

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, Feb. 9

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

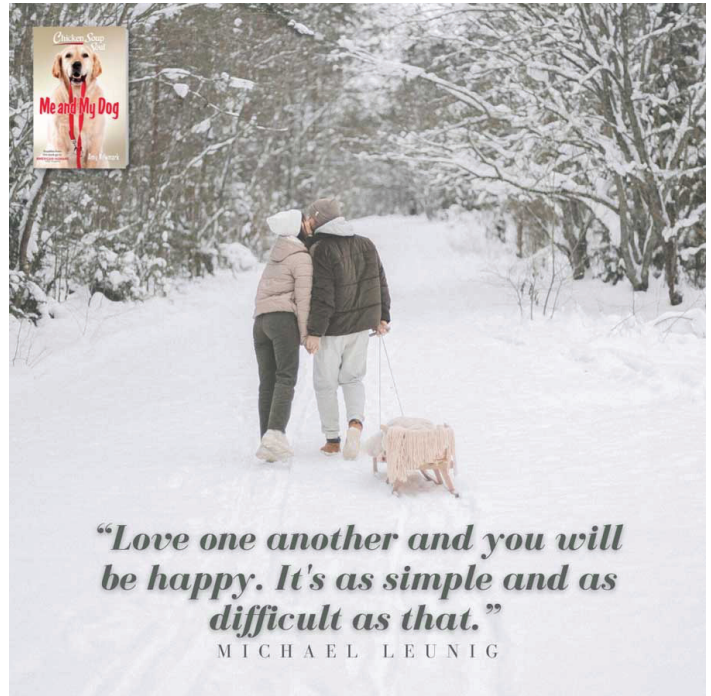
School Breakfast: Cereal.

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.

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



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.

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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The Supreme Court heard arguments yesterday over whether former President Donald Trump's role in the events of Jan. 6, 2021, make him ineligible for public office under the 14th Amendment's insurrection clause. The effort is the first time the Civil War-era provision has been attempted to be applied to a former president.

Lunar New Year celebrations kick off today, marking the start of the lunisolar calendar for billions of people worldwide. The holiday begins with the first new moon of the lunar calendar (specifically 5:59 pm ET) and will conclude in about two weeks on the first full moon. China is anticipating 9 billion trips across the country during the 40-day travel rush around the holiday, nearly double that of last year.

A newly active volcanic system in Iceland's southwest erupted for the third time in two months yesterday, spouting lava fountains over 100 feet high and sending flows across main roads. A key hot water pipe from a power plant serving the area—currently seeing below-freezing temperatures—was destroyed. Officials signaled more activity is likely in the coming months.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Kansas City Chiefs take on the San Francisco 49ers in Super Bowl LVIII Sunday (6:30 pm ET, CBS); see full preview and predictions.

Mojo Nixon, musician, actor, and DJ, dies of cardiac event at 66. Henry Fambrough, founding member of The Spinners, dies at 85.

Golfer Cristobal del Solar shoots a 57 at a Korn Ferry Tour event, the all-time lowest score at a PGA Tour-sanctioned event.

Science & Technology

Google rebrands Bard as Gemini, publicly releases an Android app dedicated to the AI platform. Federal officials ban use of AI-generated voices in robocalls as campaign season shifts into high gear.

Last month marked the warmest January on record (dating back to 1950), while also capping the first full year with global temperatures averaging 1.5 degrees Celsius above the preindustrial baseline.

Sagittarius A*, the supermassive black hole at the Milky Way's center, is spinning so quickly that its effect on spacetime makes it appear shaped like football, study suggest.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close up (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow +0.1%, Nasdaq +0.2%); S&P 500 briefly tops 5,000-point milestone in intraday trading.

Arm shares rise 48% Thursday following chipmaker's better-than-expected earnings the day before, adding roughly \$38B to its market cap. Shipping giant Maersk shares down 15% after suspending share buybacks and warning of slowdown in shipping amid Red Sea disruption.

US weekly jobless claims drop to 218,000 for the week ending Feb. 3; figure from last week marks the first decline in three weeks.

Politics & World Affairs

Senate advances bill for \$95B foreign aid by a vote of 67-32, one day after a bipartisan package combining the support with border security measures failed; \$60B to go to Ukraine and \$14B for Israel.

Special counsel finds President Joe Biden improperly took classified documents after leaving the Obama administration, declines to press charges; report claims frequent memory lapses by Biden during interviews by investigators.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy fires the country's top general, citing stalled effort in war against Russia. Tucker Carlson airs interview with Russian President Vladimir Putin from Moscow. Brazilian police accuse former President Jair Bolsonaro of plotting a coup following 2022 election loss.

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

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

February 12, 2024 – 7:00 PM – GHS Conference Room

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of January 15, 2024 school board meeting and January 30, 2024 special school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of January 2024 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
3. Approval of January 2024 District bills for payment.
4. Approval of January 2024 School Lunch Report.
5. Approval of January 2024 School Transportation Report.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
 - a. Grade 4...Sue Fjeldheim, Joel Guthmiller
 - b. Grade 5...Janel Lone, Shelby Hendrickson
3. Discussion regarding football cooperative with Langford School District.
4. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Approve resignation of Sadie Hanna, Elementary Special Education Teacher, at the end of the 2023-2024 school year.
2. Motion to declare 15 Auto Fundamental textbooks surplus [no value] for disposal.
3. Motion to declare 2016 Chevy Van surplus.

ADJOURN

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2024 Spring Load Restrictions to be Placed into Effect (Restrictions Scheduled for Weeks of Feb. 5-16, 2024)

PIERRE, S.D. - Under the authority of SDCL 32-22-24, Highway Maintaining Authorities may restrict loads as needed to protect their highways from break-up during the spring thaw.

"The unseasonable warm weather increases the freeze thaw cycles and likelihood of damage to our state highways due to heavy vehicle traffic," said Craig Smith, Director of Operations, South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT). "To prevent this damage and preserve our critical infrastructure, it becomes necessary to temporarily restrict loads this time of the year."

To avoid imposing spring load restrictions earlier or longer than necessary, the SDDOT monitors daily high and low temperatures at locations throughout the state and calculates accumulated freeze and thaw indexes. SDDOT also relies heavily on observed highway conditions and the experience of its field personnel to decide when to impose and remove load restrictions.

Each spring, a map of state-proposed spring load restrictions and a list of county roads are posted on the South Dakota Truck Info website at <https://sdtruckinfo.sd.gov/rules-regulations/size-weight-regulations/spring-load-restrictions/> and on the SD511 website at <https://www.sd511.org>. On the SD511 site, click on Traffic Notices then CVO Restrictions to see restrictions placed into effect.

The effective date of any load restriction is determined by weather and road conditions. Beginning this week, spring load limit restrictions will apply to the road segment(s) and at the indicated weight limit shown in the table below.

Effective Date	Highway	Location	Begin/End Mile Marker	Length	Posting	Region
Feb. 9, 2024	U.S. 16A	Custer State Park west gate to S.D. Highway 244	26.25 to 55.76	29.6	7 Tons/Axle	Rapid City
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 87	Wind Cave National Park to U.S. 16/385	47.27 to 79.36	30.8	7 Tons/Axle	Rapid City
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 89	U.S. 16A to S.D. 87	58.51 to 64.58	6.0	7 Tons/Axle	Rapid City
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 40	Hermosa to Cheyenne River	48.60 to 69.00	20.4	7 Tons/Axle	Rapid City
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 26	From S.D. 47 to S.D. 45	230.12 to 252.85	22.7	7 Tons/Axle	Aberdeen
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 26	From S.D. 45 to Hand/Spink County line	253.85 to 267.77	13.9	7 Tons/Axle	Aberdeen
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 25	From De Smet north to S.D. 28	115.75 to 128.88	13.1	6 Tons/Axle	Aberdeen
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 28	Between S.D. 28 and S.D. 25 junctions	316.92 to 319.91	3.0	6 Tons/Axle	Aberdeen
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 28	From U.S. 281 to S.D. 37	269.97 to 283.99	14.0	7 Tons/Axle	Aberdeen
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 1804	From S.D. 44 to Platte Creek	112.13 to 120.16	8.0	6 Tons/Axle	Mitchell
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 1806	U.S. 18 north to Whetstone	15.68 to 25.75	10.0	6 Tons/Axle	Mitchell
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 1806	S.D. 44 to Lucas Corner	37.88 to 48.55	10.7	6 Tons/Axle	Mitchell
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 251	Nebraska state line to U.S. 18	0.00 to 15.84	15.8	6 Tons/Axle	Mitchell
Feb. 9, 2024	S.D. 25	From S.D. 38 to S.D. 34	61.72 to 82.83	21.1	7 Tons/Axle	Mitchell
Feb. 12, 2024	U.S. 81	From S.D. 34 north to U.S. 14	94.71 to 116.75	22.0	7 Tons/Axle	Mitchell
Feb. 15, 2024	S.D. 1806	From U.S. 83 south to one mile east of 303 rd Ave.	164.43 to 180.05	15.6	6 Tons/Axle	Pierre
Feb. 15, 2024	S.D. 1806	Intersection west of dam to Mission Ridge	193.83 to 221.05	27.2	7 Tons/Axle	Pierre

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A spring load restriction report is usually issued in advance of any major load restriction change. This report is issued for guidance only and does not take precedence over any load restriction signs in place. For further information, or to obtain a copy of a Spring Load Restriction Map, please contact the SDDOT at 605-773-3571.

Spring load limit information may also be found on the Internet at <https://sd511.org/>. Click on Traffic Notices then CVO Restrictions for current restrictions or <https://sdtruckinfo.sd.gov/rules-regulations/size-weight-regulations/spring-load-restrictions/>.

Individuals can subscribe to an email list to receive spring load limit restrictions electronically. Subscribe at <https://listserv.sd.gov/scripts/wa.exe?A0=DOTSPRINGLOADLIMITS>. Click "subscribe" located on the right-hand side of the screen and follow the instructions. A valid email address is required. If you would like to unsubscribe at any time from the spring load limit list, visit the same site, click "unsubscribe" and enter the information and email with which you previously subscribed.



ROSEHILL
CHURCH

Women's Gathering

IF : 2024

IF2024.COM



12099 Rose Hill Road
Langford, South Dakota

February 23, 2024 | 6 - 10 pm

February 24, 2024 | 9 am - 4:30 pm

Lincoln County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash
Where: I-29, Mile marker 66, 6 miles south of Tea, SD
When: 4:08 p.m., Wednesday, February 7, 2024

Driver 1: Male, 39, Fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2005 Ford F-250
Seat Belt Used: Under investigation

Lincoln County, S.D.- A 39-year-old Brandon, SD man died Wednesday afternoon in a single vehicle crash in Lincoln County.

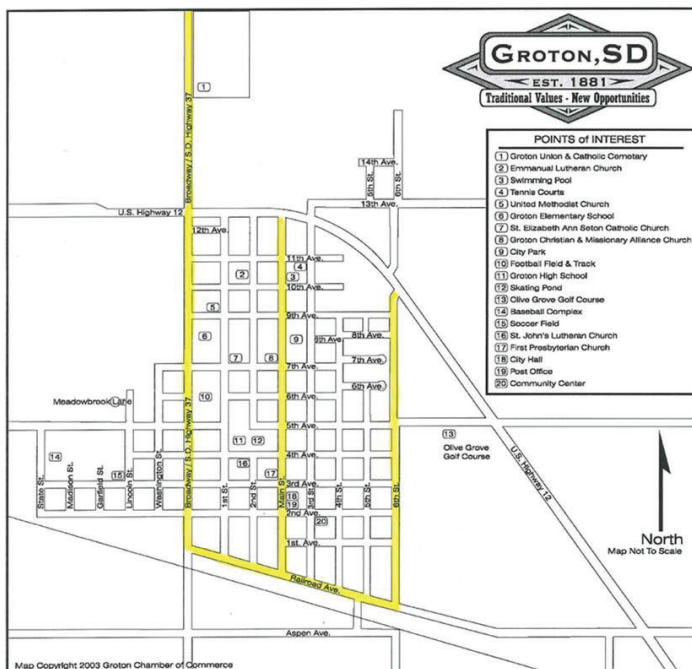
The name of the person involved has not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2005 Ford F-250 was traveling northbound when the vehicle left the roadway to the east, entered onto the shoulder and struck the guard cables and guard rail before going airborne into the overpass pillar. The driver died at the scene. There were no passengers in the vehicle.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

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

Notice of Garbage Pickup- Effective the week of February 12th



To help preserve our streets, Groton residents are asked to bring their garbage to the following locations until further notice:

Railroad Avenue, Main Street, Sixth Street, & Highway 37

Residents of the Broadway Mobile Home Park need to take their garbage to **Highway 37**.

Residents north of 13th Avenue (Olson and Jacobson Developments) need to bring their garbage to the **Bus Barns**.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated during the spring thaw.

Please bring your garbage bags and/or cans to these locations for Tuesday pickup!

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Getting the eggs ready for the Easter Egg Hunt!

On Thursday night, the Groton Lions Club was so thankful for the assistance provided by Groton Chamber and Enrich Groton SoDak Inc members! With this many volunteers working together, over 1200 eggs were filled for the upcoming Groton Lions Club Annual Easter Egg Hunt! See you March 23rd, 10am sharp at the Groton City Park! (Photo by April Abeln)

GHS Boys' Basketball

Groton Area boys defeat Redfield

The Groton Area boys' basketball team posted a 66-22 win over Redfield. The game was played Thursday in Groton.

The Tigers held a 13-7 lead after the first quarter and a 34-16 lead at halftime. The Tigers scored 21 unanswered points in the third quarter to take a 55-22 lead at the break.

Keegen Tracy led Groton Area with 11 points, four rebounds, one assist and three steals. Karson Zak had nine rebounds, one assist and one steal. Ryder Johnson had eight points, four rebounds, three assists and two steals. Jacob Zak had seven points, four rebounds, two assists, three steals and one block. Gage Sippel had seven points, five rebounds and two steals. Lane Tietz had six points, four rebounds, one assist and three steals. Colby Dunker had four points, three rebounds, two assists and two steals. Jayden Schwan had four points, three rebounds, one assist and three steals. Turner Thompson had two points, one rebound, one assist, one steal and one block. Logan Warrington had two points, four rebounds and one steal. Kassen Keough had one rebound, two assists and one steal. Blake Pauli had one steal. Holden Sippel had two rebounds. Easton Weber had. One rebound and one assist.

Groton Area made 23 of 48 two-pointers for 48 percent, four of 16 three-pointers for 25 percent, eight of 17 free throws for 47 percent, had 37 rebounds, eight turnovers, 15 assists, 24 steals, nine team fouls and two block shots.

Three-Pointers: Tietz - 1, Johnson - 1, Tracy - 1, Karson Zak - 1.

Tristen O'Daniel led Redfield with nine points followed by Grady Hulscher with six, Justin Ratigan had four and Jackson Rude had three points.

Three-Pointers: Rude -1, Hulsher - 2.

Redfield had 15 turnovers and 16 team fouls.

Groton Area won the C game, 32-11. Only three quarters were played. There was no junior varsity game.

Karson Zak and Logan Warrington each had 10 points while Jayden Schwan and Ethan Kroll each had five points and Keegan Harry had two points.

Redfield was led by Micah Zastrow and Grady Hulscher with four points apiece and Ethan Falk had three points.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM and the audio piped into the Madison livestream. Game sponsors were Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Locke Electric, The MeatHouse of Andover, Rix Farms/R&M Farms and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking. Paul Kosel did the play-by-play and Jeslyn Kosel operated the camera. The C game was sponsored by Justin and Chelsea Hanson.

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Groton Area senior Jacob Zak guards Redfield senior Tristen O'Daniel during Thursday's game in Groton. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Lane Tietz jumps for a shot during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area senior Lane Tietz searches for a teammate to pass to while Redfield senior Seth Domke guards during Thursday's game.

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Jayden Schwan grabs a loose ball during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Jayden Schwan attempts a shot while Redfield eighth grader Grady Hulscher reaches to block during Thursday's game. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Gage Sippel jumps for a shot during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Logan Ringgenberg jumps for a shot while Redfield senior Justin Ratigan tries to block during Thursday's game. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area junior Blake Pauli dribbles down the court during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area fans react after a basket during Thursday's varsity game against Redfield.

(Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area junior Turner Thompson looks to pass during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area senior Logan Ringgenberg goes for a layup during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area eighth grader Karson Zak looks to pass during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy dribbles down the court during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy jumps while guarding Redfield eighth grader Grady Hulscher during Thursday's game. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area sophomore Keegen Tracy jumps for a shot while Redfield senior Justin Ratigan tries to block during Thursday's game. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Logan Warrington reaches for a rebound during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area sophomore Ryder Johnson passes the ball during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area varsity players high five sophomore Gage Sippel after he goes back to the bench during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)

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Groton Area eighth grader Karson Zak reaches to pass during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area junior Turner Thompson holds the ball as the clock runs down at the end of Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



Groton Area eighth grader Karson Zak dribbles down the court during Thursday's game against Redfield. (Photo by Elizabeth Varin)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Scramble is on for state's remaining federal pandemic aid

Lawmakers file \$280 million worth of requests for \$130 million of funding

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 12:27 PM

South Dakota has \$130 million of federal pandemic aid left and an abundance of ideas about how to spend it.

The requests from legislators are more than double the available funding.

"A lot of hands are already in that bucket, and that bucket is only so deep," said Paul Lepisto, a lobbyist for the Izaak Walton League, which is a national conservation group.

He made the remarks to the Senate State Affairs Committee last week at the Capitol in Pierre. Lepisto testified against a bill that would use \$20 million of the money for grants to the logging and sawmill industries in the Black Hills. The industries need the help to stay afloat after years of wildfires, a tree-killing mountain pine beetle epidemic and pandemic-related effects to their businesses, the bill's proponents said.

The federal funds are limited to a list of eligible uses. The commissioner of the state Bureau of Finance and Management, Jim Terwilliger, testified against the bill. He said it "isn't necessarily a presumed eligible use of funds." Legislators endorsed the bill anyway and sent it to the budget committee for further review.

Republican Sen. Randy Deibert, from the Black Hills city of Spearfish, is the bill's prime sponsor. He suggested Terwilliger might find, with more research, that the bill does meet one of the federal legislation's qualifying uses.

"We're not there yet, but it's a hurdle we think we'll overcome," Deibert said.

Terwilliger said the bill is one of many seeking South Dakota's remaining unobligated dollars from the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act. That was the last of several rounds of federal legislation intended to bolster the country against the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The act created a State Fiscal Stabilization Recovery Fund that included \$974 million for South Dakota. State lawmakers appropriated all but about \$130 million of that money during previous legislative sessions, mostly for water and wastewater projects. The state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources has been rushing to fund projects across the state.

Gov. Kristi Noem said in her December budget address that she wants to spend most of the remaining \$130 million on "various water efforts."

All of the money has to be obligated by the end of this year and spent by the end of 2026. Terwilliger identified at least eight bills seeking the remaining money during the current legislative session, which started in January and ends in March.

"You've got a total of \$270 million in appropriations sitting out there right now going after about \$130 million worth of actual money that's available," Terwilliger said.

Actually, the sum of the requests in the eight bills is about \$280 million. Four of the bills have been unanimously endorsed by legislative committees, all of which sent the bills to the Legislature's main budget panel, the Joint Appropriations Committee, for further review. The other four bills have not had hearings yet.

Bills seeking remaining pandemic aid

SB 49: water and sewer infrastructure for a proposed men's prison in Lincoln County, \$10 million.

SB 50: water and sewer infrastructure for the new women's prison under construction in Rapid City, \$2.42 million.

SB 53, water and wastewater project grants, \$94.38 million, plus \$28 million more if uses of ARPA dol-

lars previously approved by the Legislature are not obligated to specific projects by the end of the year.

SB 66, water, wastewater and storm water projects, \$12.83 million.

SB 134, grants for loggers and sawmills in the Black Hills, \$20 million.

SB 209, telemedicine grants to assisted living centers and nursing homes, \$5 million.

HB 1226, telemedicine grants to schools, \$5 million.

HB 1235, grants for projects to prevent water pollution, \$130.63 million.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

US Supreme Court appears skeptical of Colorado ruling in Trump disqualification case

BY: QUENTIN YOUNG AND CHASE WOODRUFF - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 2:47 PM

U.S. Supreme Court justices heard oral arguments Thursday in a landmark case over whether former President Donald Trump should be barred from the 2024 presidential ballot.

A majority of the justices, including liberal members of the court, expressed skepticism about a ruling from the Colorado Supreme Court that said Trump, the GOP presidential frontrunner, is disqualified from appearing on the state's presidential primary ballot.

A main point of skepticism that emerged through the justices' exchanges with attorneys for Trump and the plaintiffs was whether states have the authority to disqualify federal candidates.

Other apparent objections to the Colorado decision concerned whether the constitutional provision at issue applies to the president, who can enforce it, the implications for democracy if a candidate can be barred from the ballot, the "disuniformity" that would result if states disqualified candidates using different standards, and the definition of "insurrection."

The hearing was over a Colorado Supreme Court ruling from December that found Trump to be disqualified from holding the office and ordered Colorado Secretary of State Jena Griswold not to include Trump's name on the Colorado presidential primary ballot.

The ruling came in response to a lawsuit that was filed in state district court in September by the watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington on behalf of six Colorado voters, who argued Trump is disqualified from office under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. Section 3, ratified after the Civil War, prohibits someone who took an oath to support the Constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" from holding office again.

"Donald Trump tried to overthrow the results of the 2020 presidential election," the lawsuit said. "His efforts culminated on January 6, 2021, when he incited, exacerbated, and otherwise engaged in a violent insurrection at the United States Capitol by a mob who believed they were following his orders, and refused to protect the Capitol or call off the mob for nearly three hours as the attack unfolded."

The district court judge, relying on a five-day evidentiary hearing with expert testimony and extensive briefs, determined that Trump had engaged in insurrection but that Section 3 doesn't apply to presidents.

The Colorado Supreme Court in a 4-3 ruling affirmed the district court's finding that Trump engaged in insurrection but, in a reversal of the district court's order, also concluded that Section 3 applies to presidents.

Trump appealed that decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in taking the case, called Trump v. Anderson, framed the scope of its review in broad terms: "Did the Colorado Supreme Court err in ordering President Trump excluded from the 2024 presidential primary ballot?"

Its answer to that question will have profound implications throughout the country that go beyond this year's election. Efforts to disqualify Trump from the ballot have emerged in most states, and he has already been disqualified in Maine.

Jonathan Mitchell, Trump's attorney, began the hearing Thursday by saying, "The Colorado Supreme Court's decision is wrong and should be reversed for numerous independent reasons."

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Mitchell argued that Section 3 didn't apply to Trump "because the president is not an officer of the United States as that term is used throughout the Constitution."

He also argued that a state barring a federal candidate from the ballot before Congress has the opportunity to relieve the candidate of Section 3 disqualification, as the provision allows for, amounts to an improper alteration of constitutional qualifications for federal office.

"A state cannot exclude any candidate for federal office from the ballot on account of Section 3," Mitchell said, adding later, "A state is not allowed to implement or enforce Section 3 of the 14th Amendment unless and until Congress enacts implementing legislation."

In a sign of hostility to the plaintiffs' case from the liberal side of the court, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson noted that Section 3 appeared to exempt the office of the president from the positions the section specifies an insurrectionist is barred from holding.

"The word 'president' or 'vice president' does not appear specifically on that list," she said during an exchange with Mitchell.

Mitchell also argued that a president was not among the insurrectionist office-holders Section 3 covers.

The plaintiffs' attorney, Jason Murray, tried to persuade the justices that Section 3 must be enforced as a safeguard against the kind of anti-constitutional violence that occurred on Jan. 6.

"For the first time in history, the attack was incited by a sitting president of the United States to disrupt the peaceful transfer of presidential power. By engaging in insurrection against the Constitution, President Trump disqualified himself from public office," he said.

But many of the justices seemed reluctant to affirm that conclusion.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh, echoing several colleagues, suggested Congress, not individual states, has the primary role in stating how Section 3 should be enforced.

"You look at Section 3, the term 'insurrection' jumps out and the questions are, what does that mean? How do you define it? Who decides whether someone is engaged in it?" he said.

Much of the discussion hinged on the so-called Griffin's case ruling from 1869, in which Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase, presiding as a circuit justice, ruled that Section 3 required congressional action to be operative. Trump's legal team and several justices expressed approval of the ruling. Many contemporary legal scholars dismiss the ruling as misguided.

50-50

Dave Williams, the chair of the Colorado Republican Party, was present in the courtroom and told Newsline afterwards that he was confident the court would rule in Trump's favor, regardless of the grounds on which it bases its decision.

"I guess I don't have a specific way for them to resolve it," Williams said. "Ultimately my interest is in ensuring people can vote for Donald Trump. However they get there makes no difference to me."

