP contacted several people who had purchased the products, or whose relatives had, who said they later felt duped. None agreed to speak on the record, citing the fear of public embarrassment. Some angry customers have posted complaints about the products on social media.

"Don't waste your money, I've already wasted mine," said one woman who uploaded a TikTok video about her experiences with a BioHealer. During the video, the woman opened the container to reveal the interior of the canister: a solid mass that resembled concrete. "They sold me a can of cement."

Many of the company's claims ape the language of science, said Caulfield, the Canadian law professor, including technical sounding words like "quantum" or "biophotons" to add to their credibility.

"They sound high-tech and employ the language of technology and medicine, even borrowing the name of Nikola Tesla," Caulfield said. "It's designed to enhance their credibility."

Tesla's claims about life force energy are also based, somewhat, on fact. Biophotons are real — a type of light emitted by living tissue that can't be seen by the human eye. But their role in health is not well understood and use as a medical therapy is not proven, according to Bahman Anvari, a professor of bio-engineering at the University of California, Riverside.

Tesla is now undertaking a clinical study to demonstrate the effectiveness of the canisters. For now, the company cites a single medical study written by Liu and three other Tesla employees as evidence to back up its claims. That study found that Tesla's canisters helped a woman who had complained of severe menstrual pain.

Anvari, however, noted that Tesla's single journal article was not peer-reviewed, was limited to a single patient who was also receiving standard treatments, lacked a control group and has not been replicated.

"It's completely scientifically implausible," Caulfield said. "But if you're desperate, and you're looking for answers, you can see why you'd be drawn to it."

Grave peril of digital conspiracy theories: 'What happens when no one believes anything anymore?'

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Days after Maui's wildfires killed scores of people and destroyed thousands of homes last August, a shocking claim spread with alarming speed on YouTube and TikTok: The blaze on the Hawaiian island was set deliberately, using futuristic energy weapons developed by the U.S. military.

Claims of "evidence" soon emerged: video footage on TikTok showing a beam of blinding white light,

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too straight to be lightning, zapping a residential neighborhood and sending flames and smoke into the sky. The video was shared many millions of times, amplified by neo-Nazis, anti-government radicals and supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory, and presented as proof that America's leaders had turned on the country's citizens.

"What if Maui was just a practice run?" one woman asked on TikTok. "So that the government can use a direct energy weapon on us?"

The TikTok clip had nothing to do with the Maui fires. It was actually video of an electrical transformer explosion in Chile earlier in the year. But that didn't stop a TikTok user with a habit of posting conspiracy videos from using the clip to sow more fear and doubt. It was just one of several similar videos and images doctored and passed off as proof that the wildfires were no accident.

Conspiracy theories have a long history in America, but now they can be fanned around the globe in seconds, amplified by social media, further eroding truth with a newfound destructive force.

With the United States and many other nations facing big elections in 2024, the perils of rapidly spreading disinformation, using ever more sophisticated technology such as artificial intelligence, now also threaten democracy itself — both by fueling extremist groups and by encouraging distrust.

"I think the post-truth world may be a lot closer than we'd like to believe," said A.J. Nash, vice president for intelligence at ZeroFox, a cybersecurity firm that tracks disinformation. "What happens when no one believes anything anymore?"

Extremists and authoritarians deploy disinformation as potent weapons used to recruit new followers and expand their reach, using fake video and photos to fool their followers.

And even when they fail to convince people, the conspiracy theories embraced by these groups contribute to mounting distrust of authorities and democratic institutions, causing people to reject reliable sources of information while encouraging division and suspicion.

Melissa Sell, a 33-year-old Pennsylvania resident, is among those who has lost faith in the facts.

"If it's a big news story on the TV, the majority of the time it's to distract us from something else. Every time you turn around, there's another news story with another agenda distracting all of us," she said. Sell thinks the Maui wildfires may have been intentionally set, perhaps to distract the public, perhaps to test a new weapon. "Because the government has been caught in lies before, how do you know?" she said.