Norma Anderson, the lead plaintiff in the Colorado case and a former Republican Colorado House speaker, said in an interview after the hearing that the justices were "hard to read."

"I think it's 50-50," Anderson said. "They were very inquisitive. I think what they were trying to figure out is, 'Is this really my job to do?'"

Critics of the lawsuit, even among some Trump opponents, have argued that disqualification of Trump would be a violation of democratic principles, and they say defeat at the ballot box is the best way to bar him from office. Proponents of disqualification argue that the framers of Section 3 intended it as a form of constitutional self-defense against precisely the kind of threat Trump represents and that the provision itself is meant to preserve democracy.

The plaintiffs, beside Anderson, include former Republican U.S. representative from Rhode Island Claudine Schneider, who now lives in Colorado; Denver Post columnist and Republican activist Krista Kafer; Michelle Priola, Kathi Wright, and Christopher Castilian.

The court is expected to issue a ruling in the case sometime before Colorado's March 5 presidential primary election.

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and the economy.*

Thune, Rounds vote yes as U.S. Senate advances emergency funding for Ukraine, Israel

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 2:31 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate moved past a procedural hurdle Thursday to begin work on a \$95 billion emergency spending bill that would provide military and humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

The strong 67-32 vote, which could predict eventual approval, came after a tense week on Capitol Hill that began Sunday evening when a bipartisan trio of senators released legislation they'd worked on for months to change the nation's border security and immigration laws.

Just two days later, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that deal likely wouldn't become law amid opposition from Republican lawmakers as well as former President Donald Trump, the front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination.

The Kentucky Republican said that senators should instead look for ways to approve assistance for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

The Senate on Wednesday officially rejected moving forward with the larger bill that included foreign aid as well as the immigration provisions, even though McConnell and others pressed for it in the first place.

Lawmakers were set to vote on the foreign-assistance-only bill right away, but Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer held that vote over until Thursday to give GOP senators time to figure out if they wanted to begin debate, or block the bill by using the chamber's legislative filibuster.

After deliberating behind closed doors, some Republican senators voted to advance the bill while others voted to block its passage, as election-year politics continued to divide the Senate GOP and affect what would have traditionally been broadly bipartisan legislation.

Schumer said following the vote that he was working with Republicans to get agreement on amendment debate and signaled the Senate wouldn't begin a two-week recess until it approves the legislation.

"Democrats have always been clear that we support having a fair and reasonable amendment process," Schumer said. "During my time as majority leader, I have presided over more amendment votes than the Senate held in all four years of the previous administration."

Schumer added that "for the information of senators, we are going to keep working on this bill until the job is done."

Failure to pass the legislation, Schumer said, would "embolden autocrats" like Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, "who want nothing more than America's decline."

Thune, Rounds among senators who voted to move ahead

Republican senators voting to advance the bill on the procedural vote included West Virginia's Shelley Moore Capito, Louisiana's Bill Cassidy, Maine's Susan Collins, Texas' John Cornyn, Iowa's Joni Ernst, Iowa's Chuck Grassley, Louisiana's John Kennedy, McConnell, Kansas' Jerry Moran, Alaska's Lisa Murkowski, Utah's Mitt Romney, South Dakota's Mike Rounds, Alaska's Dan Sullivan, South Dakota's John Thune, North Carolina's Thom Tillis, Mississippi's Roger Wicker and Indiana's Todd Young.

Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders was the only lawmaker from the Democratic side to vote against moving forward with debate on the bill.

Collins, the top Republican on the Appropriations Committee, said during a floor speech following the vote that approving the emergency spending bill is "critical" for U.S. national security.

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"There are pivotal times in our nation's history when what we do in this chamber really matters," Collins said. "How we vote may well determine whether people live or whether they die."

The legislation, Collins said, would send a "strong message to Putin that his goal of capturing free, democratic nations will not be allowed to succeed."

"It would reassure our closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, that terrorists will not achieve their goal of wiping that nation off the face of the map," Collins said.

Appropriations Chair Patty Murray, a Washington state Democrat, said Congress doesn't "have a minute to waste" in approving the bill.

"How we answer this moment will define America's future on the global stage, and could well redefine the balance of power in the world," Murray said. "So I hope today is truly a breakthrough for bipartisanship, that cooler heads will prevail from here on out and that we can move this forward in a reasonable bipartisan way."

South Carolina Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham said in a statement released before the vote that he would oppose starting debate on the package, which will include amendment votes, because he wanted to see Congress do something about border security.

"I enthusiastically support Ukraine, Taiwan and Israel, but as I have been saying for months now, we must protect America first," Graham said. "I believe there is much more we can do in this regard and I insist that we try. We should not rush this process because Senators want to go on a break — it is too important."

Graham on Wednesday voted against beginning debate on the package that included the border security and immigration law changes negotiated by three of his colleagues. That package would have also received amendment votes.

How the billions would be spent

The foreign-aid-only legislation, released on Wednesday, would provide \$95.3 billion in military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

Most of that funding would go to the U.S. departments of Defense, Energy and State as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The Defense Department would receive \$48.4 billion in assistance for Ukraine that it would then use to replenish weapons and equipment sent to that country to aid in its fight against Russia's invasion.

The U.S. military would also use the money to provide training, intelligence and support for Ukraine.

A total of \$8 million would go to the Defense Department Inspector General to provide oversight of how the U.S. assistance is being used and continue work as the Special Inspector General for Operation Atlantic Resolve.

An additional \$10.6 billion would go to the U.S. Defense Department to aid Israel in its war against Hamas following that organization's terrorist attacks on Oct. 7 and the ongoing hostage situation.

The U.S. Defense Department would get an additional \$2.6 billion "to bolster U.S. and allied capabilities in the Indo-Pacific and deter China," according to a summary of the legislation.

Of that total spending level, money would be divvied up between replenishing weapons the United States military has sent to Taiwan, addressing underfunded requirements of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and building the U.S. capacity for cruise missile components.

The U.S. Energy Department would receive about \$3 billion for the National Nuclear Security Administration to address issues in Ukraine and to "support domestic uranium enrichment to bolster production of civil nuclear fuel and advanced nuclear fuel," according to the summary.

The U.S. State Department and USAID would receive \$9.2 billion for humanitarian assistance that could go toward "emergency food, shelter, and basic services to populations suffering the impacts of a confluence of complex and protracted crises, including in Ukraine, Gaza and the West Bank, East Africa, South Asia, and elsewhere," according to the summary.

An additional \$7.6 billion would be provided for economic assistance in Ukraine as well as other countries

that have been harmed by Russia's war in that country.

The U.S. State Department would get another \$3.5 billion for foreign military financing for Israel to help that country "reestablish territorial security and deterrence."

The Inspector General for the U.S. State Department and USAID would get \$25 million to oversee use of the emergency funding in the bill.

The package also includes the Fentanyl Eradication and Narcotics Deterrence or Fend Off Fentanyl Act, a bipartisan bill that would allow the U.S. government "to apply economic and other financial sanctions to those who engage in the international trafficking of fentanyl, fentanyl precursors, or other related opioids to protect the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States."

The legislation is sponsored by Ohio Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown and South Carolina Republican Sen. Tim Scott.

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.

House panel rejects change for filling legislative vacancies

Rapid City area remains two lawmakers short as session moves past halfway point

BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 6:56 PM

The citizens of the Rapid City area have gone without full representation now for more than half of the 2024 legislative session – and may well go without until the session ends.

That reality wasn't enough to convince members of the House State Affairs Committee to change state law on filling legislative vacancies.

On Thursday, the panel shot down a bill and a constitutional ballot question that aimed to prevent a situation like that again in the future.

Both proposals came from Rep. Tina Mulally, R-Rapid City. She represents District 35, from which former Sen. Jessica Castleberry resigned last year when it was revealed she'd accepted COVID relief funds for her business after casting a vote to allocate the funding. Shortly after Castleberry's departure, District 34 Republican Rep. Jess Olson resigned her seat, citing medical issues.

Gov. Kristi Noem has chosen not to fill the seats until the state Supreme Court rules on the extent of the state constitution's prohibition on legislator conflicts of interest – an issue on which she requested an advisory opinion during the fallout from the Castleberry situation.

Party leaders in Pennington County, home to both half-strength districts, urged Noem to move on the seats before the session, but Noem declined.

That delay has stunted the options for locally relevant lawmaking, Mulally said.

"I have no one I can call on in the Senate to carry any bill for me," Mulally said. "Our district has directly experienced this impact of legislative vacancies. The lack of full representation can only delay critical decision making and addressing local needs."

Legislative districts have two representatives and one senator.

Confusion over process helps tank vacancy proposals

House Bill 1188 would have forced the governor to choose, within 90 days, a replacement for vacant positions from a list of three candidates chosen by the central committee of the former office-holder's political party. House Joint Resolution 5002 would have asked South Dakota voters to amend the state constitution to allow for such a system.

The state constitution currently gives sole authority to fill open seats to the governor.

Tonchi Weaver of South Dakota Citizens for Liberty testified in support of Mulally's proposals. She's a resident of District 34.

Weaver also noted Rep. Becky Drury's move to District 34 from District 32. Drury was appointed to fill Olson's House seat in District 34 on Jan. 16. Given that District 34 Sen. Mike Diedrich is absent from the session for medical reasons, Weaver said, that decision was one bright spot for residents of that district.

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"Due to the illness of Senator Diedrich, our district would have had two vacancies, effective vacancies, had not the governor moved the representation of 32 over into 34," Weaver said.

The committee's lock-step unanimity in opposition to Mulally's ideas was colored by concerns of practicality, and about the need to adjust the state's founding document to fix what several committee members described as the unique set of circumstances surrounding the empty seats.

Nathan Sanderson of the South Dakota Retailers Association testified against Mulally's proposals. The lobbyist told the committee that his membership has a keen interest in government affairs, and that the solutions offered would cause more problems than they would fix.

The clearest reason, Sanderson argued, is that legislative districts don't align with counties. Some districts stretch across multiple counties, and some of those only include portions of certain counties.

In those cases – or in cases where counties lack a central committee – selecting three people to fill vacancies could devolve into tangled disputes that HB 1188 has no mechanism for unraveling.

"What happens when one central committee disagrees with the other?" Sanderson said.

Rep. Roger Chase, R-Huron, was among the committee members swayed by that argument. Districts 34 and 35 have been unluckily hamstrung by the Castleberry fallout, he acknowledged, but the current system typically serves citizens well.

"The governor is waiting for some type of guidance from the Supreme Court on waiting to get these vacancies filled," Chase said. "Other than that, appointments have been made, and those seats have been filled by the governor's appointments. I don't think this is going to really be something that we need to tackle in the future."

The committee voted down HB 1188 just before taking up Mulally's joint resolution, which failed about 10 minutes later after comments from the same supporters and opponents who testified on the bill.

Fake ballot bill passes

Another Mulally bill before the committee, HB 1189, was also dispatched on a unanimous vote Thursday. It would have banned the use of taxpayer dollars for political activity, which would bar cities, counties, school districts and any other entity that collects tax dollars from hiring lobbyists. A parade of lobbyists argued that the restriction would hamstring agencies and shield lawmakers from their expertise on public affairs.

The committee did send one bill to the House floor.

HB 1239 came from Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls. It would ban the dissemination of phony ballots in electoral material. South Dakota already has a law prohibiting the circulation of misleading copies of ballot measures, which has been on the books since 1913. Soye told the committee that whole ballots ought to be covered, as well.

Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, testified in support of the measure. He handed out copies of a mailer, sent before the 2022 primary, that resembled an official ballot but "intentionally misstated the true contents of the ballot."

If lying about a ballot measure is illegal, he said, lying about what's on a ballot ought to be, as well.

The committee added an amendment to make clear that such deception would only be illegal if the ballot is "purported to be a real or sample ballot" as a way to give some freedom to political operatives who might use parts of a ballot in their communications, then passed HB 1239 on to the House floor with a 7-2 vote.

Rep. Erin Healy, D-Sioux Falls, joined Rep. Chase to vote against the measure. Healy said she's not convinced it steers clear of restricting free speech.

Chase wasn't convinced the change would make any difference.

"If we think this is going to stop misleading information on postcards, we're sorely mistaken," Chase said.

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.

Lawmakers slam uses of fund controlled by governor, but panel rejects reduction in revenue

Legislation would have lowered fees paid by employers to the Future Fund

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 5:12 PM

Lawmakers grilled a representative of the Governor's Office about a fund controlled by the governor, but a legislative committee rejected a bill Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre that would have reduced the money flowing to the fund.

The topic was the Future Fund, which draws revenue from a tax on employers.

Sen. Brent Hoffman, R-Hartford, spoke in favor of the bill.

"It's not the role of government to be Santa Claus in these economic development projects," Hoffman said.

But the Senate Commerce and Energy Committee voted 5-4 to reject the legislation.

South Dakota employers pay into the Future fund when they submit payroll taxes for unemployment benefits. The unemployment tax is calculated with a complex set of formulas that includes a percentage of the first \$15,000 of some employees' annual earnings. The Future Fund receives a fraction of an additional percent on top of that, which the state describes as an "investment fee."

State law says the Future Fund must be used "for purposes related to research and economic development for the state." Unlike other funds administered by the Governor's Office of Economic Development, Future Fund expenses don't go through a board of citizen appointees for vetting or approval.

Rodeo contract questioned

South Dakota Searchlight recently reported that the Governor's Office used the fund last year for a three-year contract worth up to \$2.5 million with rodeo announcer Rorey Lemmel's Dean Entertainment Group. The contract is for the promotion and conduct of the Cinch Playoffs Governor's Cup rodeo in Sioux Falls. The contract said Sioux Falls would contribute additional matching funds.

Gov. Kristi Noem played a starring role in the rodeo in September, carrying the American flag into the arena on horseback and posing for photos with the event winners.

The commissioner of the Governor's Office of Economic Development, Chris Schilken, testified against the bill to reduce the investment fee. Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, referenced the Searchlight story and asked Schilken, "Why would your office approve spending \$2.5 million on a rodeo?"

Schilken said "tourism is economic development" and went on to mount a defense of the spending, including citing the rodeo's economic impact to Sioux Falls and the state.

Schoenbeck leveled further criticism of the expense and asked, "How many more of these tourism events are you going to expend our economic development dollars on like that one?"

Schilken replied that rodeo is the state sport and said the event advertises the state well.

Schoenbeck responded, "My question is, how many more times are you going to do this with our money?"

"Senator, I don't have an answer specifically to that question," Schilken said. "The fund has been set up at the governor's discretion to use, such as past governors have had and for future governors to use."

Schoenbeck also asked why the rodeo contract was initially not available on the state's financial disclosure website, Open.SD.gov, when South Dakota Searchlight went looking for it.

Schilken said the department eventually put the contract on the website. That happened after South Dakota Searchlight asked the office where it was.

Future Fund amounts

The prime sponsor of the bill to reduce the investment fee was Sen. Ryan Maher, R-Isabel.

"This would result in savings to the businesses of this state," Maher said.

According to the state Department of Labor and Regulation, 28,261 employers paid \$23 million into the Future Fund in 2022, which equated to an average of \$814 per employer. Maher said his bill would have resulted in a reduction of about \$5 million, or about \$175 in savings per employer.

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Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, was one of the bill's two sponsors in the House of Representatives, along with Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish. Karr said the fund was created by former Governor George Mickelson in the 1980s "because there weren't a lot of dollars to spend" on research and infrastructure.

"Fast forward to where we are today," and the Legislature funds many such projects, Karr said, pointing to "hundreds of millions of dollars" spent on housing and water infrastructure and new research in recent years.

"It's not as necessary as it was when it was created," Karr said of the Future Fund.

Opponents testify

Economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, and some educational institutions that have received grants from the fund disagreed with Karr.

Schilken said the Future Fund has done a lot for the state "by providing support to many entities over time."

Julie Johnson was the state secretary of labor when the Future Fund was created and helped write the legislation putting it into law.

"I'm very proud of what the Future Fund has done for the state of South Dakota," she said while encouraging the committee to reject the bill.

Maher said he was not surprised by "the parade of opponents" who came forward. He said the crux of their argument was, "Don't take our pork away from us."

Maher said his goal is to "keep the money on Main Street." He said from 2020 to 2023, the fund went from taking in \$17 million to \$24 million annually.

"A fund that the Legislature doesn't have any oversight on," he added.

Schoenbeck said that even with less money in the fund, "The good projects will still all get funded."

Sen. Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, voted to defeat the bill as written, but said he would have supported a bill that called for further oversight of the fund.

Senators Steve Kolbeck, R-Brandon, and Arch Beal, R-Sioux Falls, made and seconded the motion to defeat the bill.

"I think the Future Fund is working," Kolbeck said. He said Noem's use of the fund "really isn't an abuse," given that "this governor has spent about \$100 million less than the previous administration."

Noem has been in office a little more than five years and has spent \$57 million from the fund. Former Governor Dennis Daugaard served eight years and used the fund for everything from railroad improvements to scholarships, spending a total of \$163 million.

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

Chinese spies came to South Dakota, state official tells legislators

Committee endorses bill to ban ag land ownership by foreigners from six countries

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 4:30 PM

During testimony Thursday on a bill to ban ownership of agricultural land by foreigners from six countries, a state official told lawmakers that Chinese spies visited South Dakota two years ago.

Hunter Roberts is the head of the state's Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources. He testified to the state House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee at the Capitol in Pierre.

Roberts said the department received an inquiry in 2022 from a Chinese delegation requesting to meet with him and the Governor's Office of Economic Development, and requesting tours and infrastructure meetings with grain elevator operators, processing facilities and ag producers.

Roberts said the department declined, but the Chinese delegation came anyway, and the federal Depart-

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ment of Homeland Security called state officials before the delegation's arrival to ask about it. Roberts said the federal officials were "very concerned" about the Chinese delegation and "very pleased" that state officials were not meeting with them.

"Homeland Security told the Governor's Office and the Department of Public Safety that these were Chinese spies," Roberts said.

Bill would amend 1979 law

Roberts' testimony was in favor of a bill that would ban ownership of agricultural land in South Dakota by people, companies and governments from six countries, including China. The committee voted 12-0 to recommend passage of the bill by the House of Representatives, which will consider it next.

"Our current law needs some updating," said Rep. James Wangness, R-Miller, the bill's prime sponsor. "It's hard to enforce."

An existing state law, which dates to 1979, prohibits foreign people and governments from owning more than 160 acres of agricultural land in South Dakota. There are exceptions for land that's inherited or held as security for debt, for foreign people and governments whose right to hold land is secured by treaties, and for foreigners who've established residency in the United States.

The law requires the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources to monitor annual federal government reports on foreign ownership of ag land. The department is required to scrutinize the reports for any indications of illegal ownership and to refer findings to the state attorney general. The attorney general is supposed to investigate the findings and take appropriate legal action, potentially including the forfeiture of illegally owned land.

Last year, South Dakota Searchlight found the state had one record of ever acting on the existing law, which did not lead to legal action.

New bill's provisions

The new bill goes a step further, explicitly barring any agricultural land ownership in South Dakota by entities from countries designated as prohibited entities: China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela. The bill includes exceptions for leases or easements dedicated to agricultural research on land up to 320 acres, or contract livestock feeding "at an animal feeding operation, by a family farm unit, a family farm corporation, or an authorized farm corporation."

The bill keeps the cap on the amount of agricultural land that any other foreign entity can own at 160 acres.

"The problem is the existing law has some loopholes," Roberts said, specifically mentioning a loophole for foreign corporations. The new bill closes that loophole, defining a "foreign entity" as a company with 10% or more foreign ownership.

The new bill would leverage a bill that passed last year to improve reporting to the state. That bill requires corporations formed in South Dakota to disclose whether they own agricultural land and have any foreign owners.

During Thursday's hearing, there was no update on how many corporations have made such a disclosure since the law took effect.

Luke Lindberg with South Dakota Trade, an organization party funded by the Governor's Office of Economic Development, testified in favor of the bill Thursday. He said that while 60% of the state's soybeans and one-third of its pork is exported to foreign countries (largely China), "The current system is not fair and balanced." He said China bars Americans from owning land there.

"People respond to strength and not weakness," Lindberg said.

Proponents pointed out that no agricultural groups testified against the bill.

Rep. Karla Lems, R-Canton, who made the motion to pass the bill, asked if it would impact Summit Carbon Solutions' proposed carbon dioxide pipeline project, which she said has Chinese investors. The pipeline would collect carbon emitted by ethanol plants in multiple states, including South Dakota, and transport

it for underground storage in North Dakota.

Roberts said the state would have to see the company's ownership structure, adding, "It could have an impact."

Summit secured a \$300 million investment from TPG Rise Climate in 2022, and TPG Rise Climate has mentioned the Chinese Silk Road Fund as one of its investors.

Afterward, Sabrina Zenor, spokesperson for Summit, responded to South Dakota Searchlight with a statement: "Summit has never received any direct investment from China. US-based TPG Rise Climate, who has a non-controlling stake in Summit, has accepted non-controlling investments from institutions across the US, Canada, Europe, and Asia. These investors are TPG Rise Climate's Limited Partners, and by definition have no control over TPG Rise Climate's investments."

Foreign-controlled land in South Dakota

According to the most recent federal data, South Dakota has had 307 instances of foreign people or entities acquiring more than 160 acres of ag land since the passage of the existing federal and state laws in the late 1970s. The latest U.S. Department of Agriculture report says the total area of South Dakota agricultural land held by foreigners stands at about 380,000 acres, or about 595 square miles — representing a 3,000% increase from when the existing laws were enacted over four decades ago, but comprising less than 1% of all the land in the state.

Most of those acquisitions happened after 2015. Primarily, they involved European and Canadian wind energy companies.

However, a closer look at the latest federal report shows that among the 307 ag-land acquisitions over 160 acres in South Dakota by foreigners, only 24 involve an ownership stake greater than zero, with the rest presumably being easements. An easement is an agreement that grants a right to use somebody else's land for a single purpose, like erecting a wind turbine.

About one-third of the foreign-controlled ag land in South Dakota was acquired by Canadians, with the majority of the remainder being from European countries including the United Kingdom, France, Spain and Germany. The rest totals less than 4,000 acres held by people or entities scattered across locations including the Bahamas, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.

Federal reports do not list any Chinese-owned ag land in South Dakota, although a Chinese company does own the Smithfield meatpacking plant in Sioux Falls, which is zoned as industrial land.

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

No prosecution of Biden in classified documents case, DOJ special counsel says in report

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 8, 2024 6:00 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Justice Department released a lengthy report Thursday concluding that while President Joe Biden "willfully retained" classified materials following his time as vice president, he won't be charged with a crime.

Special Counsel Robert K. Hur wrote in the 388-page report that prosecutors considered "that, at trial, Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory."

"Based on our direct interactions with and observations of him, he is someone for whom many jurors will want to identify reasonable doubt," the report states. "It would be difficult to convince a jury that they

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should convict him — by then a former president well into his eighties — of a serious felony that requires a mental state of willfulness.”

“We conclude the evidence is not sufficient to convict, and we decline to recommend prosecution of Mr. Biden for his retention of the classified Afghanistan documents,” the report states.

It says, “Our investigation uncovered evidence that President Biden willfully retained and disclosed classified materials after his vice presidency when he was a private citizen.”

Biden in a press conference called Thursday night hit back at this characterization and others, including an assertion in the report he “did not remember, even within several years, when his son Beau died.”

“I know there’s some attention paid to some language in the report about my recollection of events,” Biden said. “There’s even reference that I don’t remember when my son died.”

“How in the hell dare he raise that,” he said, adding that he still wears his son Beau’s rosary, and said he “does not need anyone to remind me of when he passed away.”

While he took a few questions from the press about the report and about Israel, he was often combative.

“I’m well-meaning and I’m an elderly man, and I know what the hell I’m doing,” he said. “My memory is fine.”

One reporter asked the president why he was confusing the names of world leaders.

Biden, addressing the hostage negotiations between Israel and Hamas, noted that Israel’s response to Hamas in Gaza “has been over the top,” and argued that he helped negotiate allowing humanitarian aid through Egypt by talking with Egypt’s president, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, to open those borders.

However, he instead referred to El-Sisi as the president of Mexico.

“Initially the president of Mexico, Sisi, did not want to open up the gate to allow humanitarian aid to get in, I talked to him, I convinced him to open the gate,” Biden said.

Executive privilege

Attorney General Merrick Garland wrote in a one-page letter to Congress that Biden “has decided not to assert executive privilege over any part of the report or its appendices.” The doctrine of executive privilege allows the president to withhold certain documents or information from the judicial or legislative branches.

The Hur report seeks to differentiate between the Biden investigation and another of former President Donald Trump’s handling of documents, which did lead to charges, saying there are “several material distinctions.”

“Unlike the evidence involving Mr. Biden, the allegations set forth in the indictment of Mr. Trump, if proven, would present serious aggravating facts,” the report says. “Most notably, after being given multiple chances to return classified documents and avoid prosecution, Mr. Trump allegedly did the opposite.”

The report adds that Trump allegedly “obstructed justice by enlisting others to destroy evidence and then to lie about it.”

“In contrast, Mr. Biden turned in classified documents to the National Archives and the Department of Justice, consented to the search of multiple locations including his homes, sat for a voluntary interview, and in other ways cooperated with the investigation,” the report added.

The announcement quickly provoked a reaction from Trump, who in a written statement released by his campaign said the two cases are significantly different and that he “did nothing wrong.”

Trump alleged there is a “two-tiered system of Justice” and called for the special counsel in his case to drop it immediately, saying it represents “election interference.”

Biden says he ‘threw up no roadblocks’

Biden said in a written statement that he was “pleased to see they reached the conclusion I believed all along they would reach — that there would be no charges brought in this case and the matter is now closed.”

“This was an exhaustive investigation going back more than 40 years, even into the 1970s when I was a young Senator,” Biden said. “I cooperated completely, threw up no roadblocks, and sought no delays.”

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Biden noted in his statement that he sat for five hours of interviews with the special counsel on Oct. 8 and 9, 2023, the two days following the terrorist attacks in Israel. He reiterated that at his press conference Thursday night.

While he was "in the middle of handling an international crisis," Biden said that he "believed that's what I owed the American people so they could know no charges would be brought and the matter closed."

Garland announced Hur as the special counsel in January 2023; Trump had appointed Hur to lead the prosecutor's office in Maryland in 2018. He left in 2021 to join the Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher law firm.

The announcement of the special counsel came after classified documents were found at the Penn Biden Center in Washington, D.C., on Nov. 2, 2022 and then in the garage at Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware, on Dec. 20, 2022 and Jan. 11 and Jan. 12, 2023.

The White House defended its decisions to delay revealing that information publicly in mid-January 2023 shortly after the special counsel was publicly appointed.

Ian Sams, White House spokesman for oversight and investigations, said at the time the administration understood "that there's a tension between the need to be cooperative with an ongoing DOJ investigation, and rightful demands for additional public information."

"And so we're trying to strike that balance and being as clear as we can," Sams said.

'Mistakes when packing documents'

Special Counsel to the President Richard Sauber said in a written statement released Thursday that Biden cooperated with investigators and that the report acknowledges "mistakes when packing documents at the end of an Administration or when Members of Congress leave office are unfortunately a common occurrence."

"Now that this investigation has concluded, President Biden plans to take new, substantive action to help prevent such mistakes in the future and will announce it soon," Sauber said.

Bob Bauer, personal counsel to Biden, said in a written statement that the special counsel's decision "rested on evidence compiled using millions of taxpayer dollars over a 15-month inquiry involving 173 interviews of 147 witnesses and more than 7 million documents."

"He specifically noted that he would have reached the same conclusion even if the President were a private citizen and not the sitting president," Bauer said.

"The Special Counsel also noted the President's complete cooperation, including the President's unprecedented decision to open up every room of his family home and beach house to comprehensive FBI searches as well as a voluntary interview conducted over two days."

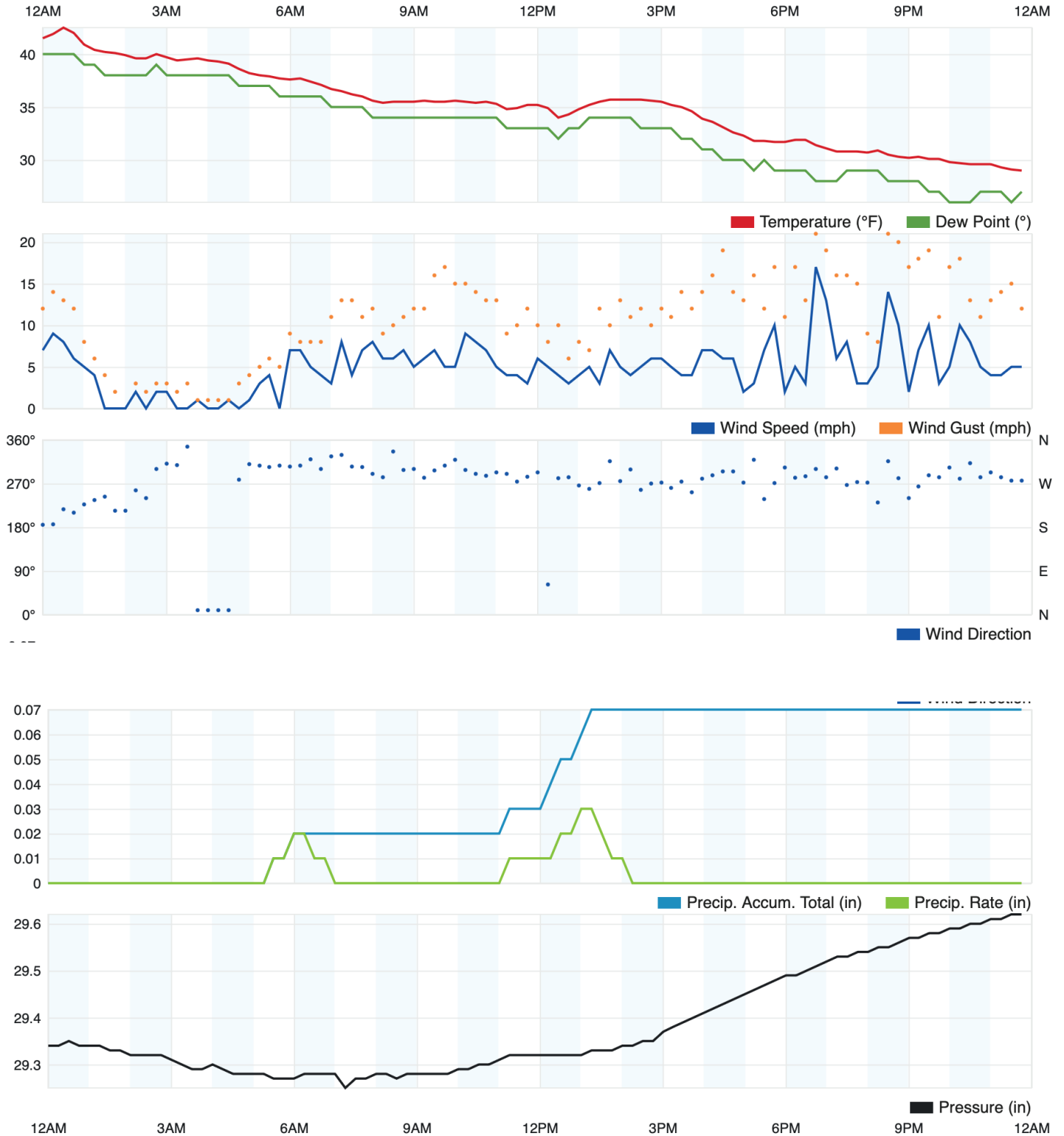
Ariana Figueroa contributed to this report.

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.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Fri	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu
Feb 9	Feb 10	Feb 11	Feb 12	Feb 13	Feb 14	Feb 15
31° F 23° F	35° F 19° F	39° F 24° F	34° F 25° F	33° F 25° F	33° F 22° F	26° F 16° F
NW 16 MPH	NW 10 MPH	W 13 MPH	WNW 12 MPH	E 11 MPH	NW 12 MPH 20%	NNW 15 MPH

Today

Light Snow Ending Later this Morning



Highs 29 to 34°

Saturday

Sunday



30 to 36°

34 to 43°



February 9, 2024

4:29 AM

Icy Roadways this Morning



Colder temperatures caused refreezing of water on many area roadways this morning. With light snow and gusty northwest winds, travel impacted can be anticipated, especially on untreated road surfaces. The light snow will continue diminishing this morning, with dry conditions by this afternoon.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 43 °F at 12:34 AM

Low Temp: 29 °F at 11:28 PM

Wind: 24 mph at 6:49 PM

Precip: : 0.07

Day length: 10 hours, 10 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 53 in 1987

Record Low: -45 in 1994

Average High: 27

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.18

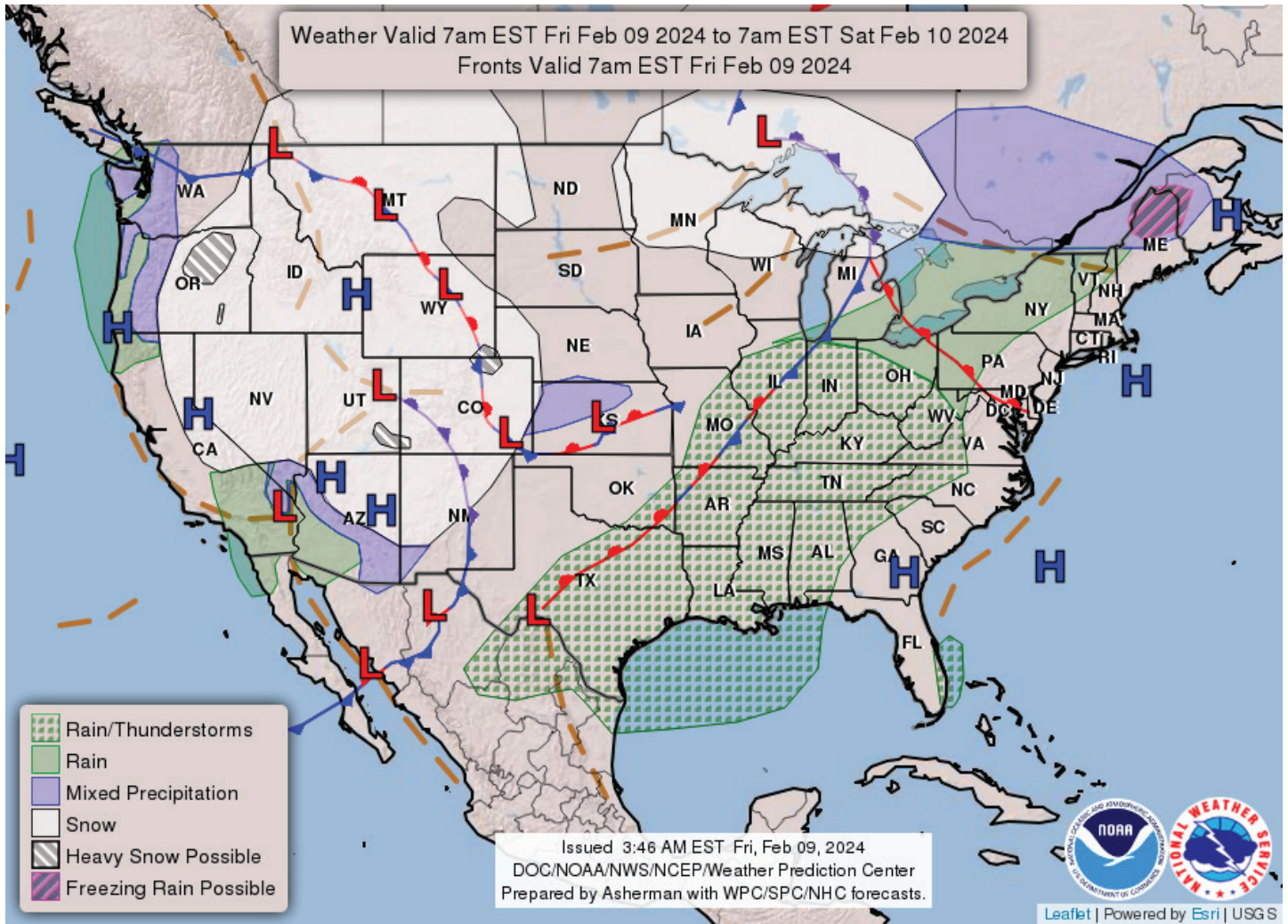
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 0.73

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 5:51:40 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:40:02 am



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Today in Weather History

February 9, 1899: Extreme cold blanketed most locations east of the Rocky Mountains during the first half of February. For South Dakota, the minimum temperature was the lowest experienced for many years, at least, and probably since its settlement. The week ending the 13th of February, the Weather Bureau stated: "With respect to temperature, this week is probably the most remarkable in the history of the Weather Bureau, over the greater part of the country east of the Rocky Mountains a large number of stations reporting the lowest temperatures recorded since their establishment. Over the whole region, extending from the eastern Rocky Mountain slope to the Atlantic coast and from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, the average daily deficiency exceeded 20 degrees. It ranged from 30 degrees to 35 degrees over an extensive area embracing the central valleys and portions of the Lake Region."

In South Dakota, the cold weather that culminated in the extremes began on January 26th and continued with little abatement over most of the state until February 12th. During the first twelve days of February, the Weather Bureau stations' daily average temperatures ranged from zero to 27 degrees below zero.

Some low-temperature readings from February 8th through the 12th include:

-29 in Spearfish on the 11th	-39 in Mellette on the 11th
-30 in Yankton on the 11th	-39 in Mitchell on the 11th
-34 in Milbank on the 9th	-39 in Pierre on the 12th
-34 in Rapid City on the 11th	-39 in Wessington Springs on the 9th
-35 in Aberdeen on the 8th and 12th	-40 in DeSmet on the 10th
-36 in Chamberlain on the 9th	-40 in Highmore on the 12th
-36 in Waubay on the 8th	-42 in Gann Valley on the 8th
-37 in Ipswich on the 8th	-40 in Redfield on the 9th
-38 in Watertown on the 11th	-42 Sioux Falls on the 9th

February 9, 1994: Widespread record cold occurred across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. Record lows were set at Aberdeen, Mobridge, Pierre, Sisseton, Timber Lake, and Wheaton, with overnight lows in the 30s below to 40s below zero across the entire area. Aberdeen fell to 45 degrees below zero or one degree off the record low of 46 degrees below zero. Mobridge dropped to 38 degrees below zero, and Pierre fell to 35 degrees below zero. Watertown came just one degree short of their daytime record, with 35 degrees below zero.

1870: President Ulysses S. Grant signed a law "to provide for taking meteorological observations at the military stations in the interior of the continent." A petition submitted by Increase A Lapham to Congressman Halbert E Paine in December 1869 began this process.

1899: One of the most significant cold outbreaks to ever impact the United States occurred early to mid-February. From the 8th-11th, the statewide average temperature across Iowa was 14.6 degrees below zero, making it the coldest four-day stretch on record in the state. On the 8th, Sioux City experienced its coldest day on record, with a daily average temperature of 24 degrees below zero. Then on the 11th, they reached their second-coldest temperature on record with a low of minus 31. Overall the coldest readings were obtained on the morning of the 9th when reported low temperatures included -21 at Keokuk, -23 at Des Moines, -33 at New Hampton, -35 at Le Mars, -38 at Estherville, and -40 at Sibley. The cold across the middle of the country was so extreme and persistent that ice floes down the Mississippi River into the deep south, emerging into the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans on February 17th. This has happened only one other time: February 13, 1784. The temperature dropped to 63 degrees below zero at Norway House, Manitoba, Canada setting the province's low-temperature record.

1933 - The temperature at Moran, WY, located next to Teton National Park, plunged to 63 degrees below zero to establish a state record. The temperature at the Riverside Ranger Station in Montana dipped to 66 below zero to establish a record for the state, and a record for the nation which stood until 1954. (David Ludlum)

1934 - The mercury dipped to 51 degrees below zero at Vanderbilt to establish a record for the state of Michigan. The temperature at Stillwater plunged to 52 degrees below zero to establish a record for the state of New York. (David Ludlum)

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1987 - A storm off the Atlantic coast produced high winds and heavy snow in the northeastern U.S., with blizzard conditions in eastern Massachusetts. Wind gusted to 80 mph and 23.4 inches of snow produced drifts eight feet high at Cape Cod MA. It was the worst blizzard in thirty years for the Cape Cod area. Winds in some of the mountains and ridges of the Appalachian Region gusted to 100 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Arctic cold invaded the north central U.S. Alliance NE plunged from 44 degrees to 12 above in just two hours, and Mobridge SD reported a wind chill of 64 degrees below zero. Winds along the eastern slopes of the Rockies gusted to 90 mph at Cheyenne WY, and reached 96 mph at Boulder CO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm continued to bring rain and snow to southern California. Snowfall totals ranged up to 18 inches at Olancho, with three inches at Palmdale. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front erupted over eastern Texas late in the morning, and produced severe weather as they swept across the southeastern states. Early evening thunderstorms spawned a tornado which injured one person at Nat TX, and produced tennis balls size hail which caused more than half a million dollars damage around Shreveport LA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1994: A devastating ice storm struck Mississippi, Louisiana, and extreme northwest Alabama. Freezing rain began falling over northern Mississippi during the early morning hours and continued until midday on the 10th. Ice accumulated 3 to 6 inches thick on exposed objects in the affected area. Due to the weight of the ice, power lines, trees, and tree limbs were down. Nearly one million people were without power after the storm, some for a month.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GOD BLESS OUR BUMPS

Little Martha was in a hurry to run out the door so she would not be late for school. In her haste, she tripped and fell, hitting her head on the floor. Immediately, a bump appeared and frightened her. As the tears ran down her cheeks, she climbed into her mother's arms to feel safe and find comfort.

Her Mom, holding her tightly, placed a cold pad on the lump and said, "Let's pray and ask Jesus to heal you so you can go to school."

Soon the tears stopped, Martha left her mother's lap, stood up, and said, "Jesus healed me. Now I can go to school."

That night when they knelt together to pray, Martha's mother asked, "What do you want to thank Jesus for tonight?"

"My bump," answered Martha quickly. "Because now I know He loves me because He made my bump go away."

"Whenever trouble comes your way," wrote the Apostle James, "let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has an opportunity to grow." In the life of every Christian, there is always a connection between the problems we face and the promises of God, and between the hardship of life and the hope of God. And, it is in those "between" when He appears to close the "gap."

James reminds us to turn our difficulties into opportunities, then grow, and become stronger in our faith. He wants us to understand that troubles are not an end in themselves. They can be a pathway to become like Christ.

Prayer: May we understand and accept, Father, that "whatever comes our way" is for our good, and that we can grow from every hardship if we learn to follow You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. James 1:2-4



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:
02.06.24

2 10 31 44 57 10

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$394,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 30 Mins 4
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

2 5 17 20 25 9

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,900,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 45
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.08.24

7 29 31 38 46 17

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

2 5 9 27 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$44,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 4
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

8 17 36 56 62 23

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 29
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.07.24

12 21 62 67 69 17

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$248,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 29
DRAW: Mins 4 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 52, Huron 39
Aberdeen Roncalli 43, Aberdeen Christian 21
Arlington 49, James Valley Christian 47
Avon 63, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 49
Canton 51, Baltic 29
Centerville 68, Menno 29
Clark-Willow Lake 69, Britton-Hecla 44
Dell Rapids 53, Parker 45
Deubrook 67, Castlewood 56
Faith 51, McIntosh 18
Freeman Academy-Marion 49, Andes Central-Dakota Christian 21
Gayville-Volin High School 70, Flandreau Indian 20
Great Plains Lutheran 26, Northwestern 23
Hamlin 56, Deuel 30
Harding County 85, Tiospaye Topa 46
Irene-Wakonda 57, Marty 35
Iroquois-Lake Preston 56, Sunshine Bible Academy 28
Lakota Tech 67, Pine Ridge 30
Lennox 57, Tri-Valley 49
Leola-Frederick High School 53, Herreid-Selby 50
Lyman 51, Philip 33
Madison 66, Alcester-Hudson 53
McLaughlin 75, Crazy Horse 13
Mobridge-Pollock 63, Sully Buttes 50
Oelrichs 91, Takini 21
Rapid City Christian 71, Lead-Deadwood 13
Sisseton 51, Tiospa Zina 13
Spearfish 58, Custer 39
St Thomas More 42, West Central 25
Warner 63, Wessington Springs 54
Watertown 50, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 25
Wilmot 58, Ipswich 42

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 47, Aberdeen Roncalli 40
Andes Central-Dakota Christian 57, Freeman Academy-Marion 42
Baltic 73, Canton 59
Burke 54, Kimball-White Lake 50
Canistota 71, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 30
Castlewood 61, Deubrook 50
Centerville 57, Menno 30
Clark-Willow Lake 63, Britton-Hecla 35
Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 68, Bennett County 62

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Colome 59, Sunshine Bible Academy 42
DeSmet 52, Wolsey-Wessington 38
Douglas 79, Hill City 63
Elkton-Lake Benton 67, Estelline-Hendricks 43
Ethan 61, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 43
Freeman 67, Corsica/Stickney 32
Gayville-Volin High School 58, Sioux Falls Lutheran 40
Great Plains Lutheran 51, Northwestern 46
Groton 66, Redfield 22
Hamlin 85, Deuel 34
Hankinson, N.D. 58, Waverly-South Shore 46
Harding County 70, Tiospaye Topa 34
Howard 68, Dell Rapids St Mary 60
James Valley Christian 72, Arlington 47
Jones County 75, Dupree 55
Marty 67, Irene-Wakonda 33
Mobridge-Pollock 69, Sully Buttes 54
Philip 57, Lyman 49
Potter County 55, Faulkton 51
Sioux Falls Christian 78, Western Christian, Iowa 57
Spearfish 63, Custer 56
Takini 76, Oelrichs 46
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 56, Avon 44

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

Holt's 27 help South Dakota defeat Denver 92-86 in OT

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Bostyn Holt had 27 points in South Dakota's 92-86 overtime win against Denver on Thursday night.

Holt was 10 of 26 shooting and went 6 for 6 from the line for the Coyotes (10-15, 3-7 Summit League). Lahat Thioune scored 19 points and added seven rebounds. Paul Bruns was 5 of 12 shooting, including 4 for 9 from 3-point range, and went 4 for 4 from the line to finish with 18 points, while adding eight rebounds. The Coyotes stopped a five-game slide with the win.

Tommy Bruner led the way for the Pioneers (13-12, 4-6) with 30 points and seven assists. Denver also got 21 points and 11 rebounds from Touko Tainamo. In addition, Jaxon Brenchley finished with 13 points and nine rebounds.

Israeli bombs target Gaza's crowded Rafah as the US warns Israel against sending troops there

By NAJIB JOBAIN, WAFAA SHURAFI and BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel bombed targets in overcrowded Rafah early Friday, hours after Biden administration officials and aid agencies warned Israel against expanding its Gaza ground offensive to the southern city where more than half of the territory's 2.3 million people have sought refuge.

Airstrikes overnight and into Friday hit two residential buildings in Rafah, while two other sites were bombed in central Gaza, including one that damaged a kindergarten-turned-shelter for displaced Palestinians. Twenty-two people were killed, according to AP journalists who saw the bodies arriving at hospitals.

U.S. President Joe Biden said Thursday that Israel's conduct in the war, ignited by a deadly Oct. 7 Hamas

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attack, is "over the top," the harshest U.S. criticism yet of its close ally and an expression of concern about a soaring civilian death toll in Gaza.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said Friday that the overall Palestinian death toll is now approaching 28,000, with about two-thirds women and children. The count does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Israel's stated intentions to expand its ground offensive to Rafah also prompted an unusual public backlash in Washington.

"We have yet to see any evidence of serious planning for such an operation," Vedant Patel, a State Department spokesman, said Thursday. Going ahead with such an offensive now, "with no planning and little thought in an area where there is sheltering of a million people would be a disaster."

John Kirby, the National Security Council spokesperson, said an Israel ground offensive in Rafah is "not something we would support."

The comments signaled intensifying U.S. friction with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who pushed a message of "total victory" in the war this week, at a time when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was in Israel to press for a cease-fire deal in exchange for the release of dozens of Hamas-held hostages.

Aid agency officials also sounded warnings over the prospect of a Rafah offensive. "We need Gaza's last remaining hospitals, shelters, markets and water systems to stay functional," said Catherine Russell, head of the U.N. children's agency UNICEF. "Without them, hunger and disease will skyrocket, taking more child lives."

With the war now in its fifth month, Israeli ground forces are still focusing on the city of Khan Younis, just north of Rafah, but Netanyahu has repeatedly said Rafah will be next, creating panic among hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

Netanyahu's words have also alarmed Egypt which has said that any ground operation in the Rafah area or mass displacement across the border would undermine its 40-year-old peace treaty with Israel. The mostly sealed Gaza-Egypt border is also the main entry point for humanitarian aid.

AIRSTRIKES OVERNIGHT

Shortly after midnight Friday, a residential building was struck near Rafah's Kuwaiti Hospital, killing five people from the al-Sayed family, including three children and a woman. A second Rafah strike killed three more people.

Another overnight strike, in the central town of Deir al-Balah, claimed nine lives. Also in central Gaza, a strike hit near a kindergarten-turned-shelter, damaging the building. It killed five and wounded several more people. Witnesses said shelter residents were asleep at the time.