Absent meaningful federal regulations governing social media platforms, it's largely left to Big Tech companies to police their own sites, leading to confusing, inconsistent rules and enforcement. Meta, the owner of Instagram and Facebook, says it makes an effort to remove extremist content. Platforms such as X, formerly known as Twitter, as well as Telegram and far-right sites like Gab, allow it to flourish.

Federal election officials and some lawmakers have suggested regulations governing AI, including rules that would require political campaigns to label AI-generated images used in its ads. But those proposals wouldn't affect the ability of extremist groups or foreign governments to use AI to mislead Americans.

Meanwhile, U.S.-based tech platforms have rolled back their efforts to root out misinformation and hate speech, following the lead of Elon Musk, who fired most of the content moderators when he purchased X.

"There's been a big step backward," said Evan Hansen, the former editor of Wired.com who was Twitter's director of curation before leaving when Musk purchased the platform. "It's gotten to be a very difficult job for the casual observer to figure out: What do I believe here?"

Hansen said a combination of government regulations, voluntary action by tech titans and public awareness will be needed to combat the coming wave of synthetic media. He noted the Israel-Hamas war has already seen a deluge of fake and altered photos and video. Elections in the U.S. and around the world this year will create similar opportunities for digital mischief.

The disinformation spread by extremist groups and even politicians like former President Donald Trump can create the conditions for violence, by demonizing the other side, targeting democratic institutions and convincing their supporters that they're in an existential struggle against those who don't share their beliefs.

Trump has spread lies about elections, voting and his opponents for years. Building on his specious claims of a deep state that controls the federal government, he has echoed QAnon and other conspiracy

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theories and encouraged his followers to see their government as an enemy. He even suggested that now-retired Army Gen. Mark Milley, whom Trump himself nominated to be the top U.S. military officer during his administration, was a traitor and deserved execution. Milley said he has had to take security precautions to protect his family.

The list of incidents blamed on extremists motivated by conspiracy theories is growing. The Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol, attacks on vaccine clinics, anti-immigrant fervor in Spain; and anti-Muslim hate in India: All were carried out by people who believed conspiracy theories about their opponents and who decided violence was an appropriate response.

Polls and research surveys on conspiracy theories show about half of Americans believe in at least one conspiracy theory, and those views seldom lead to violence or extremism. But for some, these beliefs can lead to social isolation and radicalization, interfering with their relationships, career and finances. For an even smaller subset, they can lead to violence.

The credible data that exists on crimes motivated by conspiracy theories shows a disturbing increase. In 2019, researchers at the University of Maryland's National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism identified six violent attacks in which perpetrators said their actions were prompted by a conspiracy theory. In 2020, the year of the most recent survey, there were 116.

Laws designed to rein in the power of social media and artificial intelligence to spread disinformation aren't likely to pass before the 2024 election, and even if they are, enforcement will be a challenge, according to AI expert Vince Lynch, CEO of the tech company IV.AI.

"This is happening now, and it's one of the reasons why our society seems so fragmented," Lynch said. "Hopefully there may be AI regulation someday, but we are already through the looking glass. I do think it's already too late."

To believers, the facts don't matter.

"You can create the universe you want," said Danielle Citron, a professor at the University of Virginia School of Law who studies online harassment and extremism. "If the truth doesn't matter, and there is no accountability for these false beliefs, then people will start to act on them."

Sell, the conspiracy theorist from Pennsylvania, said she began to lose trust in the government and the media shortly after the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, that left 20 students and six educators dead. Sell thought the shooter looked too small and weak to carry out such a bloody act, and the gut-wrenching interviews with stricken loved ones seemed too perfect, almost practiced.

"It seemed scripted," she said. "The pieces did not fit."