A woman, carrying a small girl in her arms, shouted as she arrived at the local Al Aqsa Martyrs' Hospital: "What can we do? This is the work of the coward Zionist enemy that chooses innocent civilians. This girl is firing rockets at the Jews? May God help us."

Some of the wounded children were treated while lying on the floor.

More than half of Gaza's population has fled to Rafah, heeding Israeli evacuation orders ahead of the military's continuously expanding ground offensive. Evacuation orders now cover two-thirds of the besieged territory, though an estimated 300,000 Palestinians remain in the northern half of Gaza, which civilians were ordered to leave early on in the war.

Even in areas of refuge, such as Rafah, Israel routinely launches air strikes against what it says are Hamas targets. It holds the militant group responsible for civilian casualties because it operates from civilian areas.

WORKING FOR A CEASE-FIRE

Israel's 4-month-old air and ground offensive — among the most destructive in recent history — has killed 27,947 Palestinians and wounded more than 67,000, local health officials said Friday. The war has driven most people from their homes and pushed a quarter of the population toward starvation.

Biden has said he continues to work "tirelessly" to press Israel and Hamas to agree on an extended pause in fighting. A truce would be linked to the release of dozens of hostages, out of some 250 seized

Oct. 7, and still believed to be in Hamas captivity.

Netanyahu has rejected Hamas' demands for a hostage deal, which includes an end to the war and the release of hundreds of veteran Palestinian prisoners serving long sentences in Israel for deadly attacks carried out as part of the long-running conflict. Netanyahu dismissed Hamas' demands as delusional, even as Blinken said he believes continued negotiations, through mediators Egypt and Qatar, are possible.

Israel's war goals appear increasingly elusive, as Hamas reemerges in parts of northern Gaza, which was the first target of the offensive and has seen widespread destruction. Israel has only rescued one hostage, while Hamas says several have been killed in airstrikes or failed rescue missions.

North Korea welcomes Russian tourists, likely first to visit the isolated country since the pandemic

By EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

A group of Russian tourists headed to North Korea from Vladivostok airport in Russia's Far East on Friday, likely the first foreign travelers from any country to enter the isolated state since the pandemic.

The tour underscores deepening cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, following a meeting last September between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin at a cosmodrome in Russia's Far East.

Many Russians now struggle to travel to Europe and the United States because of sanctions applied to Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. In October, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said he would recommend North Korea as a vacation destination.

South Korea's government said it has no record of North Korean state media reporting on tourists entering the country since the pandemic.

The tour group will visit the capital Pyongyang and will then go skiing, Inna Mukhina, the general director of the Vostok Intur agency, which is running the tour, told The Associated Press. Vladivostok airport's online timetable shows an Air Koryo plane took off for Pyongyang at 1.39 p.m. local time Friday.

There are "lots" of people who wanted to come on the tour to North Korea, Mukhina, the tour operator, said, adding that the group contains travelers from places across Russia including Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, sandwiched in between Poland and Lithuania. The group also includes children who study skiing at a Russian school that aims to create Olympic champions, she said.

The Russians' reasons for visiting North Korea vary, Mukhina said, suggesting some people are interested in the opportunity to visit a closed country, while others are more interested in skiing and snowboarding.

"We love skiing," Galina Polevshchikova told the AP at Vladivostok airport shortly before getting on the flight to Pyongyang. "I really want to go there because it's probably the most closed place where you have the opportunity to do this," she said.

The group, is not a traditional tourist group, but "a test tour delegation" that could pave the way for other groups of Russian tourists, Mukhina said.

The trip, scheduled for February, was a surprise to Asia observers, who had expected the first post-pandemic tourists to North Korea to come from China, the North's biggest diplomatic ally and economic pipeline.

According to a Tass report published in January, the group of tourists will visit monuments in Pyongyang such as the "Tower of Juche Idea," named after the North's guiding philosophy of "juche" or self-reliance. The tourists will then travel on to the North's Masik Pass on the east coast, where the country's most modern ski resort is located, Tass said.

"In (Masik Pass), you will find yourself in a real paradise for winter sports lovers!" the Vostok Intur agency's website gushes. "Here you will find incredible slopes with different levels of difficulty that will satisfy the needs of both experienced skiers and beginners."

The package for the upcoming Russian tour costs \$750 per person, according to Tass and the tour agency.

According to Vladivostok airport's flight timetable, the group is travelling on a Tupolev Tu-154 jet, a workhorse of Soviet aviation but has been involved in a number of crashes.

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Tass reported that the trip was arranged under an agreement reached between Oleg Kozhemyako, governor of the Primorye region, and North Korean authorities.

Kozhemyako traveled to Pyongyang in December for talks on boosting economic ties as part of a flurry of bilateral exchanges since the Kim-Putin summit. Ahead of the trip, he told Russian media he expected to discuss tourism, agriculture and trade cooperation.

The expanding ties between North Korea and Russia come as they are each locked in separate confrontations with the United States and its allies — North Korea over its advancing nuclear program, and Russia over its protracted war with Ukraine.

The Kim-Putin summit deepened global suspicions that North Korea is supplying conventional arms to Russia for its war in Ukraine, in return for high-tech Russian weapons technologies and other support.

North Korea has been slowly easing pandemic-era curbs and opening its international borders as part of its efforts to revive its economy devastated by the lockdown and persistent U.S.-led sanctions. In August, South Korea's spy service told lawmakers that North Korea's economy shrank each year from 2020 to 2022, and that its gross domestic product last year was 12% less than in 2016.

Chinese travelers accounted for about 90% of the foreign visitors to North Korea before the pandemic. In 2019, a record number of about 300,000 foreign tourists visited North Korea, resulting in North Korea earning between \$90 million and \$150 million, according to analysts' assessments.

Donald Trump wins Nevada's Republican caucuses after being the only major candidate to participate

By MICHELLE L. PRICE, JONATHAN J. COOPER and GABE STERN Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Former President Donald Trump won Nevada's Republican presidential caucuses Thursday after he was the only major candidate to compete, winning his third straight state as he tries to secure his party's nomination.

Former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, his last major rival still in the race, skipped the caucuses even though they are the only contest in Nevada that counts toward the GOP nomination. Haley cited what she considered an unfair process favoring Trump and instead ran in Nevada's symbolic state-run presidential primary on Tuesday, when she finished behind the "none of these candidates" option.

Trump will win most, if not all, of the state's 26 delegates. He needs to accrue 1,215 delegates to formally clinch the party's nomination and could reach that number in March.

From Nevada, the GOP contest pivots to the South Carolina primary in Haley's home state on Feb. 24. Trump remains popular in the deeply conservative state but Haley, who won two elections as South Carolina's governor, is hoping her local roots give her an edge. Trump is eyeing a massive delegate haul during the March 5 Super Tuesday contests, which would move him closer to becoming the GOP's presumptive nominee.

Trump, delivering a brief victory speech in Las Vegas, basked in reports of long lines in the Western state and told his supporters he was eager to declare victory in the upcoming South Carolina primary.

"We're leading everybody," he said. "Is there any way we can call the election for next Tuesday? That's all I want."

Though Trump has been the front-runner, Nevada's caucuses were seen as especially skewed in his favor due to the intense grassroots support caucuses require candidates to harness around a state in order to win. Nevada's state party gave him a greater edge last year when it barred candidates from running both in the primary and caucuses and also restricted the role of super PACs like the groups that were key to Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' campaign before he dropped out.

Caucuses typically require voters to show up for an in-person meeting at a certain day or time, while elections can offer more flexibility to participate, with polls open for most of the day on Election Day along with absentee or early voting. Nevada Republicans said they wanted certain rules in place like a requirement that participants show a government-issued ID.

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Trump's supporters waited in long lines Thursday. At one caucus site at a Reno-area elementary school, a line of nearly 1,000 people stretched around the corner and down the street 20 minutes after the caucuses opened.

Voters in line, some of whom were wearing Trump hats and shirts, said they came out to back the former president in a contest that would give him a third straight win in the Republican presidential race.

"I think it's about backing Trump up and giving him the support that he needs. And to let people know that we're supporting him," said Heather Kirkwood, 47.

Trump has long been immensely popular among Nevada Republicans, but he had other perceived advantages among the party's key figures. Nevada GOP Party Chair Michael McDonald and the state's Republican National Committeeman Jim DeGraffenreid were among six Republicans in the state indicted on felony charges that they were so-called fake electors who sent certificates to Congress falsely claiming Trump won Nevada in 2020. The chairman of the Republican Party in Clark County — the largest county, which is home to Las Vegas — was another of the six so-called fake electors.

Republicans are increasingly converging behind Trump while he faces a deluge of legal problems, including 91 criminal charges in four separate cases. Trump is flexing his influence both in Congress — where Republicans rejected a border security deal after he pushed against it — and at the Republican National Committee, as chairwoman Ronna McDaniel could resign in the coming weeks after he publicly questioned whether she should stay in the job.

Trump still faces unprecedented jeopardy for a major candidate. A federal appeals panel ruled this week that Trump can face trial on charges that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election, rejecting his claims that he is immune from prosecution. The U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday heard arguments in a case trying to keep Trump from the 2024 presidential ballot over his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss. The justices sounded broadly skeptical of the effort.

As Finns choose a new president, one thing is certain: A hard line on Russia will continue

By JARI TANNER Associated Press

HELSINKI (AP) — Finns on Sunday will choose either of two experienced politicians to be their next head of state, whose main task will be to steer the Nordic country's foreign and security policy now that it is a member of NATO, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Ex-Prime Minister Alexander Stubb, 55, on the center right, and former foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, 65, from the green left, largely agree on Finland's foreign policy and security priorities. These include maintaining a hard line toward Moscow and Russia's current leadership, strengthening security ties with Washington, and the need to help Ukraine both militarily and at a civilian level.

In the last days of campaigning, however, tiny differences in style and approach between the candidates have emerged.

"After the exceptionally polite campaigning of the first round, there has been a bit more confrontation" between the two men vying for the post, said Teivo Teivainen, professor of world politics at the University of Helsinki.

Stubb and Haavisto differ in their stance on the hypothetical question of whether Finland, a NATO newcomer, would allow the transportation of the alliance's nuclear weapons through its territory.

"Stubb has a more positive attitude in bringing in nuclear weapons into Finland's territory," Teivainen said. "This reflects his slightly more positive line towards NATO integration and the United States."

Unlike in most European countries, the president of Finland holds executive power in formulating foreign and security policy together with the government, especially concerning countries outside the European Union such as the United States, Russia and China.

The head of state also commands the military, particularly important in Europe's current security environment and the changed geopolitical situation of Finland, which joined NATO in April 2023 in the aftermath of Russia's attack on Ukraine a year earlier.

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A brief look at a map shows why foreign and security policy are so important in this northern European country of 5.6 million people: Finland shares a 1,340-kilometer (832-mile) border with Russia. In November, Helsinki closed all eight official border crossings with its eastern neighbor, alleging that Moscow was using migrants to destabilize Finland in an alleged act of "hybrid warfare."

A politician with the conservative National Coalition Party, Stubb took the top spot in the first round of the election on Jan. 28 with 27.2% percent of the votes, ahead of the eight other candidates — five men and three women.

Stubb, who led the government in 2014-2015 and earlier held several other Cabinet posts, is the favorite to win the presidency and succeed highly popular President Sauli Niinistö, whose second six-year term expires in March. He is not eligible for reelection.

Haavisto, the runner-up in the first round, was Finland's top diplomat in 2019-2023 and the main negotiator of its entry into NATO. A former conflict mediator with the United Nations and a devout environmentalist, Haavisto took 25.8% of the votes in the first round.

A runoff was required because none of the candidates got more than half of the votes on Jan. 28. Recent polls indicate Stubb is the front-runner: he is predicted to get 53% to 54% of the votes and Haavisto 46% to 47%.

Haavisto, a former leader of the Green League who is running as an independent, is seeking the post for a third consecutive time after the 2012 and 2018 elections.

The head of state is expected to remain above the fray of day-to-day politics and largely to stay out of domestic political disputes.

However, Finland was hit by massive labor union strikes earlier this month, and the two candidates have faced questions on the campaign trail.

Stubb distanced himself from his party's approach of giving employers and employees more freedom to settle disputes locally and said he wouldn't interfere with labor market issues as a president. For his part, Haavisto said he would try — at the very minimum — to bring the parties together for talks behind the scenes.

The swing voters will be the supporters of the far-right populist The Finns party and the rural-based Center Party. The candidates for those parties were eliminated in the first round, but some 615,000 people, or nearly 20% of voters, cast their vote for the speaker of Parliament, Jussi Halla-aho, the former leader of The Finns.

Those voters favoring traditional values will now decide the Finnish presidency, analysts say.

"The second round of the election will primarily be decided by the voters of The Finns and the Center Party," Teivainen said. "There's a lot of conservatism and patriotism among them, so Haavisto's homosexuality and civil service background have significance."

Conscription military service or civil service is mandatory for Finnish males.

Haavisto's strong advocacy for green policies is seen alienating or splitting some voters, while Stubb's center-right backers seem much more united in their support.

The president seized 1% of El Salvador's population. Their children pay the consequences

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

SANTA ANA, El Salvador (AP) — Tears welled in Alex's eyes and he pressed his head into his hands as he thought about more than a year of birthdays and holidays without his mother, who was swept up by El Salvador's police as she walked to work in a clothing factory.

"I feel very alone," the 10-year-old said last month as he sat next to his 8-year-old brother and their grandmother. "I'm scared, feeling like they could come and they could take away someone else in my family."

Forty thousand children have seen one parent or both detained in President Nayib Bukele's nearly two-year war on El Salvador's gangs, according to the national social services agency. The records were shared with The Associated Press by an official with the National Council on Children and Adolescents, who insisted

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on anonymity due to fear of government reprisal against those violating its tight control of information. The official said many more children have jailed parents but aren't in the records.

By arresting more than 1% of his country's population, Bukele, who appears headed to a second five-year term, is trying to break the chain of violence that has ravaged El Salvador for decades. But many worry that debilitating poverty, long-term trauma and government failures to protect their children could instead fuel a future wave of gang warfare.

"Kids aren't spared when their dad, brother or mom is detained, they carry this trauma with them," Nancy Fajardo, a lawyer and aid provider working with 150 such families. "They feel as if the president has robbed them of their family ... It could push the kids to later join a gang as a form of vengeance for everything they're suffering."

Single mother Juana Guadalupe Recinos Ventura raised her boys in a small concrete house in an area coated by Barrio 18 gang graffiti. The family was never rich, but they were able to scrape by.

When she was detained outside their home in June 2022 on vague charges of "illegal gathering", the boy's grandmother, María Concepción Ventura, was left struggling to feed Alex and his brother and pay the bills without her daughter's salary. The \$75 packages of food and clothes the family sends once a month dealt the family another financial blow at a time that poverty has soared in El Salvador.

And that's made the kids even more vulnerable in the long term.

"They would cry and cry, and still cry when they remember her," Ventura said. "They'd just ask me, 'When is mom coming back? When is my mom coming back?' And you just have to tell them you don't know when the government will let her go."

The Associated Press spoke to Alex after being told he wanted to speak about his mother, and with consent of his grandmother Ventura.

Concerns were echoed by social workers, relatives, religious leaders and even Salvadoran Vice President Félix Ulloa, who said in an interview that, "if the state doesn't do something, these kids will become the criminals of the future."

Alex's home in the western city of Santa Ana is like much of the Central American nation: Two gangs once divided its territory.

El Salvador's Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs originated from marginalized migrant communities in Los Angeles in the 1980s, made up in part of vulnerable unaccompanied minors fleeing Central America's military conflicts. Once deported from the United States, the gangs began to prey upon youth in precarious situations in their own communities in El Salvador, eventually driving new waves of emigration as families fled their terror.

In his effort to eradicate the gangs, Bukele has detained over 76,000 Salvadorans, many with little evidence or access to due process. Families pass months without any news of their imprisoned loved ones. Human rights groups have documented widespread human rights abuses.

The crackdown has broad support among Salvadorans who have been able to retake their neighborhoods, but children left without parents have been among its heaviest costs.

While younger kids feel abandoned or confused why their parents have left, older teenagers are left with festering resentment or fear of authorities.

In one San Salvador community, neighbors are rotating children as young as 3 years old, sharing the economic burden so the kids don't end up in the government system, where neighbors worry they could suffer sexual or physical abuse. Kids who slip through the cracks often end up on the street, said a local leader who asked to not share his name because he feared government retaliation.

"They are children, they're not guilty even if their parents did wrong," he said. But "they are forced to suffer."

In Santa Ana, a 61-year-old grandmother had to take in eight grandchildren, feeding them with only the \$30 a week she makes picking leaves to wrap tamales, and aid from the local church. The children say that, despite being innocent, they're treated like criminals by neighbors.

"Now, they look at us as if we were scum," said 14-year-old Nicole, who still wants to be a police officer. For Alex, the pain is in the small moments.

He misses his mother helping him with schoolwork and has nightmares about police coming to take away the rest of his family. When he got bullied at school, his mom would go to his teachers to defend him. Until last year the family would set off fireworks together on Christmas in the alley outside their home.

Yet before police swept the neighborhood, the family would often hear gang shootouts ring out over their tin roof and neighbors would go missing. The family would never let the kids play outside.

Now, Alex and his 8-year-old brother run next to walls where the government has painted over the gang graffiti, so María Concepción Ventura sees benefits to the crackdown.

"They just need to free the innocents. Those that are guilty should pay the price, but let the innocents go," she said, adding that her daughter's detention prompted her to not vote in El Salvador's elections.

El Salvador's government has admitted it "made mistakes" and has released some 7,000 people.

The government has touted a youth program as a "security strategy," which includes opening up libraries and recreational areas in formerly violence-torn areas, and providing many students in public schools with laptops and tablets.

"Many of those detained right now were kids that the state didn't care for, orphans of the war, kids whose parents had gone to the United States, or who died and grew up in dysfunctional families, and past governments didn't do anything for them," said Ulloa, on his way to a second term as vice president. "And look what we have now – criminals when they are adults."

Ulloa said the administration was "100% obligated" to provide for children of detained Salvadorans, but he could not list an example of what the government was doing for them.

None of the five families interviewed by the AP said they'd received any aid from Bukele's government. Local churches assisting hundreds of families said they had not heard of any government aid being distributed to the kids. Even then, children need more than just monetary support, said Kenton Moody, the pastor of the local church providing Ventura's family with food.

"These kids need love," Moody said. "The government can't give love, only a family unit can."

Migrants from Africa and Mideast who died in Bosnia get marble headstones and a memorial

By SABINA NIKSIC Associated Press

BIJELJINA, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — In cities along a section of the Drina River, which forms a natural border between Bosnia and Serbia, there are simple, durable gravestones marking the final resting places of dozens of migrants who drowned in recent years trying to reach Western Europe.

Their often decomposing bodies were retrieved from the Bosnian side of the river, examined by a forensic pathologist and then buried — unidentified and unclaimed — with no loved ones to mark the passing of their lives.

The gravestones recently replaced decaying wooden markers, under which the remains of 41 people from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia seeking a better life in Europe were originally interred. The bodies have all been retrieved from the river since 2017 and buried in local cemeteries in three border towns of eastern Bosnia.

The gravestones serve as a visual reminder of a prolonged effort by local volunteers to "preserve the dignity of nameless victims" who met their end in the Balkan country, and hopefully also make them easier to find if their families ever come looking for them.

"Buried under these gravestones are not just unidentified human remains, but also dreams and hopes of the people they belong to, the people who deserve to be remembered," said Nihad Suljic, a 34-year-old office administrator from the northeastern town of Tuzla.

Suljic turned into an activist more than seven years ago when thousands of migrants started streaming through Bosnia after previous migration routes to wealthy European countries from the Balkans were closed off.

Migrants typically enter Bosnia from the southeast, walking through dense forest and crossing the riv-

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ers that separate it from Serbia and Montenegro, and then traversing the length of the country to reach a northwestern pocket bordering European Union member state Croatia.

The country initially struggled to shelter the arriving migrants, forcing thousands of desperate men, women and children to form squalid makeshift camps in various parts of its territory while looking for a chance to move on toward Western Europe. Bosnia has never truly recovered from its brutal internecine war in the 1990s, which left more than 100,000 dead and forced upwards of 2 million people, or over a half of its population, to flee their homes.

Having spent his childhood in war, Suljic was deeply sympathetic to the plight of the desperate travelers sleeping rough in the streets of Tuzla, many of whom were fleeing armed conflicts. This prompted him to invite some to rest and recuperate in his home before continuing their journey.

Suljic keeps in touch with many of the several hundred people he has helped over the years. In the summer of 2022, one of them, an Afghan who has since settled in Western Europe, reached out to ask for help locating a young man from his hometown. The youngster was reported by the group he had traveled with to have drowned in the Drina near the town of Zvornik. His family was desperate to retrieve his body.

Bosnia and other countries along migration routes in the western Balkans do not keep official records of migrants who die or are reported missing on their soil. But Suljic visited the east of the country armed with information about the date of the man's reported drowning and a description of his appearance at the time. Police officers and local rescuers he spoke with in Zvornik suggested he contact a forensic pathologist working out of a hospital in the nearby city of Bijeljina who examines the bodies pulled out of the Drina in that part of the country.

Dr. Vidak Simic examined more than 40 corpses of migrants and refugees so far retrieved from the river. Many others have never been found. Under local laws, bone samples are taken from unidentified bodies before they are buried in paupers' graves. The samples must be kept for six months in case someone comes looking for a missing relative and needs a DNA sample for comparison.

However, Simic has been keeping the unnamed migrants' bone samples long past the time required by the law. He has advocated for a mandatory procedure to be set up to run DNA tests on all of them and for the creation of an online database where relatives from faraway countries looking for loved ones who disappeared in the Balkans can access them.

Meanwhile, Simic — who also notes any identifying scars or marks on the bodies he examines and keeps cuttings from their clothes — is happy to help everyone who comes looking for a missing migrant or a refugee. He shared the information he had with Suljic and the two helped the Afghan family obtain a DNA sample and identify their missing son, repatriate his body and rebury it in his hometown.

"All these people are recorded as unidentified, but they all once had a name and a surname, they had fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters; that is why I do what I do, that is why I hold onto their bone samples," Simic said.

Moved by his interactions with the missing man's family, Suljic started contacting local officials and various non-governmental organizations who help migrants with the idea of properly marking the nameless graves scattered along the Drina.

Municipal officials, funeral homes and others embraced the idea and a Vienna-based human rights organization SOS Balkanroute provided financial support. So in the closing days of January, the clusters of overgrown graves in public cemeteries of three towns along the Drina were cleared. The rotting wooden markers were removed and replaced with black marble gravestones. At the cemetery in Bijeljina, where nearly half of all the unidentified migrants pulled out of Drina so far are buried, 41 trees were planted and a memorial for the drowned was erected.

Shaped like the gravestones and made of the same stone, the memorial carries a simple message engraved in golden letters: "Migrants and refugees in whose memory these trees were planted are buried here; we will never forget you and your dreams that were cut short in the Drina River."

The families of a few Israeli hostages don't want a deal to bring them home. They want Hamas crushed

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Chants of "Now! Now! Now!" ring out at nearly every protest in Israel imploring the government to do everything possible to win the immediate release of dozens of hostages held by Hamas.

But a small group of hostages' families is pushing a different message: Let the army first finish the job of defeating the militant group, even if that delays the return of their loved ones.

These families argue that the price to be paid in any hostage deal — the release of large numbers of Palestinian militants held by Israel — would endanger the country in the future.

"When you release terrorists, they will return to murder. That's how it has always been," said Tzvika Mor, whose son Eitan, 23, was abducted four months ago from the Nova music festival, where he was working as a security guard.

"How can you stand in front of people and say, 'I want my son back, and I don't care about you?'" Mor told The Associated Press by phone. "Instead of us only worrying about our son, we are concerned for the whole country."

Most of the hostages' relatives sharply disagree with Mor, saying only a deal can free the captives and that their chances of survival are increasingly dim given the dangerous conditions in Gaza. Those fears were heightened late Wednesday when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected the latest Hamas demands for a hostage deal as delusional and instead vowed to pursue war until "total victory."

The hostages' plight has captured the Israeli public's attention since they were seized during the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas on southern Israel that sparked the war. Posters of the captives are plastered on city streets, and many Israelis now wear necklaces with symbolic military-style dog tags and small yellow ribbons in solidarity with them.

Protests calling on the government to reach a deal with Hamas have grown in size and intensity as the crisis has dragged on. And fearing that time is running out to bring them home safely, protesters have grown increasingly vocal — in some cases grabbing microphones and letting out blood-curdling screams.

Mor said he knows his opinion is "different from what's acceptable" and is even viewed as unnatural. In December, Alon Nimrodi, the father of hostage Tamir Nimrodi, told Mor during a live show on Israel's Channel 11, "just because you gave up on your son, doesn't mean I will give up on mine," causing Mor to break down in tears.

The Mor family and two other hostages' families founded the Tikva Forum, a loosely organized group whose public members are mostly religious and right-wing. They share the belief that military pressure, not an immediate cease-fire or hostage release deal, is the best way to bring their loved ones home.

Mor said his critics can't understand how he could put his ideology above the natural response to seek the safe return of loved ones. He and others in the forum say they are being rational and that their critics are being led by their emotions.

Approximately 250 people were taken hostage during the Oct. 7 attack in which Hamas also killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians. Israel's ensuing war on Hamas in Gaza has killed more than 27,000 Palestinians, two-thirds of whom are women and children, according to local health officials in Gaza, where Hamas continues to hold sway in some areas.

During a weeklong cease-fire in November, approximately 100 hostages were released in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners, mostly women and children who had been convicted of minor offenses.

In its latest demands, Hamas is seeking the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including those convicted of killing Israelis during the long-running conflict, in exchange for freeing all the hostages.

That's unacceptable to the Tikva Forum, whose views hew closely to Netanyahu's.

"Surrendering to the delusional demands of Hamas that we have heard not only won't lead to the release of the hostages, it will invite another massacre," Netanyahu told reporters Wednesday.

Netanyahu's words were devastating for the vast majority of hostages' families.

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"I'm extremely scared that if you continue along this path ... there won't be any more hostages to release," said 72-year-old Adina Moshe, who was among the hostages freed in November, referring to Netanyahu.

As Hamas leaders arrived in Cairo on Thursday for another round of talks, Mor was in the United States arguing Israel's case for continued military pressure.

Mor said he's certain he is acting in accordance with his son's wishes.

A few months before Oct. 7, Mor said he was sitting around the table after a Shabbat meal with his children, including Eitan, who is the oldest of eight. Mor lives in Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement that is known for its far-right ideology and that is next to Hebron, the largest Palestinian city in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

They were discussing the 2011 Gilad Shalit deal, in which more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners were released in exchange for Shalit, an Israeli soldier who was taken from his tank into Gaza in 2006 and held captive for five years. Yehya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in Gaza and mastermind of the Oct. 7 attack, was among those released in the swap.

Mor said he had opposed the exchange, and that Eitan concurred.

"Eitan said he didn't want there to be a situation where they would release him for murderers," Mor said. "We know they will go back to murdering the same way they did after Gilad Shalit."

Mor said other hostages' families are associated with the Tikva Forum, not just its three founding families, and that they share the belief that continued military pressure is key to releasing the captives. He said many members do not want to be publicly identified because they are worried that Hamas could make conditions worse for their loved ones.

Ditza Or is a founding member of the Tikva Forum. Her son Avinatan was last seen being marched away from the music festival by Hamas militants as his girlfriend, Noa Argamani, screamed "don't kill me!" as she was dragged towards Gaza. Several weeks ago, Hamas released a video showing Argamani alive, but there has been no word of her fate since.

Avinatan's uncle, Shimon Or, told the AP that he believes that Avinatan would be proud of his family's stance.

Negotiations must be made from a place of strength, he said. "They are identifying our weaknesses and in another few years they'll attack us again," he said, referring to Hamas.

Liran Berman fears for the worst if Israel stays on its current course. His 26-year-old brothers, twins Gali and Ziv Berman, were abducted from Kibbutz Kfar Aza.

"We see that when there's a deal, hostages return, and in between, when there isn't, only bodies come back," said Berman.

Standing outside the ruins of his brothers' homes last week, Berman noted that Israeli troops have freed only one hostage during the four months of war. Once any deal is available, the government must grab it, he said.

"Only through a deal we will get my brothers back," Berman said.

Biden and Trump: How the two classified documents investigations came to different endings

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

Classified documents were found in a damaged cardboard box in President Joe Biden's cluttered Delaware garage, near where golf clubs hung on the wall. A photo in former President Donald Trump's indictment, meanwhile, shows stacks of boxes filled with documents under a chandelier in an ornate Mar-a-Lago bathroom.

In Biden's case, special counsel Robert Hur, a former U.S. attorney for Maryland nominated by Trump, concluded in a report released Thursday that the president should not face criminal charges, despite finding evidence that Biden willfully retained classified information. Trump, on the other hand, is scheduled to stand trial on charges alleging he hoarded classified documents at his Florida estate and thwarted government efforts to get them back.

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Trump, who has denied any wrongdoing in the case brought by special counsel Jack Smith, slammed the decision not to charge Biden, saying: "THIS IS A TWO-TIERED SYSTEM OF JUSTICE!" Biden, late Thursday, angrily lashed out at Hur for unflattering characterizations of his memory in the report and said he never shared classified information.

At look at the similarities and differences between the Biden and Trump investigations:

WHAT KINDS OF DOCUMENTS ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

BIDEN: FBI agents found classified documents about Afghanistan in Biden's Delaware garage in 2022, along with drafts of a handwritten memo Biden sent to President Barack Obama to persuade Obama not to send more troops into the country, Hur's report said.

In an office and basement den in the Delaware home, agents also found notebooks with classified information that Biden wrote on during briefings with Obama and in White House Situation Room meetings, the report said. Investigators said the notebooks included national security and foreign policy information that touched on "sensitive intelligence sources and methods." Hur found that on at least three occasions during interviews with his ghostwriter, Biden read aloud from classified parts from his notebooks "nearly verbatim."

TRUMP: Prosecutors have alleged that Trump stored hundreds of classified documents in boxes as he packed to leave the White House in 2021. After a Trump attorney told the FBI that there were no more classified documents at Mar-a-Lago, the FBI searched the property in August 2022 and found more than 100 documents with classified markings, according to his indictment. Each of the 32 counts of willful retention of national defense information Trump is charged with pertains to a specific classified document found at Mar-a-Lago that were marked "SECRET" or "TOP SECRET." Topics addressed in the documents include details about U.S. nuclear weapons and the nuclear capabilities of a foreign country.

WHY DID HUR NOT CHARGE BIDEN?

Hur concluded there is not enough evidence to convict Biden of "willfully" retaining the Afghanistan documents or the notebooks. When the Afghanistan documents were found in the garage in 2022, Biden was allowed to have them because he was president at the time, the report said. To bring charges, Hur said prosecutors would have to rely on a comment that Biden had made to his ghostwriter in 2017 — when Biden was a private citizen and living in Virginia — that he had "just found" classified documents downstairs.

But Hur said Biden could convince some jurors his actions weren't willful by arguing, for example, that he forgot about the documents shortly after finding them in 2017. It's also possible the Afghanistan documents were never in the Virginia home at all, but were accidentally kept without Biden's knowledge in Delaware since he was vice president, Hur concluded.

Hur also cited limitations with Biden's memory and the president's cooperation with investigators that "could convince some jurors that he made an innocent mistake. The report described the president as "someone for whom jurors will want to identify reasonable doubt."

"We have also considered that, at trial, Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory," the report said. "It would be difficult to convince a jury that they should convict him-by then a former president well into his eighties-of a serious felony that requires a mental state of willfulness."

Regarding the notebooks containing classified information, Hur concluded that Biden could plausibly argue if there were a trial that he believed that the notebooks were his personal property and he was allowed to take them home.

"During our interview of him, Mr. Biden was emphatic, declaring that his notebooks are 'my property' and that 'every president before me has done the exact same thing,' that is, kept handwritten classified materials after leaving office," the report said.

Other classified documents found at the Penn Biden Center, Biden's Delaware home, and among Senate papers at the University of Delaware "could plausibly have been brought to these locations by mistake," Hur concluded.

WHAT HAVE PROSECUTORS SAID IN TRUMP'S CASE?

Trump is accused of not only hoarding classified documents at Mar-a-Lago, but trying to hide them from investigators and working to block the government from clawing them back. Prosecutors have alleged that Trump showed off the documents to people who did not have security clearances to review them and enlisted others to help him hide records demanded by authorities.

Hur's report says the differences between the two cases are "clear." Unlike Biden — who cooperated with investigators, agreed to searches of his homes and sat for a voluntary interview — the allegations in Trump's case present "serious aggravating facts," Hur wrote.

"Most notably, after being given multiple chances to return classified documents and avoid prosecution, Mr. Trump allegedly did the opposite," the report said.

For instance, prosecutors say, after the Justice Department issued a subpoena for the records in May 2022, Trump asked his own lawyers if he could defy the request and said words to the effect of, "I don't want anybody looking through my boxes."

"Wouldn't it be better if we just told them we don't have anything here?" one of his lawyers described him as saying, according to the indictment.

Prosecutors allege that during the July 2021 meeting at Bedminster, Trump also waved around the classified attack plan to his guests. "This is secret information," he said, according to a recording prosecutors have cited, claiming that, "as president I could have declassified it" but hadn't.

Prosecutors have also accused Trump of scheming with his valet, Walt Nauta, and a Mar-a-Lago property manager, Carlos De Oliveira, to try to conceal security camera footage from investigators after they issued a subpoena for it. Video from the property would ultimately play a significant role in the investigation because, prosecutors said, it captured Nauta moving boxes of documents in and out of a storage room — including a day before an FBI visit to the property. The boxes were moved at Trump's direction, the indictment alleges.

Lamar Jackson is near-unanimous choice for his second AP NFL Most Valuable Player award

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Accepting the AP NFL Most Valuable Player award in person was bittersweet for Lamar Jackson.

Jackson was a near-unanimous choice for his second MVP award announced at NFL Honors on Thursday night but the quarterback's Baltimore Ravens fell one win short of playing in Sunday's Super Bowl.

"I'd rather send in a video to win the award," Jackson said. "To be here for the award, it's an honor but I'd rather be in the Super Bowl accepting this award."

The All-Pro QB received 49 of 50 first-place votes from a nationwide panel of voters that includes media members who regularly cover the NFL, former players and coaches.

Jackson led the Ravens (14-5) to the NFL's best record in the regular season, but they lost to the Kansas City Chiefs in the AFC championship game. The 27-year-old Jackson is the fourth player to win his second MVP before turning 28, joining Patrick Mahomes (27), Brett Favre (27) and Jim Brown (22).

"It's an honor. I guess I'm in elite company," Jackson said.

San Francisco 49ers running back Christian McCaffrey ran away with the AP Offensive Player of the Year award. He'll try to add a Super Bowl ring to his trophy case when the 49ers take on the Chiefs on Sunday.

Cleveland Browns edge rusher Myles Garrett beat out T.J. Watt for AP Defensive Player of the Year. Houston Texans quarterback C.J. Stroud won the AP Offensive Rookie of the Year award in a landslide. Defensive end Will Anderson Jr., Stroud's Houston teammate, won the AP Defensive Rookie of the Year award, outgaining both Jalen Carter and Kobie Turner by two first-place votes.

The Browns took home four awards.

Quarterback Joe Flacco, who came off the couch to lead Cleveland to the playoffs, was named AP Comeback Player of the Year. Kevin Stefanski edged Houston's DeMeco Ryans for AP Coach of the Year

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honors by one first-place vote. Defensive coordinator Jim Schwartz won the AP Assistant Coach of the Year award after guiding the league's No. 1 ranked unit.

"It was a special year for a special team," Garrett said about the Browns. "I think next year is going to be our year."

Despite his disappointment over losing the AFC title game, it was also a special year for Jackson.

The one first-place MVP vote he didn't receive went to Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen. Jackson threw for 3,678 yards and 24 touchdowns and ran for 821 yards and five scores while leading Baltimore to a record 10 wins over teams that finished with a winning record. He helped the Ravens rout Houston in the divisional round but struggled in a 17-10 loss to the Chiefs in the AFC title game.

McCaffrey, San Francisco's All-Pro running back, received 39 of 50 first-place votes for OPOY, outpacing Dolphins wide receiver Tyreek Hill. A unanimous choice for All-Pro, McCaffrey led the NFL with 1,459 yards rushing and had 14 rushing TDs. He also had 564 yards receiving for seven scores.

"I feel so fortunate to be part of the best organization on the planet so thank you for believing in me," McCaffrey said.

Garrett was equally as dominant on the other side of the ball. He received 23 first-place votes and 165 points to beat out Watt for DPOY. Despite constant double-teams, Garrett had 14 sacks, 30 quarterback hits, 17 tackles for loss, four forced fumbles and forced offensive coordinators to avoid his side of the field.

Stroud received 48 of 50 first-place votes for OROY with Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Puka Nacua getting the other two. The No. 2 overall pick, Stroud threw for 4,108 yards, 23 touchdowns, five interceptions and had a passer rating of 100.8, third-best by a rookie. He helped the Texans go from worst to first place in the AFC South and led them to a playoff win in the wild-card round.

"I'm the type of person who wonders what's next and what I can do better but reflecting on the season, being my first, it's special just to be in the NFL let alone on a winning team," Stroud said.

Anderson and Stroud are the fourth teammates to win the offensive and defensive rookie awards in the same season. Garrett Wilson and Sauce Gardner swept the awards last year for the New York Jets.

"It means the absolute world," Anderson said about him and Stroud winning. "Just watching how he comes to work every day, the preparation he put in and rebuilding the culture and being captains our rookie year, it's special."

Flacco beat out Bills safety Damar Hamlin and Buccaneers quarterback Baker Mayfield for the comeback award. He received 13 first-place votes, 26 second-place votes and eight thirds to finish with 151 points.

Hamlin returned to the NFL this season after collapsing on the field and needing to be resuscitated following a cardiac arrest on Jan. 2, 2023. He played in five regular-season games. Hamlin received 21 first-place votes but appeared on 42 of 50 ballots while Flacco was on 47. He got seven second-place votes and 14 thirds for 140 points.

Flacco, the 39-year-old former Super Bowl MVP, was home in New Jersey with his family when Cleveland called him in November. He went 4-1 in five starts and passed for over 300 yards in four straight games with 13 touchdowns.

Stefanski led the Browns to their third playoff appearance since 1999 despite losing quarterback Deshaun Watson, star running back Nick Chubb and right tackle Jack Conklin to season-ending injuries and starting five QBs.

Cleveland's Schwartz received 25 first-place votes and finished with 160 points, easily outpacing Baltimore Ravens defensive coordinator Mike Macdonald.

AP-NORC Poll: Most Americans say air travel is safe despite recent scares

By DAVID KOENIG and LINLEY SANDERS

Most U.S. adults believe that air travel is generally safe in the U.S., despite some doubts about whether aircraft are being properly maintained and remain free from structural problems.

About 7 in 10 U.S. adults say planes are a "very" or "somewhat" safe method of travel, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Even with that high level of trust, only about 2 in 10 U.S. adults have "a great deal" of confidence that airplanes are being properly

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maintained, or that they are safe from structural faults. Another half have a "moderate" amount of faith that this is the case.

The poll was conducted after a Jan. 5 accident in which a panel blew off an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner 16,000 feet (4,900 meters) above Oregon, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the plane. That led to the grounding of more than 140 planes and raised questions about Boeing's ongoing manufacturing problems as well as the Federal Aviation Administration's ability to address them.

U.S. adults are more confident in airline pilots' and air traffic controllers' ability to maintain air safety than they are in the commercial airlines, airplane manufacturers or federal government agencies charged with it. A majority have at least a "moderate" amount of confidence that each is ensuring safety.

Some with fears of flying expressed even more concern because of the Alaska Airlines incident.

"I don't enjoy flying. It is so unnatural — we're in a metal tube flying through the air," said Margaret Burke of Pensacola, Florida, who read accounts of the jetliner incident, which resulted in no serious injuries. "The fact that people do fly safely every day seems, to me, like a miracle."

Despite her fear, Burke will board a plane for a trip to California this spring because of the speed and convenience that air travel offers.

"I have a 3-year-old, and I can't put him in a car seat for three days straight, that's just unfair," she said.

Even with maintenance concerns, U.S. adults have a higher level of certainty that airline pilots and air traffic controllers are well-trained and engaged in proper safety procedures. Slightly fewer than half — 45% — have "a great deal" of confidence in pilots' training, while 38% say that about air traffic controllers.

About one-quarter of U.S. adults have a high level of confidence that air travel is safe from terrorist attacks, or that government agencies have enacted necessary safety regulations. Even with the variation, a majority of U.S. adults have at least "a moderate amount" of confidence that planes are safe, pilots are well-trained and the regulations are appropriate.

That may be because flying is still much safer than driving and also safer than rail travel on a per-mile basis, according to U.S. Department of Transportation figures.

Airline officials and aviation regulators like to point out that there has not been a fatal crash of a U.S. airliner since 2009, although in 2018 a passenger died on a Southwest flight after an engine explosion and in the past year there has been a sharp increase in close calls being investigated by federal officials.

Sherry Kohn, a retired English literature teacher in Pennsylvania, thinks that flying is generally safe — "I would get on a plane" — but she is among those who are only moderately confident that planes are manufactured safely.

"Nobody is going to put something out that's going to kill people, I don't think," she said, "but Boeing has had a history of problems."

Kohn also worries about maintenance.

"They recycle these planes so quickly," she said. "It lands, somebody goes in and vacuums. I don't know that they are checking (the planes) as carefully as they should."

About one-quarter of U.S. adults say they travel by plane at least a few times a year when traveling long distances.

Those frequent flyers are more likely than those who fly less often to have a great deal of confidence on all categories: that airplanes are being properly maintained, are safe from structural faults, that air traffic controllers are well-trained, that pilots are well-trained, that government agencies have enacted the necessary safety regulations and that it's safe from terrorist acts.

Randi Niedfeldt, a retired physician assistant in Wisconsin, has a great deal of confidence in the planes, despite the recent incidents. Her husband is a recreational pilot, and he checks the type of plane they'll be flying on, but they don't avoid any specific make or model.

"How many big airplane crashes do you hear about?" she asked. "When they happen, they're catastrophic, but they don't happen very often for the amount of flying that is done."

Storms dump heavy snowfall in northern Arizona after leaving California a muddy mess

By WALTER BERRY and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Heavy snow shut down parts of major interstates in northern Arizona on Thursday while low-lying clouds delayed dozens of flights in Phoenix, after storms earlier this week battered California and left a muddy mess.

The mountainous region of northern Arizona recorded 2 feet (61 centimeters) of snowfall or more in some locations with more expected into the weekend. Snow, ice and whiteout conditions forced partial closures of Interstates 40 and 17 in and around Flagstaff, northern Arizona's largest city. I-17 later reopened but portions of I-40 remained closed Thursday night.

Dennis Fritsch, a trucker, was enroute from Georgia to Reno, Nevada, where he has a delivery due Friday. He pulled over at a truck stop along I-40 in Bellemont, Arizona, anticipating the roadway would be shut down after the temperature dropped and the sun disappeared.

"It's pretty brutal, actually," he said.

Longtime Bellemont resident Rick Schuler, who was clearing his and a neighbor's driveway, was taking it in stride as his dog, Dakota, ran around in deep snow.

"Just enjoying this beautiful weather, plowing snow, playing with the dog, enjoying it," he said.

Schools around northern Arizona, including Northern Arizona University, called snow days.

Farther south, rain hit the state's desert regions. A low cloud ceiling briefly shut down all flights in and out of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport — the state's largest airport. The Federal Aviation Administration issued a ground stop for 45 minutes Thursday morning, delaying more than 100 flights, according to the flight-tracking website FlightAware. The rainy weather also disrupted the first-round play at the Phoenix Open golf tournament.

In California, the clear skies over most of the state were welcomed after days of wind, rain and heavy snowfall that caused power outages, street flooding and hundreds of destructive mudslides. The extremely wet weather marked a major turnabout from a very slow start to winter.

It was prime ski weather in the Sierra Nevada, where more snow fell Thursday at one Lake Tahoe ski resort and at Mammoth Mountain south of Yosemite National Park. Mammoth had already reported as much as 5 feet (1.5 meters) of snow since Sunday.

An area east of Los Angeles, aptly named Snow Valley in the San Bernardino Mountains, got almost as much snow as parts of the eastern Sierra, the National Weather Service said. Several times, snow completely buried an eagle named Jackie, whose care for three eggs in a nest is widely watched via a webcam, the Friends of Big Bear Valley said on its Facebook page.

The five-day rainfall total in downtown Los Angeles topped 9 inches (23 centimeters), more than half of the 14.25 inches (36 centimeters) it normally gets per year, while other parts of the city received more than a foot (30 centimeters).

Meanwhile, the risk of avalanches in the San Gabriel Mountains east of Los Angeles kept searchers from continuing the hunt for a woman who vanished Sunday while hiking alone on Mount Baldy. San Bernardino County authorities say Lifei Huang, 22, of El Monte was last heard from Sunday afternoon as a storm moved into the area. Baldy is known to be treacherous in winter and last year claimed the lives of several hikers, including actor Julian Sands.

The exceptional precipitation in California began last weekend, when extraordinary low pressure spinning off the coast hauled in an atmospheric river. Northern California was blasted with fierce winds, and the huge plume of moisture then rained on the south for days.

A new front then roared down the California coast on Wednesday, unleashing downpours and damaging winds that included a weak tornado near Grover Beach in San Luis Obispo County.

State officials tallied nine storm-related deaths, not including five Marines killed in the crash of a military helicopter late Tuesday night east of San Diego. Officials have not said if the weather was a factor.

The storms also spawned destructive mudslides — more than 500 in the city of LA alone, where at least

16 buildings have been deemed uninhabitable and 33 others have been yellow-tagged, meaning residents can go in to retrieve belongings but cannot stay. Experts say soils are so saturated the threat of landslides will persist.

Biden angrily pushes back at special counsel's report that questioned his memory, handling of docs

By ERIC TUCKER, LINDSAY WHITEHURST, ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A special counsel report released Thursday found evidence that President Joe Biden willfully retained and shared highly classified information when he was a private citizen, including about military and foreign policy in Afghanistan, but concluded that criminal charges were not warranted.

The report from special counsel Robert Hur resolves a criminal investigation that had shadowed Biden's presidency for the last year. But its biting assessment of his handling of sensitive government records and unflattering characterizations of his memory will spark fresh questions about his competency and age that cut at voters' most deep-seated concerns about his candidacy for re-election.

In remarks at the White House Thursday evening, Biden denied that he improperly shared classified information and angrily lashed out at Hur for questioning his mental acuity, particularly his recollection of the timing of his late son Beau's death from cancer.

The searing findings will almost certainly blunt his efforts to draw contrast with Donald Trump, Biden's likely opponent in November's presidential election, over a criminal indictment charging the former president with illegally hoarding classified records at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida and refusing to return them to the government. Despite abundant differences between the cases, Trump immediately seized on the special counsel report to portray himself as a victim of a "two-tiered system of justice."

Yet even as Hur found evidence that Biden willfully held onto and shared with a ghostwriter highly classified information, the special counsel devoted much of his report to explaining why he did not believe the evidence met the standard for criminal charges, including a high probability that the Justice Department would not be able to prove Biden's intent beyond a reasonable doubt, citing among other things an advanced age that they said made him forgetful and the possibility of "innocent explanations" for the records that they could not refute.

"I did not share classified information," Biden insisted. "I did not share it with my ghostwriter." He added he wasn't aware how the boxes containing classified documents ended up in his garage.

And in response to Hur's portrayal of him, Biden insisted to reporters that "My memory is fine," and said he believes he remains the most qualified person to serve as president.

"How in the hell dare he raise that?" Biden asked, about Hur's comments regarding his son's death, saying he didn't believe it was any of Hur's business.

When asked about the report earlier Thursday in a private moment with a handful of House Democrats ahead of his speech at their suburban Virginia retreat, Biden responded angrily, according to two people familiar with his comments, saying, "You think I would f— forget the day my son died?" The people did not want to address the matter publicly and spoke of condition of anonymity.

Biden pointedly noted that he had sat for five hours of in-person interviews in the immediate aftermath of Hamas's October attack on Israel, when "I was in the middle of handling an international crisis."

"I just believed that's what I owed the American people so they could know no charges would be brought and the matter closed," Biden said.

The investigation into Biden is separate from special counsel Jack Smith's inquiry into the handling of classified documents by Trump after Trump left the White House. Smith's team has charged Trump with illegally retaining top secret records at his Mar-a-Lago home and then obstructing government efforts to get them back. Trump has said he did nothing wrong.

Hur, in his report, said there were "several material distinctions" between the Trump and Biden cases, noting that Trump refused to return classified documents to the government and allegedly obstructed the investigation, while Biden willfully handed them over.

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Hur, a former U.S. Attorney in the Trump administration, was appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland as special counsel in January 2023 following an initial discovery by Biden staff of classified records in Washington office space. Subsequent property searches by the FBI, all coordinated voluntarily by Biden staff, that turned up additional sensitive documents from his time as vice president and senator.