That idea — that the victims of the rampage were actors hired as part of a plot to push gun control laws — was notably spread by conspiracy theorist Alex Jones. The families of Sandy Hook victims sued, and the Infowars host was later ordered to pay nearly \$1.5 billion in damages.

Claims that America's elected leaders and media cannot be trusted feature heavily in many conspiracy theories with ties to extremism.

In 2018, a committed conspiracy theorist from Florida mailed pipe bombs to CNN, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and several other top Democrats; the man's social media feed was littered with posts about child sacrifice and chemtrails — the debunked claim that airplane vapor clouds contain chemicals or biological agents being used to control the population.

In another act of violence tied to QAnon, a California man was charged with using a speargun to kill his two children in 2021. He told an FBI agent that he had been enlightened by QAnon conspiracy theories and had become convinced that his wife "possessed serpent DNA and had passed it on to his children."

In 2022, a Colorado woman was found guilty of attempting to kidnap her son from foster care after her daughter said she began associating with QAnon supporters. Other adherents have been accused of environmental vandalism, firing paintballs at military reservists, abducting a child in France and even killing a New York City mob boss.

The coronavirus pandemic, with its attendant social isolation, created ideal conditions for new conspiracy theories as the virus spread fear and uncertainty around the globe. Vaccine clinics were attacked, doctors

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and nurses threatened. 5G communication towers were vandalized and burned as a wild theory spread claiming they were being used to activate microchips hidden in the vaccine. Fears about vaccines led one Wisconsin pharmacist to destroy a batch of the highly sought after immunizations, while bogus claims about supposed COVID-19 treatments and cures led to hospitalizations and death.

Few recent events, however, display the power of conspiracy theories like the Jan. 6 insurrection, when thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, vandalized the offices of Congress and fought with police in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election.

More than 1,200 people have been charged with Capitol riot-related crimes. About 900 have pleaded guilty or been convicted after trials. Over 750 have been sentenced, with roughly two-thirds receiving some term of imprisonment, according to data compiled by The Associated Press. Many of those charged said they had bought into Trump's conspiracy theories about a stolen election.

"We, meaning Trump supporters, were lied to," wrote Jan. 6 defendant Robert Palmer in a letter to a judge, who later sentenced him to more than five years for attacking police. "They kept spitting out the false narrative about a stolen election and how it was 'our duty' to stand up to tyranny."

Many conspiracy theorists reject any link between their beliefs and violence, saying they're being blamed for the actions of a tiny few. Others insist these incidents never occurred, and that events like the Jan. 6 attack were actually false-flag events concocted by the government and media.

"Lies, lies lies: They're lying to you over and over and over again," said Steve Girard, a Pennsylvania man who has protested the incarceration of Jan. 6 defendants. He spoke to the AP while waving a large American flag on a busy street in Washington.

While they may have taken on a bigger role in our politics, surveys show that belief in conspiracy theories hasn't changed much over the years, according to Joe Uscinski, a University of Miami professor and an expert on the history of conspiracy theories. He said he believes that while the internet plays a role in spreading conspiracy theories, most of the blame lies with the politicians who exploit believers.

"Who was the bigger spreader of COVID misinformation: some guy with four followers on Twitter or the president of the United States? The problem is our politicians," Uscinski said. "Jan. 6 happened, and people said: 'Oh, this is Facebook's fault.' No, the president of the United States told his followers to be at this place, at this time and to fight like hell."

Governments in Russia, China, Iran and elsewhere have also pushed extremist content on social media as part of their efforts to destabilize Western democracy. Russia has amplified numerous anti-U.S. conspiracy theories, including ones claiming the U.S. runs secret germ warfare labs and created HIV as a bioweapon, as well as conspiracy theories accusing Ukraine of being a Nazi state.

China has helped spread claims that the U.S. created COVID-19 as a bioweapon.

Tom Fishman, the CEO at the nonprofit Starts With Us, said that Americans can take steps to defend the social fabric by turning off their computer and meeting the people they disagree with. He said Americans must remember what ties them together.