Hur's report said many of the documents recovered at the Penn Biden Center in Washington, in parts of Biden's Delaware home and in his Senate papers at the University of Delaware were retained by "mistake."

Biden could not have been prosecuted as a sitting president, but Hur's report states that he would not recommend charges against Biden regardless.

"We would reach the same conclusion even if Department of Justice policy did not foreclose criminal charges against a sitting president," the report said.

But investigators did find evidence of willful retention and disclosure of a subset of records found in Biden's Wilmington, Delaware house, including in a garage, office and basement den. The files pertain to a troop surge in Afghanistan during the Obama administration that Biden had vigorously opposed. He kept records that documented his position, including a classified letter to Obama during the 2009 Thanksgiving holiday.

Documents found in a box in Biden's Delaware garage have classification markings up to the Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information Level and "other materials of great significance to him and that he appears to have personally used and accessed." Hur, though, wrote that there was a "shortage of evidence" to prove that Biden placed the documents in the box and knew they were there.

Some of the classified information related to Afghanistan was shared with a ghostwriter with whom he published memoirs in 2007 and 2017. As part of the probe, investigators reviewed a recording of a February 2017 conversation between Biden and his ghostwriter in which Biden can be heard saying that he had "just found all the classified stuff downstairs."

Prosecutors believe Biden's comment, made at a time he was renting a home in Virginia, referred to the same documents FBI agents later found in his Delaware house. Though Biden sometimes skipped over presumptively classified material while reading notebook entries to his ghostwriter, the report says, at other times he read aloud classified entries "verbatim."

The report said there was some evidence to suggest that Biden knew he could not keep classified handwritten notes at home after leaving office, citing his deep familiarity "with the measures taken to safeguard classified information and the need for those measures to prevent harm to national security." Yet, prosecutors say, he kept notebooks containing classified information in unlocked drawers at home.

"He had strong motivations to do so and to ignore the rules for properly handling the classified information in his notebooks," the report said. "He consulted the notebooks liberally during hours of discussions with his ghostwriter and viewed them as highly private and valued possessions with which he was unwilling to part."

While the report removes legal jeopardy for the president, it is nonetheless an embarrassment for Biden, who placed competency and experience at the core of his rationale to voters to send him to the Oval Office. It says that Biden was known to remove and keep classified material from his briefing books for future use and that his staff struggled and sometimes failed to get those records back.

Even so, Hur took pains to note the multiple reasons why prosecutors did not believe they could prove a criminal case beyond a reasonable doubt.

Those include Biden's "limited memory" both during his 2017 recorded conversations with the ghostwriter and in an interview with investigators last year in which, prosecutors say, he could not immediately remember the years in which he served as vice president. Hur said it was possible Biden could have found those records at his Virginia home in 2017 and then forgotten about them soon after.

"Given Mr. Biden's limited precision and recall during his interviews with his ghostwriter and with our office, jurors may hesitate to place too much evidentiary weight on a single eight-word utterance to his ghostwriter about finding classified documents in Virginia, in the absence of other, more direct evidence," the report says

"We have also considered that, at trial, Mr. Biden would likely present himself to a jury, as he did during our interview of him, as a sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory," investigators wrote.

In addition, prosecutors say, Biden could have plausibly believed that the notebooks were his personal property and belonged to him, even if they contained classified information.

In an interview with prosecutors, the report said, Biden was emphatic with investigators that the notebooks were "my property" and that "every president before me has done the exact same thing."

Special counsels are required under Justice Department regulations to submit confidential reports to the attorney general at the conclusion of their work. Such reports are then typically made public. The dual appointments in the Biden and Trump cases were seen as a way to insulate the Justice Department from claims of bias and conflict by placing the probes in the hands of specially named prosecutors.

Garland has worked assiduously to challenge Republican claims of a politicized Justice Department. He has named special counsels to investigate not only the president but also his son, Hunter, in a separate tax-and-gun prosecution that has resulted in criminal charges.

But in this case, Biden's personal and White House lawyers strongly objected to the characterizations of Biden in the report and to the fact that so much derogatory information was released about an uncharged subject like the president.

Biden's personal attorney Bob Bauer accused the special counsel of violating "well-established" norms and "trashing" the president.

"The special counsel could not refrain from investigative excess, perhaps unsurprising given the intense pressures of the current political environment. Whatever the impact of those pressures on the final report, it flouts department regulations and norms," he said in a statement.

But a public outcome was basically sealed once Garland appointed a special counsel.

Regulations require special counsels to produce confidential reports to the attorney general at the conclusion of their work. Those documents are then generally made public, even if they contain unflattering assessments of people not criminally charged.

Strikes kill 13 in Gaza as Biden describes Israel's military response as 'over the top'

By NAJIB JOBAIN, WAFAA SHURAFI and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli airstrikes killed at least 13 people in Rafah in the Gaza Strip after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected Hamas' cease-fire terms and vowed to expand the offensive into the southern Gaza town.

President Joe Biden called Israel's military response in Gaza "over the top" and said he continues to work "tirelessly" to press Israel and Hamas to agree on an extended pause in fighting.

"I am of the view, as you know, that the conduct of the response in the Gaza Strip has been over the top," Biden told reporters in an exchange on Thursday evening after delivering remarks on a special counsel report on his handling of classified documents.

Biden has been under political pressure to mend any rifts with voters he might need, especially in the Arab American community, where he has faced increased backlash for his vocal support of Israel's war in Gaza. On Thursday, he sent emissaries to a suburb of Detroit, where the nation's largest concentration of Arab Americans resides.

More than half of the Gaza Strip's population has fled to Rafah, a city on the mostly sealed border with Egypt that is also the main entry point for humanitarian aid. Egypt has warned that any ground operation there or mass displacement across the border would undermine its 40-year-old peace treaty with Israel.

The strikes killed at least 13 people, including two women and five children, according to the Kuwaiti Hospital, which received the bodies. At the scene of one of the strikes, residents used their cellphone flashlights as they dug through the rubble with pick-axes and their bare hands.

"I wish we could collect their whole bodies instead of just pieces," said Mohammed Abu Habib, a neighbor who witnessed the strike.

Israel's 4-month-old air and ground offensive — among the most destructive in recent history — has

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killed over 27,000 Palestinians, driven most people from their homes and pushed a quarter of the population toward starvation.

Netanyahu has said the offensive will continue and expand until "total victory" over Hamas, which started the war by launching a wide-ranging attack into southern Israel on Oct. 7 in which militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took around 250 hostage.

Biden has pushed for an extended pause in the fighting to facilitate the release of the remaining hostages after brief pauses earlier that had allowed for the release of mostly women and children. More than 100 are still captive and Israel has vowed to bring them back.

Hamas, however, has demanded that Israel release hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and end the war as part of a hostage deal. Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has refused to agree to those terms.

Biden said he still is hopeful that a deal can be worked out that might create a path to ending the war. "I am pushing very hard now to deal with this hostage cease-fire," Biden said. "I've been working tirelessly on this deal."

Israel's goals appear increasingly elusive, as Hamas reemerges in parts of northern Gaza, which was the first target of the offensive and has seen widespread destruction. Israel has only rescued one hostage, while Hamas says several have been killed in airstrikes or failed rescue missions.

ALARM GROWS AS ISRAEL EYES RAFAH

Netanyahu said preparations were underway to expand the offensive into Rafah, where hundreds of thousands of people who fled from other areas are crowded into squalid tent camps and overflowing U.N.-run shelters.

The Palestinian death toll from four months of war has already reached 27,840, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory. The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its figures but says most of the dead were women and children.

International aid organizations have warned that any major operation in Rafah would compound what is already a humanitarian catastrophe.

"If they aren't killed in the fighting, Palestinian children, women and men will be at risk of dying by starvation or disease," said Bob Kitchen, of the International Rescue Committee. "There will no longer be a single 'safe' area for Palestinians to go to."

Outside the hospital where bodies from the overnight strikes were brought, relatives wept as they said farewell to their loved ones. Warda Abu Warda said she felt helpless.

"Where do we go after Rafah? Do we go to sea?" she asked.

GAPS REMAIN IN TALKS OVER CEASE-FIRE AND HOSTAGE RELEASE

The United States, Qatar and Egypt are trying to broker another cease-fire agreement to ensure the release of the remaining hostages. But Hamas has demanded an end to the war, a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, including high-profile militants.

Netanyahu rejected those demands as "delusional" on Tuesday and said Israel would never agree to any deal that leaves Hamas in partial or full control of the territory it has ruled since 2007.

But visiting Secretary of State Antony Blinken said an agreement was still possible and that negotiations would continue, the latest sign of a growing divide between the two close allies on the way forward. A Hamas delegation arrived in Cairo on Thursday for more negotiations.

Netanyahu is under mounting pressure from families of the hostages and the wider public to bring them home, even if it requires a deal with Hamas. At least one senior Israeli official has acknowledged that saving the captives and destroying Hamas might be incompatible.

Hamas is still holding over 130 hostages, but around 30 of them are believed to be dead, with the vast majority killed on Oct. 7. The group is widely believed to be holding the captives in tunnels deep underground and using them as human shields for its top leaders.

North Korea's Kim says he has no desire for talks and repeats a threat to destroy South if provoked

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un restated he has no desire for diplomacy with South Korea and that the North would annihilate its rival if provoked, state media said Friday, in the latest of his belligerent statements that are raising tensions in the region.

During a visit to North Korea's Defense Ministry on Thursday, Kim said his recent moves to cut ties with South Korea allow his military to take on a more aggressive posture "by securing lawfulness to strike and destroy (the South) whenever triggered."

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have increased in recent months, with Kim elevating his weapons demonstrations and threats and the United States, South Korea and Japan strengthening their combined military exercises in response.

While most South Korean officials and experts have downplayed the possibility that Kim has real intent to engage in a war, concerns about a direct military provocation have grown as the North may try to ramp up pressure in an election year in South Korea and the United States.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency reported Kim said he took the initiative to "shake off the unrealistic pretense of dialogue and cooperation with the (South) Korean puppets who sought the collapse of our republic." The agency said Kim on his visit to the ministry was accompanied by his daughter, thought to be named Kim Ju Ae, who some experts believe is being groomed as a future leader.

Kim Jong Un's remarks came weeks after he declared to his rubber-stamp parliament that North Korea was abandoning its long-standing objective of a peaceful unification with South Korea and ordered the rewriting of its constitution to cement the South as its most hostile foreign adversary.

The North has since shut down government departments that handled affairs with the South, tore down a major unification monument and abolished laws that had governed past economic projects with the South.

Experts say Kim's attempts to recalibrate relations with the South, which come amid a testing spree of potentially nuclear-capable weapons targeting neighboring rivals and the United States, are aimed at reducing Seoul's voice and eventually forcing direct negotiations with Washington over the nuclear standoff. His long-term goal is to force the United States to accept the idea of the North as a nuclear power and negotiate security and economic concessions from a position of strength.

Other analysts say Kim may want to raise tensions with South Korea to maintain a sense of external threat for his domestic audience. Kim's government has recently been strengthening campaigns to remove the influence of South Korean pop culture and language amongst his population, which he may see as beneficial to reinforcing the North's national identity and prolonging his family's dynastic rule.

In a pre-recorded interview with local television that aired Monday, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol described Kim's government as "irrational" actors who are putting further strain on North Korea's broken economy by aggressively expanding the country's collection of nuclear weapons and missiles.

"We need to keep that in mind as we prepare to counter their security threats or provocations, preparing not just for actions based on rational judgments but also actions based on irrational conclusions," Yoon said.

Special counsel alleged Biden couldn't recall personal milestones. His response: 'My memory is fine'

By JOSH BOAK and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The longstanding concerns about President Joe Biden's age and memory intensified on Thursday after the release of a special counsel's report investigating his possession of classified documents.

The report described the 81-year-old Democrat's memory as "hazy," "fuzzy," "faulty," "poor" and having "significant limitations." It noted that Biden could not recall defining milestones in his own life such as when his son Beau died or when he served as vice president.

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"My memory is fine," Biden responded Thursday night from the White House, where he grew visibly angry as he denied forgetting when his son died. Beau Biden died of brain cancer in 2015 at the age of 46.

While Biden will not face charges for mishandling classified documents, the report's assertions about his memory could undermine Biden's message to voters that he can manage the government and safeguard the country. Voters are already going into this year's election with severe misgivings about Biden's age, having scrutinized his gaffes, his coughing, his slow walking and even a tumble off his bicycle.

Yet even as Biden defended himself, he committed another gaffe while discussing the Israel-Hamas War and mistakenly referred to Egypt's leader Abdel Fattah El-Sissi as "the president of Mexico."

In ruling out prosecution of Biden over his retention of highly classified materials as a private citizen, the report from special counsel Robert Hur suggested he would seem too feeble to prosecute: "It would be difficult to convince a jury that they should convict him — by then a former president well into his eighties — of a serious felony that requires a mental state of willfulness."

Biden said the report's descriptions of his memory and his son's death were "extraneous commentary" that "had no place in this report." About his son's death, Biden said, "How in the hell dare he raise that?"

"Frankly, when I was asked the question, I thought to myself, it wasn't any of their damn business," he said. "Every Memorial Day we hold a service remembering him, attended by friends and family and the people who loved him. I don't need anyone, I don't need anyone to remind me when he passed away."

In response to reporters' questions about his memory, Biden disputed the report's statements and said he's "the most qualified person in this country to be president."

The White House also pushed back on the characterizations of Biden's memory in a Feb. 5 letter from the president's lawyers that was published in Hur's report. The letter argues that Biden's "inability to recall dates or details of events that happened years ago is neither surprising nor unusual," particularly about when certain documents were packed or moved.

"We do not believe that the report's treatment of President Biden's memory is accurate or appropriate," the letter said. "The report uses highly prejudicial language to describe a commonplace occurrence among witnesses: a lack of recall of years-old events. Such comments have no place in a Department of Justice report."

It is not unusual for the subjects of government investigations to say they don't recall an event or a conversation in order to avoid issues such as perjury. The special counsel did not release the transcript of the interviews with Biden, so some context is unclear. Former President Donald Trump, the current Republican front-runner, has boasted of his own vast memory but has also at times said in legal proceedings that he does not recall certain events.

Biden noted in a statement issued Thursday that he had sat for five hours of interviews with Hur's team over two days on Oct. 8 and 9, "even though Israel had just been attacked on October 7th and I was in the middle of handling an international crisis."

In an August poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs, 77% of U.S. adults said Biden is too old to be effective for four more years. It was one of the rare sources of bipartisan agreement during a politically polarized era, with 89% of Republicans and 69% of Democrats saying Biden's age is a problem.

The release of the report overlapped with recent Biden speeches in which he mistakenly claimed to talk with European leaders — France's Francois Mitterrand and Germany's Helmut Kohl — who had, in fact, not held office since the 1990s and had died several years ago.

The 77-year-old Trump also faces questions about recent memory lapses. In a January speech, Trump mistakenly and repeatedly confused former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, his major opponent for the GOP nomination, with Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

Pelosi was the House speaker during the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection by Trump's supporters who were seeking to stop the certification of the 2020 election results. Trump said it was Haley who led the House and alleged she should have done more to secure it.

But Republican critics were quick to pile on Thursday as the special counsel's report became public.

Rep. Tom Emmer, R-Minn., said on X, formerly Twitter, that the report was "alarming" and it's clear that Biden "does not have the cognitive ability to be President."

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"If you're too senile to stand trial, then you're too senile to be president. Joe Biden is unfit to lead this nation," said Alex Pfeiffer, a spokesman for Make America Great Again Inc., the main super PAC backing Trump's candidacy.

Shortly before the special counsel's report was publicly released, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre was playing down Biden's gaffes at the daily news briefing. Jean-Pierre said the slip-ups are "common" for most public figures, including those younger than Biden.

"It happens to all of us," said Jean-Pierre, who noted she herself has misspoken, as has House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La.

Jean-Pierre tried to say that the public's attention should be focused more on the substance of what Biden was saying about how world leaders are worried about Trump's possible return to the White House.

And Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Steven Horsford, D-Nev., on Thursday dismissed concerns about Biden's mental acuity after the president's mix-ups earlier this week.

"I was with the president on Sunday," Horsford said, referring to Biden's Nevada visit. "The president is very well suited to be our commander-in-chief and we're going to continue to focus on the issues that the American people are focused on."

Andra Day prays through nervousness ahead of Super Bowl performance

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Andra Day normally deals with nervousness before any big show — especially in front of her peers. But the Grammy winner eventually leans on prayer to settle her anxiety.

On Sunday, Day will certainly use the same approach before she graces the Super Bowl stage as a pregame performer. She's set to perform "Lift Every Voice and Sing" ahead of the Kansas City Chiefs matchup against the San Francisco 49ers at Allegiant Stadium.

"I'm a praying person. I'm a deeply spiritual person. Prayer is huge," the soul singer told The Associated Press Thursday afternoon. Along with Day's performance, other pregame performers include country music star Reba McEntire who will sing the national anthem, while Post Malone will perform "America the Beautiful." Usher is the featured halftime performer.

Day certainly belongs. Last week, she earned a standing ovation after her performance at the Recording Academy's Black Music Collective event in Los Angeles. A couple days later at Clive Davis' pre-Grammy gala, she performed "That's What Friends Are For" and "What the World Needs Now is Love" onstage with Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight, Dionne Warwick, Keyshia Cole and Frederic Yonnet.

"If I'm here, I'm of the mindset that I'm called to be here," said Day, who's excited about hitting the Super Bowl stage in front of millions to perform "Lift Every Voice and Sing," a popular hymn known within the African American community.

"It's a huge moment," she said. "I don't want to just do well, but I really want people to encounter the spirit."

Day broke through with her standout single "Rise Up." She eventually won a Grammy and Golden Globe for her acting and musical work on the film "The United States vs. Billie Holiday."

After starring in the "Billie Holiday" and "The Deliverance" films, Day has re-focused her attention to making her own music. She recorded music while filming those projects and she's almost ready to reveal her second solo album "Cassandra," which is expected to release in the spring.

It'll be Day's first album since her 2015 debut "Cheers to the Fall," which earned a Grammy nomination along with "Rise Up."

On her upcoming album, Day wants to explore relationships and her spiritual walk with God. She'll also look to touch on her happiness and her not-so proud moments stemmed from selfish decisions.

Day said she wrote and sang through those experiences using it as her therapy.

"I wanted to show up as myself," she said. "Not necessarily do the right thing or say the right thing. I just want to show the iterations of me."

Day has already dropped two singles: "Where Do We Go" and "Probably," which explore the stories

behind a breakup in a relationship. She said her upcoming project makes her feel like a new artist.

"It feels like a genesis," she said. "It feels like a new beginning. I told my team that I want to approach this like a brand new artist as if I've never done this before. It genuinely feels like that. My voice, my awareness of myself and how I approach the music. The sound is different."

The Senate votes to begin working on a last-ditch effort to approve funds for Ukraine and Israel

By STEPHEN GROVES, MARY CLARE JALONICK, and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Overcoming a week of setbacks, the Senate on Thursday voted to begin work on a package of wartime funding for Ukraine, Israel and other U.S. allies. But doubts remained about support from Republicans who earlier rejected a carefully negotiated compromise that also included border enforcement policies.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called the latest vote a "good first step" and pledged that the Senate would "keep working on this bill -- until the job is done."

The 67-32 vote was the first meaningful step Congress has taken in months to approve Ukraine aid, but it still faces a difficult path to final passage. Continued support from GOP senators is not guaranteed, and even if the legislation passes the Senate, it is expected to be more difficult to win approval in the Republican-controlled House, where Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has been noncommittal on the aid.

The Senate prepared for a days-long slog to reach a final vote. Leaders had not agreed to a process to limit the debate time for the bill as Republicans remained divided on how to approach the legislation.

The \$95 billion package is intended to show American strength at a time when U.S. military troops have been attacked and killed in Jordan, allies including Ukraine and Israel are deep in war and unrest threatens to shake the global order. It is also the best chance for Congress to replenish completely depleted military aid for Ukraine — a goal shared by President Joe Biden, Schumer and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell.

After the collapse this week of a bipartisan agreement to include border policy changes in the package, Schumer salvaged \$60 billion in aid for Ukraine, as well as roughly \$35 billion for Israel, other allies and national security priorities in the current legislation.

But Senate Republicans were fractured and frustrated as they huddled Thursday morning to discuss their approach to the legislation and struggled to coalesce behind a plan to assert their priorities. Still, Schumer forged ahead to the noon-hour vote, essentially daring the Ukraine supporters within the GOP to vote against the aid.

Schumer's push worked as the vote to begin debate on the new package cleared with 17 Republicans along with Democrats voting to move forward. Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont who opposes much of the aid for Israel, voted against it.

Some in the Senate vowed to do everything they could to delay final action.

"I'll object to anything speeding up this rotten foreign spending bill's passage," said Sen. Rand Paul, a Kentucky Republican, on X.

The U.S. is already out of money to send missiles and ammunition to Kyiv, just as the nearly two-year-old war reaches a crucial juncture. Ukraine supporters say the drop-off in U.S. support is already being felt on the battlefield and by civilians. Russia has renewed its commitment to the invasion with relentless attacks.

"There are people in Ukraine right now, in the height of their winter, in trenches, being bombed and being killed," said Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C.

While military support for Ukraine once enjoyed wide bipartisan support in Congress, an increasing number of Republicans in the House and Senate have expressed serious reservations about supporting a new round of funding for Ukraine. Following the lead of Donald Trump, the likely GOP presidential nominee, they see the funding as wasteful and argue that an end to the conflict should be negotiated.

Biden has made halting Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion a top foreign policy priority and last year requested a sweeping funding proposal to replenish aid for Ukraine and Israel, as well as to invest

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more in domestic defense manufacturing, humanitarian assistance and managing the influx of migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The \$95 billion package proposed by Democrats this week would send \$14 billion in military aid to Israel, provide further funding for allies in Asia, and allot \$10 billion for humanitarian efforts in Ukraine, Israel, Gaza and other places.

The revamped package includes legislation to authorize sanctions and anti-money laundering tools against criminal enterprises that traffic fentanyl into the U.S.

Supporters of the national security package have cast it as a history-turning initiative that would rebuff both Russia's incursion in Europe and Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitions in Taiwan and Asia.

"Failure to pass this bill would only embolden autocrats like Putin and Xi who want nothing more than America's decline," Schumer said.

Republicans had initially demanded that the package also include border policy changes, arguing that they would not support other countries' security when the U.S. border was seeing rampant illegal crossings. But after months of round-the-clock negotiations on a bipartisan compromise intended to overhaul the asylum system with faster and tougher enforcement, Republicans rejected it as insufficient.

Some Republicans, even traditional supporters of Ukraine, refused to give up demands for border measures.

"It's pretty dire if you have to negotiate with Putin to give up significant territories," said Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla. "And I think it would also have an impact on how allies around the world view us and our reliability."

But he insisted, "The point is we can address that... All I ask is the president enforce our immigration laws and he's just grotesquely ignoring this, on purpose."

A number of Republicans appeared determined to mount another push for border legislation and suggested that the contours of the bill unveiled on Sunday could still be modified and made more strict. During one moment on the Senate floor, Sens. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican, and Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona independent who crafted the border proposal, entered into a testy exchange.

"I am not going to put Ukraine, Israel, or anybody else ahead of America," Graham said. "I am going to try to create an outcome where the bill gets through the House. It's got to get through the House."

Sinema responded by pointing out that Graham voted against opening debate for the border and Ukraine deal on Wednesday. She said that had Republicans supported that bill, it could have made it easier to add policies they wanted to the legislation.

"If we had wanted to have a robust debate, an openness to an open amendment process, the time to do that would have been yesterday," Sinema said.

Usher says it's been a challenge to squeeze 30-year career into 13-minute Super Bowl halftime show

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Usher found fitting a successful three decades of music into a super-short Super Bowl halftime show a challenge, but the multiple Grammy winner decided to concentrate on past hits, moments from his popular Las Vegas residency and possibly draw from his new album.

"I was very mindful of my past, celebrating my present, which is here in Las Vegas, and thinking about where we're heading in the future," the singer said when he addressed the media Thursday in advance of Sunday's Super Bowl, which will be held at Las Vegas' Allegiant Stadium, with the San Francisco 49ers facing off against the Kansas City Chiefs. He will release his ninth studio album "Coming Home" on Friday.

Usher said he's been asking himself, "What songs do people know me for, what songs have been a celebration of all of the journey?"

The R&B singer thought about adding the roller skating element from his residency into his halftime performance, but he gave no other specific clues on where that process led him, and what his take on the global spectacle will look like.

"For everybody who heard about my show in Las Vegas, you'll now get a chance to see some of what

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I did here but you'll get the best of it," he said. "

Usher did not drop names of who might be joining him on stage, but he offered some vague hints. He confirmed that he won't be alone at Allegiant Stadium. In previous years, most Super Bowl performers have included guest stars — except for Rihanna, who was a solo act last year.

The singer suggested it would be people he's collaborated with before.

"I think I made it easy for myself when I decided to have featured artists on songs that became hit records. That gave me the greatest inspiration," he said. "I have definitely gone through a lot of ideas of who I would have go through this moment with me

That hardly narrows it down, however, given all the folks he's collaborated with, from Beyoncé to Monica to Nicki Minaj to Ludacris to Lil Jon.

Usher was a Super Bowl guest star himself, with Black Eyed Peas frontman will.i.am in 2011. He told The Associated Press previously that he'd use that performance as a "cheat sheet" for Sunday's show.

On Thursday, he said he had a harrowing moment getting there.

"My hand got caught on a wire that was holding me 30 feet in the air, and I almost missed my entrance," he said.

He still managed to hit is mark — in the splits. But he would prefer to avoid that kind of mishap.

Usher said he definitely aims to bring the flavor of Atlanta — a city where he made his musical name. His 100-show local residency in Las Vegas last year was a perfect workshop to help make that happen.

"I've been able to bring a great deal of Atlanta and the melting pot that it is, musically and culturally, to Las Vegas," he said. "It wasn't easy to do but I turned Vegas into Atlanta. I took the V and turned it upside down."

An eight-time Grammy winner, Usher's "Confessions" has sold more than 10 million units in the U.S. The album ranks among one of the best-selling music projects of all time and launched No. 1 hits such as "Yeah!" with Ludacris and Lil Jon, "Burn" and "Confessions Part II." His special edition version included the smooth hit "My Boo," a duet with Alicia Keys. Next year will mark the 20th anniversary of the epic album.

Usher joins a list of celebrated entertainers, who have played during the Super Bowl halftime shows, including Prince, Beyoncé, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Coldplay, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Dr. Dre and Snoop Dogg. Last year, Rihanna chose her Super Bowl performance to tell the world she was pregnant with her second child.

Usher spoke to the media not in a traditional news conference format but via an interview with Apple Music's Nadeska Alexis in front of an audience full of reporters that was streamed on its platform and social media sites.

The news conference also featured pre-game performers including Reba McEntire, Post Malone and Andra Day.

The Supreme Court seems poised to reject efforts to kick Trump off the ballot over the Capitol riot

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court seems poised to reject attempts to kick former President Donald Trump off the 2024 ballot, with conservative and liberal justices in apparent agreement in a case that puts them at the heart of a presidential election.

A definitive ruling for Trump, the leading Republican candidate for president, would largely end efforts in Colorado, Maine and elsewhere to prevent his name from appearing on the ballot.

The justices could act quickly, possibly by Super Tuesday on March 5, when Colorado, Maine and 13 other states will hold primaries.

Conservative and liberal justices alike questioned during arguments Thursday whether Trump can be disqualified from being president again because of his efforts to undo his loss in the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden, ending with the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Their main concern was whether Congress must act before states can invoke a constitutional provision

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that was adopted after the Civil War to prevent former officeholders who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office again. There also were questions about whether the president is covered by the provision.

In the first ruling of its kind, Colorado's Supreme Court decided that the provision, Section 3 of the 14th amendment, could be applied to Trump, who the court found incited the Capitol attack.

But on a Supreme Court that prefers to avoid cases in which it is the final arbiter of a political dispute, the justices appeared to be searching for a consensus ruling and the issue of congressional action seemed to draw the most support.

Justice Elena Kagan was among several justices who wanted to know "why a single state should decide who gets to be president of the United States."

Eight of the nine justices suggested that they were open to at least some of the arguments made by Jonathan Mitchell, Trump's lawyer at the Supreme Court. Trump could win his case if the court finds just one of those arguments persuasive.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor sounded most skeptical of Mitchell's arguments, though she too might not vote to uphold the Colorado ruling that found that Trump "engaged in insurrection" and is ineligible to be president.

In another sign of trouble for the Colorado voters who sued to remove Trump from the ballot, the justices spent little time talking about whether Trump actually "engaged in insurrection" following the 2020 election.

Lawyer Jason Murray, representing the voters, pressed the point that Trump incited the Capitol attack to prevent the peaceful handover of power "for the first time in history."

Mitchell argued that the Capitol riot was not an insurrection and, even if it was, Trump did not directly participate.

Trump, speaking to reporters after the proceedings, called the Supreme Court argument "a beautiful thing to watch in many respects," even as he complained about the case being brought in the first place.

"I hope that democracy in this country will continue," he told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida.

Trump could be back before the Supreme Court in a matter of days to seek an emergency order to keep his election subversion trial on hold so he can appeal lower-court rulings that he is not immune from criminal charges.

That issue had a brief airing Thursday, when Justice Brett Kavanaugh said a more legally sound approach to disqualifying someone from office is found in a federal criminal statute against insurrection.

Someone prosecuted for insurrection "if convicted, could be or shall be disqualified" from office, Kavanaugh said.

Mitchell agreed, but with a caveat, Trump's claim of immunity. "So we would not concede that he can be prosecuted for what he did on January 6th," Mitchell said.

The exchange was largely hypothetical because, while Trump faces criminal charges related to Jan. 6, he has not been charged under the insurrection statute.

The justices heard more than two hours of history-laden arguments in their first case considering Section 3 of the 14th amendment.

Chief Justice John Roberts worried that a ruling against Trump would prompt efforts to disqualify other candidates, "and surely some of those will succeed."

Trump's lawyers argue that the amendment can't be used to keep Trump off the ballot for several reasons.

For one thing, they contend the Jan. 6 riot wasn't an insurrection, and even if it was, Trump did not go to the Capitol or join the rioters. The wording of the amendment also excludes the presidency and candidates running for president, they say. Even if they are wrong about all of that, they argue that Congress must pass legislation to reinvigorate Section 3.

Sotomayor at one point gently mocked part of Mitchell's argument for why Trump is not covered by Section 3. "A bit of a gerrymandered rule, isn't it, designed to benefit only your client?" Sotomayor said.

The lawyers for Republican and independent voters who sued to remove Trump's name from the Colorado ballot counter that there is ample evidence that the events of Jan. 6 constituted an insurrection and that Trump incited it. They say it would be absurd to apply Section 3 to everything but the presidency or that Trump is somehow exempt. And the provision needs no enabling legislation, they argue.

But Murray face sustained, difficult questioning across the high-court bench, including from Justice Neil Gorsuch and Kagan, two justices for whom Murray once worked as a clerk.

If the court in the end upholds the Colorado decision, it would amount to a stunning declaration that Trump did engage in insurrection and is barred by the 14th Amendment from holding office again. That would allow states to keep him off the ballot and imperil his campaign.

The justices could opt for a less conclusive outcome, but with the knowledge that the issue could return to them, perhaps after the general election in November and in the midst of a full-blown constitutional crisis.

Trump is separately appealing to state court a ruling by Maine's Democratic secretary of state, Shenna Bellows, that he was ineligible to appear on that state's ballot over his role in the Capitol attack. Both the Colorado Supreme Court and the Maine secretary of state's rulings are on hold until the appeals play out.

The issues may be novel, but Trump is no stranger to the justices, three of whom Trump appointed when he was president. They have considered many Trump-related cases in recent years, declining to embrace his claims of fraud in the 2020 election and refusing to shield tax records from Congress and prosecutors in New York.

In addition to the immunity issue, the court also will hear an appeal in April from one of the more than 1,200 people charged in the Capitol riot. The case could upend a charge prosecutors have brought against more than 300 people, including Trump.

The court last played so central a role in presidential politics in its 5-4 decision that effectively ended the disputed 2000 election in favor of George W. Bush.

Justice Clarence Thomas is the only member of the court who also took part in Bush v. Gore. Thomas has ignored calls by some Democratic lawmakers to step aside from the case because his wife, Ginni, supported Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election results and attended the rally that preceded the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters.

CIA terminates whistleblower who prompted flood of sexual misconduct complaints

By JIM MUSTIAN and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

The CIA this week terminated a woman whose whistleblower account of being assaulted in a stairwell at the spy agency's headquarters prompted a flood of colleagues to come forward with their own complaints of sexual misconduct. The woman's attorney called the action a brazen retaliation.

While the CIA said that accusation was "factually inaccurate," it wouldn't comment further on the case and declined to explain why the 36-year-old did not make it through the agency's clandestine officer training program known as "the Farm" and, unlike many of her classmates, was not hired into another job.

"To be clear, the CIA does not tolerate sexual assault, sexual harassment or whistleblower retaliation," CIA spokesperson Tammy Thorp told The Associated Press, adding the agency uses "consistent processes to ensure the fair and equal treatment of every officer going through training."

The woman's termination came less than six months after she filed a federal civil rights lawsuit alleging the CIA retaliated against her for reporting what she said was a 2022 stairwell assault in Langley, Virginia, to law enforcement and testifying about it in a closed congressional hearing.

The lawsuit accused the agency of giving her harsher performance reviews and "slut shaming" her by improperly releasing her personal information during the state prosecution last year of Ashkan Bayatpour, a then-fellow CIA trainee convicted of assaulting her with a scarf.

The woman's attorney, Kevin Carroll, told the AP that the CIA has now "unlawfully ended a young woman's career only because she had the moral courage, lacking in her managers, to stand up and be a witness about her sexual assault."

"The agency's festering workplace sexual violence problem," Carroll said, "is now harming the retention of young women who won't put up with it any longer."

The woman, who is not being identified because the AP does not generally identify victims of alleged sexual abuse, was credited with launching a reckoning, of sorts, at the CIA because hers was the rare

allegation of sexual misconduct at the super-secret spy agency to make it into a public courtroom.

An AP investigation found the case helped embolden at least two-dozen women to come forward to authorities and Congress over the past two years with their own accounts at the CIA of sexual assaults, unwanted touching and what they contend is a campaign to keep them from speaking out.

Their accusations ranged from lewd remarks about sexual fantasies at after-work happy hours to a case in which a senior manager allegedly showed up at a subordinate's house at night with a firearm demanding sex. Some of the alleged incidents go back years and took place as officers were on risky covert missions overseas, while others took place at CIA headquarters.

A congressional inquiry and bipartisan calls for a watchdog investigation prompted CIA Director William Burns last year to launch a series of reforms to streamline claims, support victims and more quickly discipline those behind misconduct.

It remains unclear whether the woman's firing will prompt further action. Offices of the U.S. senators leading the inquiry, Virginia Democrat Mark Warner and Florida Republican Marco Rubio, did not respond to requests for comment.

Carroll, the woman's attorney, said she had been given protected whistleblower status before speaking with Congress. But those familiar with the Whistleblower Protection Act cautioned that such protections can be limited, especially at the CIA.

Tom Devine, a longtime whistleblower rights advocate who is legal director for the Government Accountability Project, said CIA employees don't have the same rights as other federal employees because of national security concerns.

"You can blow the whistle, but only within the intel community," Devine said. "So when she went to the police, she was very much on her own. It's an obnoxious loophole."

In her testimony to a Virginia judge last summer, the woman recounted the moment when Bayatpour allegedly tightened the scarf around her neck and tried to kiss her against her will.

"He made a face like he was trying to really hurt me," she testified. "That face, that's what stays with me to this day. That's the hardest part."

Bayatpour acknowledged wrapping the scarf around the woman in the stairwell but insisted his actions were intended in jest during a 40-minute walk together. The incident, his attorney said, was "a joke that didn't land the way it was intended to land."

Bayatpour, a 39-year-old Alabama native and former Navy intelligence officer, remained employed at CIA for several months after he was convicted in August of misdemeanor assault and battery, sentenced to six months probation and ordered to surrender any firearms.

But as of last month, he no longer works for CIA, according to a person familiar with the situation who wasn't authorized to discuss the matter and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Bayatpour deferred questions to his attorney, Jennifer Steeve, who said her client has maintained his innocence and is appealing his conviction, which allows him a jury trial.

Ukraine's president replaces top general to shake up deadlocked war with Russia

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's president replaced his top general Thursday in a shake-up aimed at re-igniting momentum in the deadlocked war with Russia, which is grinding into its third year as the country grapples with shortages of ammunition and personnel and struggles to maintain support from the West.

After days of speculation that change was coming, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on social media that he was thankful for the service of the outgoing Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi — a military leader popular with troops and the general public. "The time for ... a renewal is now," Zelenskyy said on X.

Zelenskyy appointed the commander of Ukraine's ground forces, Col. Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi, to lead the army, which needs a morale boost at a time when the conflict with Russia has been at a near stalemate for months. Syrskyi has been instrumental in Ukraine's biggest successes during the war, including

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overseeing the defense of the capital in the early days of the invasion.

His ascension marks the most significant overhaul of Ukraine's military leadership since Russia's full-scale invasion on Feb. 24 2022. Zaluzhnyi said in a Telegram message that he agreed there is a "need to change approaches and strategy."

An adviser to Zelenskyy, Mykhailo Podolyak, said on X that Ukraine needs to "prevent stagnation on the front line, which negatively affects public sentiment, to find new functional and high-tech solutions that will allow (Ukraine) to retain and develop the initiative."

Syrskiy, 58, was bestowed with the country's highest honor for his role in repelling Moscow's advance on the capital. He has also been credited with orchestrating the successful counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region.

Ukraine's struggles with ammunition and personnel come on the heels of a failed counteroffensive last summer and as European allies try to bump up their military production. At the same time, a political standoff in the United States is holding up further aid from Ukraine's main supplier.

The Kremlin has lately been focused on taking the eastern Ukraine city of Avdiivka, throwing more troops into the four-month battle and bombarding Ukrainian defenses there.

Before Thursday's announcement, local media had speculated for days that Zelenskyy would sack Zaluzhnyi.

Zaluzhnyi was highly regarded by his troops and by foreign military officials. Some analysts warned that his exit could bring unwelcome disruption, potentially driving a wedge between the Ukrainian army and its politicians, and fueling uncertainty among the country's Western allies.

There has been little change in positions along the 1,500-kilometer (900-mile) front line over the winter, though Russia has kept up its attacks. Faced with an anticipated shortfall of Western weaponry, Ukraine has been digging defenses, while Moscow has put its economy on a war footing to give its military more muscle.

Strains began to appear between Zaluzhnyi and Zelenskyy after the counteroffensive last summer failed to meet its goal of penetrating Russia's deep defenses. Western allies had poured billions of dollars' worth of military hardware into Ukraine to help it succeed.

Months later, amid signs of war fatigue in the West, Zaluzhnyi described the conflict as being at a "stalemate," just when Zelenskyy was arguing in foreign capitals that Ukraine's new weaponry had been vital.

Zelenskyy said at the end of last year that he had turned down the military's request to mobilize up to 500,000 people, demanding more details about how it would be paid for.

Born into a family of Soviet servicemen, Zaluzhnyi is credited with modernizing the Ukrainian army along NATO lines. He took charge seven months before Russia's full-scale invasion, and was widely regarded in the West as an ambitious and astute battlefield commander.

Zaluzhnyi earned wide support after the defense of Kyiv in the early days of the war, followed by a triumphant counteroffensive in the Kharkiv region and the liberation of Kherson. His courage and defiance of Russia's ambitions were renowned, and he became a symbol of resilience and national unity.

"We are on our land and we will not give it up," Zaluzhnyi said on the first day of the war.

For months, a giant poster hung outside City Hall in Kyiv to honor him. Designed to look a stamp, it featured a fictional picture of Zaluzhnyi with his fingers in a victory gesture escorting Russian President Vladimir Putin — in handcuffs and an orange prisoner's jumpsuit — before three judges in wigs.

Despite his popularity, Zaluzhnyi shied from the spotlight, deferring that role to Zelenskyy. He made limited public appearances and rarely gave interviews.

Retired Australian Maj. Gen. Mick Ryan, a fellow of the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington, described Zaluzhnyi as "a charismatic and popular military leader" who would be hard to replace.

The perception of government instability "is a real danger area for" Zelenskyy, Ryan wrote recently in an article posted online.

In Washington, The White House's national security spokesman, John Kirby, told reporters on Thursday that "we're not concerned about Ukrainian stability as a result of this."

Earlier Thursday, Ukrainian forces claimed to have shot down a Russian attack helicopter in eastern Ukraine near the city of Avdiivka, where soldiers are fighting from street to street as Russia's army seeks to surround Kyiv's defending troops.

Avdiivka has become "a primary focus" of Moscow's forces, the U.K. Defense Ministry said in an assessment Thursday.

The General Staff of Ukraine's armed forces reported Thursday that its troops had fended off 40 enemy assaults around Avdiivka over the previous 24 hours. That is roughly double the number of daily Russian assaults at other points along the front line.

Ukraine has built multiple defenses in Avdiivka, complete with concrete fortifications and a network of tunnels. Despite massive losses of personnel and equipment, Russian troops have slowly advanced since October.

Inflation is nearly back to 2%. So why isn't the Federal Reserve ready to cut rates?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — From Wall Street traders to car dealers to home buyers, Americans are eager for the Federal Reserve to start cutting interest rates and lightening the heavy burden on borrowers.

The Fed is widely expected to do so this year — probably several times. Inflation, as measured by its preferred gauge, rose in the second half of 2022 at an annual rate of about 2% — the Fed's target level. Yet this week, several central bank officials underscored that they weren't ready to pull the trigger just yet.

Why, with inflation nearly conquered and the Fed's key rate at a 22-year high, isn't now the time to cut?

Most of the Fed's policymakers have said they're optimistic that even as the economy and the job market keep growing, inflation pressures will continue to cool. But they also caution that the economy appears so strong that there's a real risk that price increases could spike again.

And some are worried that if they cut rates now and inflation re-accelerates, then the Fed could be forced into an about-face and have to raise rates again.

"History tells many stories of inflation head-fakes," said Tom Barkin, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, in a speech Thursday.

Inflation had seemed defeated in 1986, Barkin noted, when Paul Volcker was Fed chair.

"The Fed reduced rates, but inflation then escalated again the following year, causing the Fed to reverse course," he said.

"I would love to avoid that roller-coaster if we can," said Barkin, who is among 12 Fed officials who vote on interest rate policy this year.

Several officials have said they want more time to see if inflation continues to subside. In the meantime, they note, the economy is solid enough that it can thrive without any rate cuts. Last month, for example, America's employers delivered a burst of hiring, and the unemployment rate stayed at 3.7%.

"They're going to be glacial, and take their time," said Steven Blitz, chief US economist at GlobalData TS Lombard. "They're willing to say, 'We don't know, but we can afford to wait so we're going to wait.'"

The sturdiness of the economy has also raised questions about just how effective the Fed's 11 rate hikes have been. If higher borrowing rates are only barely restraining the economy, some officials may conclude that high rates should stay in place longer or that few rate cuts will be needed.

"I don't feel there's a sense of urgency here," Loretta Mester, president of the Cleveland Federal Reserve, told reporters Tuesday. "I think later this year, if things evolve as anticipated, we would be able to start moving the rate down."

Yet their caution carries risks. Right now, the economy appears on track for a "soft landing," in which inflation would be defeated without causing a recession or high unemployment. But the longer that borrowing rates stay high, the higher the risk that many companies and consumers would stop borrowing and spending, weakening the economy and potentially sending it into a recession.

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High rates could also compound the struggles of banks that are saddled with bad commercial real estate loans, which would be harder to refinance at higher rates.

The high cost of borrowing has become a headache for David Kelleher's Chrysler-Jeep dealership just outside of Philadelphia. Just 2 1/2 years ago, Kelleher recalled, his customers could get an auto loan below 3%. Now, they're lucky to get 5.5%.

Customers who had monthly car lease payments of, say, \$400 three years ago are finding that with vehicle prices much higher and interest rates up, their monthly payments would be closer to \$650. The trend is pushing many of his customers toward lower-priced used cars — or no purchase at all.

"We need the government to address the interest rates ... and understand that they've accomplished their goal of lowering inflation," Kelleher said. "If interest rates can come down, I think we're going to start selling more cars."

Kelleher is likely to get his wish by May or June, when most economists expect the Fed to start reducing its benchmark rate, which is now at about 5.4%. In December, all but two of the 19 policymakers that participate in the Fed's policy discussions said they expect the central bank to cut rates this year. (Twelve of those 19 actually get to vote on rate policies each year.)

Yet economic growth has accelerated since then. In the final three months of last year, the economy expanded at an unexpectedly strong 3.3% annual rate. Surveys of manufacturers and service-providers, such as retailers, banks, and shippers, also reported that business perked up last month.

Collectively, the latest reports suggest that the economy may not be headed for a soft landing but rather what some economists call a "no landing." By that they mean a scenario in which the economy would remain robust and inflation an ongoing threat, potentially stuck above the Fed's target. Under this scenario, the Fed would feel compelled to keep rates at elevated levels for an extended period.

Powell said last week that while the Fed wants to see continued "strong growth," a strong economy does threaten to send inflation up.

"I think that is a risk ... that inflation would accelerate," Powell said. "I think the greater risk is that it would stabilize at a level meaningfully above 2%. ... That's why we keep our options open here and why we're not rushing."

Other officials this week drove home the point that the Fed is trying to balance the risk of cutting rates too soon — which might cause inflation to surge again — and keeping rates too high for too long, which could trigger a recession.

"At some point, the continued cooling of inflation and labor markets may make it appropriate to reduce" rates, Andrea Kugler, a recently appointed Fed governor said Wednesday in her first public speech. "On the other hand, if progress on disinflation stalls, it may be appropriate to hold the target range steady at its current level for longer."

Some analysts have pointed to signs that the economy is becoming more productive, or efficient, allowing it grow faster without necessarily increasing inflation. Yet productivity data is notoriously hard to measure, and any meaningful improvement wouldn't necessarily become apparent for years.

Still, "maybe the economy can take higher interest rates than we thought in 2019 before the pandemic," said Eric Swanson, an economist at the University of California, Irvine.

If so, that might not just delay the Fed's rate cuts, but result in fewer of them. Fed officials are still saying they plan to cut rates perhaps three times this year, below the five or six that some market analysts foresee.

AI-generated voices in robocalls can deceive voters. The FCC just made them illegal

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Federal Communications Commission on Thursday outlawed robocalls that contain voices generated by artificial intelligence, a decision that sends a clear message that exploiting the

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technology to scam people and mislead voters won't be tolerated.

The unanimous ruling targets robocalls made with AI voice-cloning tools under the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, a 1991 law restricting junk calls that use artificial and prerecorded voice messages.

The announcement comes as New Hampshire authorities are advancing their investigation into AI-generated robocalls that mimicked President Joe Biden's voice to discourage people from voting in the state's first-in-the-nation primary last month.

Effective immediately, the regulation empowers the FCC to fine companies that use AI voices in their calls or block the service providers that carry them. It also opens the door for call recipients to file lawsuits and gives state attorneys general a new mechanism to crack down on violators, according to the FCC.

The agency's chairwoman, Jessica Rosenworcel, said bad actors have been using AI-generated voices in robocalls to misinform voters, impersonate celebrities and extort family members.

"It seems like something from the far-off future, but this threat is already here," Rosenworcel told The Associated Press on Wednesday as the commission was considering the regulations. "All of us could be on the receiving end of these faked calls, so that's why we felt the time to act was now."

Under the consumer protection law, telemarketers generally cannot use automated dialers or artificial or prerecorded voice messages to call cellphones, and they cannot make such calls to landlines without prior written consent from the call recipient.

The new ruling classifies AI-generated voices in robocalls as "artificial" and thus enforceable by the same standards, the FCC said.

Those who break the law can face steep fines, with a maximum of more than \$23,000 per call, the FCC said. The agency has previously used the consumer law to clamp down on robocallers interfering in elections, including imposing a \$5 million fine on two conservative hoaxers for falsely warning people in predominantly Black areas that voting by mail could heighten their risk of arrest, debt collection and forced vaccination.

The law also gives call recipients the right to take legal action and potentially recover up to \$1,500 in damages for each unwanted call.

Josh Lawson, director of AI and democracy at the Aspen Institute, said even with the FCC's ruling, voters should prepare themselves for personalized spam to target them by phone, text and social media.

"The true dark hats tend to disregard the stakes and they know what they're doing is unlawful," he said. "We have to understand that bad actors are going to continue to rattle the cages and push the limits."

Kathleen Carley, a Carnegie Mellon professor who specializes in computational disinformation, said that in order to detect AI abuse of voice technology, one needs to be able to clearly identify that the audio was AI generated.

That is possible now, she said, "because the technology for generating these calls has existed for awhile. It's well understood and it makes standard mistakes. But that technology will get better."

Sophisticated generative AI tools, from voice-cloning software to image generators, already are in use in elections in the U.S. and around the world.

Last year, as the U.S. presidential race got underway, several campaign advertisements used AI-generated audio or imagery, and some candidates experimented with using AI chatbots to communicate with voters.