"We can look at the window and see foreshadowing of what could happen if we don't: threats to a functioning democracy, threats of violence against elected leaders," he said. "We have a civic duty to get this right."

Today in History: February 1

Space shuttle Columbia destroyed during re-entry

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Feb. 1, the 32nd day of 2024. There are 334 days left in the year.

Today in History:

In Feb. 1, 2003, the space shuttle Columbia broke apart during re-entry, killing all seven of its crew members: commander Rick Husband; pilot William McCool; payload commander Michael Anderson; mission specialists Kalpana Chawla, David Brown and Laurel Clark; and payload specialist Ilan Ramon, the

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first Israeli in space.

On this date:

In 1790, the U.S. Supreme Court convened for the first time in New York, but because only three of its six justices were present recessed until the next day.

In 1862, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," a poem by Julia Ward Howe, was published in the Atlantic Monthly.

In 1865, abolitionist John S. Rock became the first Black lawyer admitted to the bar of the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1943, during World War II, one of America's most highly decorated military units, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, made up almost exclusively of Japanese-Americans, was authorized.

In 1959, men in Switzerland rejected giving women the right to vote by a more than 2-1 referendum margin. (Swiss women gained the right to vote in 1971.)

In 1960, four Black college students began a sit-in protest at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, where they'd been refused service.

In 1979, Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (hoh-MAY'-nee) received a tumultuous welcome in Tehran as he ended nearly 15 years of exile.

In 1991, 34 people were killed when an arriving USAir jetliner crashed atop a commuter plane on a runway at Los Angeles International Airport.

In 1994, Jeff Gillooly, Tonya Harding's ex-husband, pleaded guilty in Portland, Oregon, to racketeering for his part in the attack on figure skater Nancy Kerrigan in exchange for a 24-month sentence and a \$100,000 fine.

In 2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak announced he would not run for a new term in September elections but rejected protesters' demands he step down immediately and leave the country.

In 2013, Hillary Rodham Clinton formally resigned as America's 67th secretary of state, capping a four-year tenure that saw her shatter records for the number of countries visited.

In 2016, the World Health Organization declared a global emergency over the explosive spread of the Zika virus, which was linked to birth defects in the Americas.

In 2020, as China's death toll from the new coronavirus rose to 259, Beijing criticized Washington's order barring entry to most foreigners who had visited China in the past two weeks.

In 2021, actor Dustin Diamond, best known as "Screech" on the 1990s sitcom "Saved by the Bell," died of cancer at age 44.

In 2023, the FBI searched President Joe Biden's Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, home as part of its investigation into the potential mishandling of classified documents.

Today's birthdays: Today's birthdays: Actor Garrett Morris is 87. Bluegrass singer Del McCoury is 85. TV personality-singer Joy Philbin is 83. Political commentator Fred Barnes is 81. Rock musician Mike Campbell (Tom Petty & the Heartbreakers) is 74. Blues singer-musician Sonny Landreth is 73. Actor-writer-producer Bill Mummy (MOO'-mee) is 70. Rock singer Exene Cervenka is 68. Actor Linus Roache is 60. Princess Stephanie of Monaco is 59. Actor Sherilyn Fenn is 59. Comedian-actor Pauly Shore is 56. Actor Brian Krause is 55. Jazz musician Joshua Redman is 55. Rock musician Patrick Wilson (Weezer) is 55. Actor Michael C. Hall is 53. Rock musician Ron Welty is 53. Rapper Big Boi (Outkast) is 49. Roots rocker Jason Isbell is 45. Country singer Julie Roberts is 45. Rock singer-musician Andrew VanWyngarden is 41. TV personality Lauren Conrad is 38. Actor-singer Heather Morris is 37. Actor and mixed martial artist Ronda Rousey is 37. Rock singer Harry Styles (One Direction) is 30.