Bipartisan efforts in Congress have sought to regulate AI in political campaigns, but no federal legislation has passed, with the general election nine months away.

Rep. Yvette Clarke, who introduced legislation to regulate AI in politics, lauded the FCC for its ruling but said now Congress needs to act.

"I believe Democrats and Republicans can agree that AI-generated content used to deceive people is a bad thing, and we need to work together to help folks have the tools necessary to help discern what's real and what isn't," said Clarke, D-N.Y.

The AI-generated robocalls that sought to influence New Hampshire's Jan. 23 primary election used a voice similar to Biden's, employed his often-used phrase, "What a bunch of malarkey" and falsely suggested that voting in the primary would preclude voters from casting a ballot in November.

"New Hampshire had a taste of how AI can be used inappropriately in the election process," New Hamp-

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shire Secretary of State David Scanlan said. "It is certainly appropriate to try and get our arms around the use and the enforcement so that we're not misleading the voting population in a way that could harm our elections."

The state's attorney general, John Formella, said Tuesday that investigators had identified the Texas-based Life Corp. and its owner, Walter Monk as the source of the calls, which went to thousands of state residents, mostly registered Democrats. He said the calls were transmitted by another Texas-based company, Lingo Telecom.

According to the FCC, both Lingo Telecom and Life Corp. have been investigated for illegal robocalls in the past.

Lingo Telecom said in a statement Tuesday that it "acted immediately" to help with the investigation into the robocalls impersonating Biden. The company said it "had no involvement whatsoever in the production of the call content."

A man who answered the business line for Life Corp. declined to comment Thursday.

Google rebrands its AI services as Gemini, launches new app and subscription service

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google on Thursday introduced a free artificial intelligence app that will enable people to rely on technology instead of their own brains to write, interpret what they're reading and deal with a variety of other task in their lives.

With the advent of the Gemini app, named after an AI project unveiled late last year, Google will cast aside the Bard chatbot that it introduced a year ago in an effort to catch up with ChatGPT, the chatbot unleashed by the Microsoft-backed startup OpenAI in late 2022. Google is immediately releasing a stand-alone Gemini app for smartphones running on its Android software.

In a few weeks, Google will put Gemini's features into its existing search app for iPhones, where Apple would prefer people rely on its Siri voice assistant for handling various tasks.

Although the Google voice assistant that has been available for years will stick around, company executives say they expect Gemini to become the main way users apply the technology to help them think, plan and create. It marks Google's next foray down a new and potentially perilous avenue while remaining focused on its founding goal "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

"We think this is one of the most profound ways we are going to advance our mission," Sissie Hsiao, a Google general manager overseeing Gemini, told reporters ahead of Thursday's announcement.

The Gemini app initially will be released in the U.S. in English before expanding to the Asia-Pacific region next week, with versions in Japanese and Korean.

Besides the free version of Gemini, Google will be selling an advanced service accessible through the new app for \$20 a month. The Mountain View, California, company says it is such a sophisticated form of AI that will it be able to tutor students, provide computer programming tips to engineers, dream up ideas for projects, and then create the content for the suggestions a user likes best.

The Gemini Advanced option, which will be powered by an AI technology dubbed "Ultra 1.0," will seek to build upon the nearly 100 million worldwide subscribers that Google says it has attracted so far — most of whom pay \$2 to \$10 per month for additional storage to back up photos, documents and other digital material. The Gemini Advanced subscription will include 2 terabytes of storage that Google currently sells for \$10 per month, meaning the company believes the AI technology is worth an additional \$10 per month.

Google is offering a free two-month trial of Gemini Advanced to encourage people to try it out.

The rollout of the Gemini apps underscores the building moment to bring more AI to smartphones — devices that accompany people everywhere — as part of a trend Google began last fall when it released its latest Pixel smartphones and Samsung embraced last month with its latest Galaxy smartphones.

It also is likely to escalate the high-stakes AI showdown pitting Google against Microsoft, two of the

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world's most powerful companies jockeying to get the upper hand with a technology that could reshape work, entertainment and perhaps humanity itself. The battle already has contributed to a \$2 trillion increase in the combined market value of Microsoft and Google's corporate parent, Alphabet Inc., since the end of 2022.

In a blog post, Google CEO Sundar Pichai predicted the technology underlying Gemini Advanced will be able to outthink even the smartest people when tackling many complex topics.

"Ultra 1.0 is the first to outperform human experts on (massive multitask language understanding), which uses a combination of 57 subjects — including math, physics, history, law, medicine and ethics — to test knowledge and problem-solving abilities," Pichai wrote.

But Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella made a point Wednesday of touting the capabilities of the ChatGPT-4 chatbot — a product released nearly a year ago after being trained by OpenAI on large-language models, or LLMs.

"We have the best model, today even," Nadella asserted during an event in Mumbai, India. He then seemingly anticipated Gemini's next-generation release, adding, "We're waiting for the competition to arrive. It'll arrive, I'm sure. But the fact is, that we have the most leading LLM out there."

The introduction of increasingly sophisticated AI is amplifying fears that the technology will malfunction and misbehave on its own, or be manipulated by people for sinister purposes such as spreading misinformation in politics or to torment their enemies. That potential has already led to the passage of rules designed to police the use of AI in Europe, and spurred similar efforts in the U.S. and other countries.

Google says the next generation of Gemini products have undergone extensive testing to ensure they are safe and were built to adhere to its AI principles, which include being socially beneficial, avoiding unfair biases and being accountable to people.

Russian election officials reject antiwar politician's bid to oppose Putin in next month's vote

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Antiwar politician Boris Nadezhdin was rejected Thursday as a candidate in next month's presidential balloting by Russian election authorities, a strong signal from the Kremlin that it won't tolerate any public opposition to the invasion of Ukraine.

The move by the Central Election Commission provides an even smoother path for President Vladimir Putin to win a fifth term in power. He faces only token opposition from pro-Kremlin candidates in the March 15-17 vote and is all but certain to win, given his tight control of Russia's political system.

Nadezhdin, a local legislator in a town near Moscow, had needed to gather at least 100,000 signatures of supporters — a requirement that applies to candidates of political parties that are not represented in the Russian parliament.

The Central Election Commission declared that more than 9,000 signatures submitted by Nadezhdin's campaign were invalid, which was enough to disqualify him. Russia's election rules say potential candidates can have no more than 5% of their submitted signatures thrown out.

He has openly called for a halt to the nearly 2-year-old war in Ukraine and for starting a dialogue with the West. Thousands of Russians lined up across the country last month to sign papers supporting his candidacy, an unusual show of opposition sympathies in the rigidly controlled political landscape.

The 60-year-old Nadezhdin, whose name is a form of the Russian word for "hope," gave a sense of optimism to those opposing the war, and many of them stood in bitterly cold temperatures across the country last month to sign petitions.

Starting peace talks with Kyiv was among his campaign promises, as was the idea that Russia is not "a besieged fortress" and needs to pivot toward working with the West rather than being in a confrontation with it.

Speaking to officials at the election commission Thursday, Nadezhdin had asked them to postpone their decision, but they declined. He said he would appeal his disqualification in court.

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"It's not me standing here," Nadezhdin said. "Hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens who put their signatures down for me are behind me."

Putin is running as an independent candidate, and his campaign was required to gather at least 300,000 signatures in his support. He was swiftly allowed on the ballot earlier this year, with election officials disqualifying only 91 out of 315,000 that his campaign submitted.

Most of the opposition figures who might have challenged Putin have been either imprisoned or exiled abroad. That includes opposition leader Alexei Navalny, whose attempt to run against Putin in 2018 also was rejected, and he is now serving a 19-year prison sentence on extremism charges.

The vast majority of independent Russian media outlets also have been banned under Putin.

Central Election Commission head Ella Pamfilova said the ballot will have only four names — the fewest number of candidates since 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev ran in place of the term-limited Putin. Medvedev easily won the race with three other token contenders in a power-sharing deal that kept Putin in charge as prime minister.

Three candidates running against Putin next month were nominated by parties represented in parliament and weren't required to collect signatures: Nikolai Kharitonov of the Communist Party, Leonid Slutsky of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party and Vladislav Davankov of the New People Party.

Those parties largely support the Kremlin's policies. Kharitonov ran against Putin in 2004, finishing a distant second.

Exiled opposition activists, including those on Navalny's team, had thrown their weight behind Nadezhdin, urging their supporters to sign his nomination petitions.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said the Kremlin doesn't view Nadezhdin as "a rival."

Speaking after the election commission hearing, Nadezhdin stressed that many Russians want change. "You can remove Nadezhdin from the elections, no question, you can do it," he said. "But where do you put tens of millions of people who want change, who do not agree with the course that is now taking place in the country? That's the problem. These people are not going anywhere."

Nadezhdin is the second antiwar hopeful to be denied a spot on the ballot. In December, the election commission refused to certify the candidacy of Yekaterina Duntsova, citing problems such as spelling errors in her paperwork.

Duntsova, a journalist and a former legislator from the Tver region north of Moscow, had announced plans last year to challenge Putin. Promoting a vision of a Russia as "peaceful, friendly and ready to cooperate with everyone on the principle of respect," she said she wanted to end the fighting in Ukraine swiftly and for Moscow and Kyiv to come to the negotiating table.

Abbas Gallyamov, a former Putin speechwriter who became a political analyst, said the decision to keep Nadezhdin off the ballot showed how hollow the support for Putin was.

"All of Putin's mega-popularity, which official sociology constantly broadcasts, all that 'rally around the national leader' that Peskov regularly talks about is, in fact, a highly artificial and unstable structure that does not withstand any contact with reality," he said.

It is highly unlikely that the refusal to register Nadezhdin as a candidate will produce any protests in the streets. Demonstrations have been rare in Russia since February 2022, when antiwar rallies resulted in mass arrests and eventually fizzled. Nadezhdin himself has publicly entertained the idea of calling for protests, but stressed that those would be possible only if the government authorizes them, which it rarely does.

Earlier this month, Navalny urged supporters to show their opposition to Putin by coming to the polls to vote at a specific time on election day — a move he hoped would result in long queues and turn into "a powerful demonstration of the country's mood."

Navalny's top strategist Leonid Volkov reiterated that call Thursday, saying the decision to reject Nadezhdin "serves one goal: to sow despair, so that more people throw in the towel and decide not to go anywhere."

In a post on X, formerly Twitter, Volkov argued March election is a "propaganda effort to spread hopelessness" and "instill despair in all normal people in Russia" by creating an image of Putin's overwhelming popularity.

"Millions of people will come to vote against Putin, but if every one of them in our vast country comes

on their own, they will be an easy prey for Putin's propaganda, fall for the lie that there are few people like him out there. And if everyone comes at the same time and sees each other, propaganda will be powerless," he said.

Biden determined to use stunning Trump-backed collapse of border deal as a weapon in 2024 campaign

By COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — How it began: President Joe Biden was urgently seeking more money from Congress to aid Ukraine and Israel. He took a gamble by seizing on GOP demands to simultaneously address one of his biggest political liabilities — illegal migration at the U.S.-Mexico border.

How it ended: Biden came close to succeeding, before it all fell apart spectacularly. Now the president is trying to make the best of it after a major congressional deal was scuttled once Republican front-runner Donald Trump got involved. And Biden is intent on showing that the former president and his "Make America Great Again" Republican acolytes in Congress aren't really interested in solutions.

In between: There is a story of a president willing to anger his own party's activist class in an election year, rare hope for bipartisan progress on one of the third rails of American politics, and a sudden, stunning collapse publicly engineered by Trump that Biden's team now sees as a political gift.

This account of Biden's big gamble is based on interviews with more than a dozen White House aides, lawmakers, Biden administration officials and congressional aides, some of whom spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the back and forth over the collapsed deal, and what happens next.

The bipartisan legislative deal announced Sunday evening was the culmination of more than four months of negotiations that started with Senate Democrats and Republicans, and later included top Biden aides and Cabinet officials. It came after Republicans, led by then-House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, backed a temporary spending deal that kept the government operating but delivered no new funding for Ukraine.

McCarthy had insisted to the White House that any effort to continue U.S. funding for Ukraine needed to be linked to significant steps to secure the U.S.-Mexico border, long a GOP priority. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Biden's most valuable Republican ally when it came to Ukraine aid, also began appealing to senior administration officials for the spending measure to include border provisions.

Inside the White House, there was no shortage of grumbling that Republicans were insisting on unrelated policy changes and holding up badly needed money for the Ukrainian armed forces.

But Biden and his advisers saw a potential upside as well, at a time when the president's handling of immigration was one of his biggest political vulnerabilities and there were chaotic scenes at the border and in major Democratic-run cities where migrants are sleeping in police station foyers, bus stations and hotels.

Before long McCarthy was ousted and it took weeks to elect a replacement. New House Speaker Mike Johnson, elected Oct. 25, made clear that he, too, wanted to pair border security with any new Ukraine funding.

While the House was in disarray, a group of bipartisan senators quietly got to work.

The White House kept its distance until senior officials felt it was the right time to get directly involved, but there was also pressure from Republicans for them to join the talks. GOP lawmakers insisted it was necessary for Biden to expend some political capital and embrace a border compromise that could be unpopular with parts of his own party.

On Dec. 12, the White House dispatched senior officials, including Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, to join the negotiations. The idea was to underscore Biden's seriousness about cutting a deal with Republicans.

"Immediately after the Republicans demanded that the administration show up, they showed up," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., one the negotiators.

Difficult negotiations stretched into 2024. But there were signs of progress and Biden was optimistic. So much so that on Jan. 18, he said he didn't think there were any sticking points left.

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In an effort to push the bill forward, Biden even adopted Trump's own language saying he'd "shut down the border" if given the power — a stunning admission from a Democrat that was quickly and loudly condemned by activists in his own party.

The deal that emerged would have overhauled the asylum system to provide faster and tougher immigration enforcement, as well as given presidents new powers to immediately expel migrants if authorities become overwhelmed with the number of people applying for asylum. It also would have added \$20 billion in funding, a huge influx of cash.

It was never entirely clear what the White House strategy was to advance the border compromise in the House should it make it out of the Senate. Johnson repeatedly voiced resistance to how the agreement was shaping up. Asked why the administration was choosing to hash out a deal with the Senate and not the House, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre regularly pointed out that House Republicans left for the holidays in mid-December while talks were ongoing.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mike Rogers, R-Ala., said it was a mistake that the White House didn't negotiate with House Republicans directly, but that even so, if the deal "actually sealed the border, it could've sailed through."

Enter the former president. He had been occupied for weeks by a defamation trial in New York City and fending off GOP challenges from Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley in Iowa and New Hampshire.

At a rally in Nevada on Jan. 27 — after solidifying his position as the far and away GOP front-runner — he said his piece: "As the leader of our party, there is zero chance I will support this horrible open borders betrayal of America. I'll fight it all the way."

"A lot of the senators are trying to say, respectfully, they're blaming it on me," Trump added, followed by the 10 words that made Biden aides light up: "I say, that's OK. Please blame it on me. Please."

By the time the text of the bill was released last Sunday, the pile-up of Republicans willing to block it already appeared insurmountable. GOP lawmakers claimed Biden already could fix the situation at the border with existing authority. But some in Congress publicly echoed Trump in saying they didn't want to give Biden a political win on an issue that they see as key to their 2024 hopes.

With that, the deal that the White House and many in the Senate thought would pass was headed for failure. In a stern address this week, the president vowed to make sure that voters understand why it foundered.

"I'll be taking this issue to the country, and the voters are going to know that just at the moment we were going to secure the border and fund these other programs, the MAGA Republicans said 'no' because they're afraid of Donald Trump," Biden said.

The rapid collapse of Republican backing for the border compromise stunned even those who worked most closely on the agreement. Murphy said that even as late as Sunday, he had counted 20 to 25 GOP senators as potential votes in favor of the deal.

"I am still shocked at how every single one of these Republicans, including many Republicans that were like, literally in the room with us — like, hours after helping us try to get the final product, they were declaring they were against it," Murphy said. "I've never seen anything like this in my time in Washington."

To Biden aides, it was public validation of the argument the president had been making about Trump and his allies — that they had their own interests at heart, not the country's.

Even in failure, the bipartisan agreement in principle was the closest Washington has come to significant revisions to border policy in two decades. And Biden allies are intent on making Republicans take the hit for any further scenes of chaos at the border.

It's far from assured that Biden's efforts to pin the blame on Trump will stick. His GOP critics will no doubt continue their relentless efforts to saddle the current Oval Office occupant with the country's immigration woes. And the president still has to contend with sore feelings among progressive Democrats who feel the president sold them out by going all-in on tougher measures and language that had previously been a nonstarter for the party.

Biden, though, has his plan: "Every day between now and November, the American people are going to know that the only reason the border is not secure is Donald Trump and his MAGA Republican friends."

Conspiracy theories swirl around Taylor Swift. These Republican voters say they don't care

By MATT BROWN and JAMES POLLARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — To hear some conservatives on cable news or on social media tell it, Taylor Swift is part of an elaborate plot to help Democrats win the November election.

"I wonder who's going to win the Super Bowl next month," wrote former Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy in January after the Kansas City Chiefs made the game with a strong performance from tight end Travis Kelce, Swift's partner. "And I wonder if there's a major presidential endorsement coming from an artificially culturally propped-up couple this fall."

Many voters just see that talk as noise to tune out.

Ryan Allstun was wearing a Green Bay Packers hoodie at a recent rally in Lancaster, South Carolina, for GOP presidential candidate Nikki Haley. Allstun said he supports former President Donald Trump and wants famous people to keep their politics private. But Allstun doesn't look to celebrities such as Swift and Kelce for endorsements.

"Couldn't care less," he said. "To each their own."

Many people at recent Republican political events were far more ambivalent about the pop star than some personalities who suggest the media coverage of Swift and Kelce's relationship is a pretext to boost a potential future endorsement of Democratic President Joe Biden. Some have gone so far as to suggest — some tongue in cheek, others perhaps not — that the U.S. government is running a covert operation involving Swift.

Some Republican strategists think the focus on Swift could hurt the party.

"People just want to like Taylor Swift. They want to be able to watch football and listen to her music and not consider the political implications," said Matt Gorman, vice president at Targeted Victory, a Republican political consulting firm. "I beg people who care about this to go outside and touch grass. Most everyday people don't have the time or energy to care."

Susan Cummins, a Haley supporter who moved to the Charleston, South Carolina, area from New Jersey about two years ago, said her social media feeds have been flooded with coverage of the couple. She considers Swift a "good performer," but Cummins isn't a huge fan. She follows the Philadelphia Eagles but doesn't watch much football.

Cummins is familiar with the conspiracy theory and finds it "really far-fetched" that everything would be "rigged."

"It just seems over the top to me that there would be all these forces that would do something like this," Cummins said.

Conspiracy theories gain the widest attention when they target the most well-known figures and institutions. The latest right-wing conspiracy theories blend Swift with claims about the most watched sporting event in the U.S. and a pivotal presidential election, making any intersection of the events ripe for conspiracy theories.

"The good news is people don't believe in conspiracy theories more than they have in the past. The bad news is that they believe them more than we paid attention to or cared about," said Joseph Uscinski, a political science professor at the University of Miami who studies conspiracy theories.

"If the right Pied Piper comes along then folks can be mobilized, sometimes with very devastating consequences," Uscinski said.

Mellissa Best, a Trump supporter from Florence, South Carolina, wasn't aware of the theories about Swift. But Best said she wouldn't be surprised if powerful people tried to leverage Swift's influence to improve Biden's popularity among young people. Best said that if she had young children, she wouldn't want them attending Swift's concerts.

"I believe these leftists will do anything to stay in power," she said. "It wouldn't surprise me."

While Republicans and Democrats believe in conspiracy theories about equally, said Uscinski, Trump

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"flipped the game on its head" in 2016 and brought conspiratorial thinking to the forefront of conservative politics, making cases such as those against Swift more common because of new incentives in politics.

Swift endorsed Biden in 2020. She also backed former Tennessee Gov. Phil Bredesen, a Democrat, in his 2018 run for Senate, which he lost to Sen. Marsha Blackburn, a Republican.

While many of the same political rules apply to a Swift endorsement, one new challenge for Republicans in dismissing the drama is the reality that celebrity culture is now considered a mainstay of American politics.

"Since 2016, for obvious reasons, it's become difficult for Republicans to credibly make a case that celebrities should stay out of politics," said David Jackson, a political scientist at Bowling Green State University who studies political endorsements. Jackson said Trump "created a new pathway to the presidency, from celebrity culture right to the Oval Office."

The conspiracy theories have become an issue in the campaign as well, with Republican lawmakers dismissing the claims about Swift but also the significance of any potential endorsement for the 2024 election.

"Taylor Swift has made a career off of writing songs about picking the wrong man, so I don't think we should take advice from her now," said Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for Trump's 2024 campaign, in an interview with Fox News host Sean Hannity. Leavitt added that Democrats' eagerness for a Swift endorsement shows they are "panicking about the prospect of Biden being evicted from the White House."

Haley told a recent audience that she didn't understand "what the obsession is."

"Taylor Swift is allowed to have a boyfriend. Taylor Swift is a good artist. I've taken my daughter to Taylor Swift concerts before. To have a conspiracy theory of all of this is bizarre," she said.

Today in History: February 9 The Beatles appear on "The Ed Sullivan Show"

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 9, the 40th day of 2024. There are 326 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 9, 1964, the Beatles made their first live American television appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," broadcast from New York on CBS. The quartet played six songs, including "Love Me Do" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand," to a crowd of screaming teenagers in person and more than 70 million viewers across the country.

On this date:

In 1825, the House of Representatives elected John Quincy Adams president after no candidate received a majority of electoral votes.

In 1942, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff held its first formal meeting to coordinate military strategy during World War II.

In 1943, the World War II battle of Guadalcanal in the southwest Pacific ended with an Allied victory over Japanese forces.

In 1950, in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, Republican Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin charged that the State Department was riddled with Communists.

In 1962, an agreement was signed to make Jamaica an independent nation within the British Commonwealth later in the year.

In 1963, the Boeing 727 went on its first-ever flight as it took off from Renton, Washington.

In 1971, a magnitude 6.6 earthquake in California's San Fernando Valley claimed 65 lives.

In 1984, Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov, 69, died 15 months after succeeding Leonid Brezhnev; he was followed by Konstantin U. Chernenko (chehr-NYEN'-koh), who would only be in power for 13 months.

In 1986, Halley's Comet visited the solar system for the first time since 1910. (Its next return will be in 2061).

In 2002, Britain's Princess Margaret, sister of Queen Elizabeth II, died in London at age 71.

In 2009, New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez admitted to taking performance-enhancing

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drugs, telling ESPN he'd used banned substances while with the Texas Rangers for three years.

In 2018, at the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics in South Korea, North and South Korean athletes entered Olympic Stadium together, waving flags showing a unified Korea; it was their first joint Olympic march in more than a decade.

In 2020, "Parasite," from South Korea, won the best picture Oscar, becoming the first foreign-language film to take home the biggest honor in film.

In 2021, the Senate moved ahead with a second impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, rejecting arguments that the chamber could not proceed because Trump was no longer in office.

In 2022, it was revealed that Kamila Valieva, the 15-year-old Russian figure skating superstar who had just led her team to an Olympic gold medal, tested positive for a banned heart medication before the Beijing Games.

In 2023, Burt Bacharach, the composer and Oscar winner who delighted millions with the quirky arrangements and unforgettable melodies of "Walk on By," "Do You Know the Way to San Jose" and dozens of other hits, died at age 94.

Today's birthdays: Actor Janet Suzman is 85. Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee is 84. Actor-politician Sheila James Kuehl (TV: "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis") is 83. Singer-songwriter Carole King is 82. Actor Joe Pesci is 81. Singer Barbara Lewis is 81. Author Alice Walker is 80. Actor Mia Farrow is 79. Former Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., is 78. Singer Joe Ely is 77. Actor Judith Light is 75. Actor Charles Shaughnessy is 69. Actor Ed Amatrudo is 68. Former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe is 67. Jazz musician Steve Wilson is 63. Country singer Travis Tritt is 61. Actor Julie Warner is 59. Country singer Danni Leigh is 54. Actor Sharon Case is 53. Actor Jason George is 52. Actor Amber Valletta is 50. Actor-producer Charlie Day is 48. Rock singer Chad Wolf (Carolina Liar) is 48. Actor A.J. Buckley is 47. Rock musician Richard On (O.A.R.) is 45. Actor Zhang Ziyi is 45. Olympic silver and bronze medal figure skater Irina Slutskaya is 45. Actor Tom Hiddleston is 43. Actor David Gallagher is 39. Actor Michael B. Jordan is 37. Actor Rose Leslie is 37. Actor Camille Winbush is 34. Actor Jimmy Bennett is 28. Actor Evan Roe (TV: "Madam Secretary") is 24.