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## Tuesday, February. 27

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

School Breakfast: Scones.

School Lunch: Chicken legs, mashed potatoes.

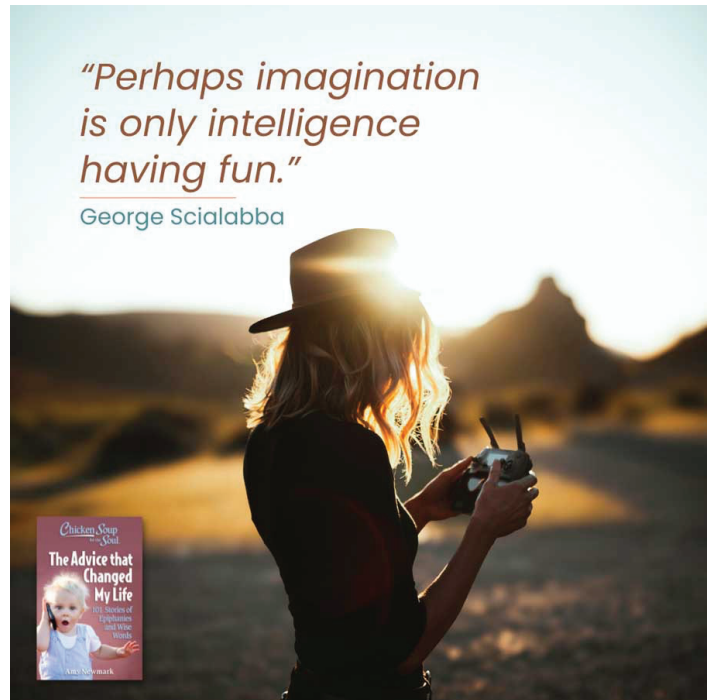
Boys Region 1A at Groton: 6 p.m.: Groton Area vs. Redfield, 7:15: Waubay-Summit vs. Aberdeen Roncalli

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

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

United Methodist: Bible Study, 10 a.m.

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



*"Perhaps imagination is only intelligence having fun."*

George Scialabba

## Wednesday, Feb. 28

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

School Breakfast: Cereal.

School Lunch: Chef salad.

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

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

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

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

## Thursday, Feb. 29

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

School Breakfast: Breakfast pizza.

School Lunch: Pasta with meat sauce.

Girls SoDak 16

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

## **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

In partnership with [smartasset](#)

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh and his government resigned yesterday amid calls for reform from the US and Middle East nations. The overhaul is part of the conditions the US and countries, including Saudi Arabia, are seeking before the Palestinian Authority, which administers the West Bank, can play a potential role in governing Gaza after the Israel-Hamas war. Israel has said it won't accept a Palestinian Authority rule over Gaza.

The US Federal Trade Commission and nine states sued to block supermarket chain Kroger's \$25B acquisition of competitor Albertsons yesterday, arguing the move would raise prices, lower wages, and reduce competition in the industry. The proposed deal, first announced in 2022, would be the largest in supermarket chain history.

The Albert Einstein College of Medicine announced it received a \$1B donation from 93-year-old former professor Dr. Ruth Gottesman. The gift, which will provide free education in perpetuity for all 737 medical students at the school, is believed to be the largest to any medical school in US history.

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Beyoncé's country single "Texas Hold 'Em" becomes the singer's ninth solo No. 1 song on the Billboard Hot 100 chart; Beyoncé became the first Black woman to top Billboard's country songs chart last week.

Dan Wilcox, Emmy-winning TV writer and producer known for his work on "M\*A\*S\*H" and "Sesame Street," dies at 82.

French actor Gérard Depardieu faces another allegation of sexual assault; Depardieu has now been accused of sexual misconduct by more than a dozen women.

## Science & Technology

Mistral AI releases large language model Mistral Large and chatbot Le Chat; company aims to compete with AI leaders OpenAI and Anthropic by focusing on efficiency and lower costs.

Escaped gut bacteria that make it into the retina may in part cause blindness and eye diseases previously thought to be inherited.

Engineers demonstrate 3D-printed titanium structure with strength-to-weight ratio 50% greater than advanced metal alloys used in aerospace applications.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.4%, Dow -0.2%, Nasdaq -0.1%); Amazon joins 30-stock Dow Jones Industrial Average, replacing Walgreens.

Lord Jacob Rothschild, British banker, financier, and philanthropist, dies at 87; Rothschild was known for leaving his family's banking dynasty in 1980 to build his own financial empire in London.

Boeing safety procedures fell short due to lack of communication between management and employees, Federal Aviation Administration panel finds; review comes after 2018-19 crashes that killed 346 people.

## Politics & World Affairs

Michigan holds presidential primaries today; former President Donald Trump leads GOP race by double digits in recent polling. Trump appeals \$454M judgment in New York business fraud case. Manhattan district attorney requests gag order on Trump in hush money trial.

US House expected to deliver impeachment charges against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas to the Senate as soon as this week; Democrats expected to seek to dismiss case. Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel to step down March 8.

Hungary's parliament approves Sweden's bid to join NATO, clearing final hurdle for the country to become the 32nd member of the transatlantic military alliance. Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was to be freed in prisoner swap between Moscow and the West before his death, according to reports.



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**Good Luck Tigers in post season action from these GDILIVE.COM sponsors!**

**Bary Keith at Harr Motors  
BK Custom Ts & More  
Blocker Construction  
Dacotah Bank  
Farmers Union Coop  
Groton Ag Partners  
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S & S Lumber  
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## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### Special School Board Meeting

February 29, 2024 – 7:00 AM – GHS Conference Room

#### AGENDA:

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

#### POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

#### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Adopt resolution for opt-out 24-01 and vote to be held on April 9, 2024 (7:00 AM to 7:00 PM), and authorize Business Manager to designate officials, with voting precincts in Andover, Bristol, Columbia, and Groton.
3. Set dates, times, and locations of public meetings to discuss opt-out.

#### ADJOURN

## Name Released in Harding County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal motorcycle crash

Where: Tipperary St and 3rd St, Buffalo, SD

When: 1:30 p.m., Sunday, February 4, 2024

Driver 1: Jameson Jeffrey Egemo, 24-year-old male from Buffalo, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2024 Kawasaki KX450

Helmet Used: No

Harding County, S.D.- A 24-year-old man died yesterday as a result of injuries sustained in a single vehicle motorcycle crash on February 4 in Harding County.

Preliminary crash information indicates a 2024 Kawasaki KX450 driven by 24-year-old Jameson J. Egemo of Buffalo, SD, crashed on Tipperary Street on Sunday, February 4 around 1:30 p.m., resulting in serious head and leg trauma. Egemo was taken to a Bismark, ND hospital where he died from those injuries early Sunday morning, February 25.

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.

## Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #14 Results

**2nd Third Results:** Shihtzus – 20, Coyotes – 19, Chipmunks – 17, Jackelopes – 14, Foxes – 9, Cheetahs – 5

**Men's High Games:** Randy Stanley – 226, Brad Waage – 221, Lance Frohling – 209

**Women's High Games:** Vicki Walter – 182, Brenda Waage – 164, Michelle Johnson – 156

**Men's High Series:** Brad Waage – 622, Lance Frohling – 573, Ron Belden – 563

**Women's High Series:** Vicki Walter – 524, Michelle Johnson – 451, Brenda Waage – 444

Fun Game: Most Fills - Jackelopes with 87!

Shihtzus won the 2nd Third!



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **State House endorses millions for border deployment, phonics instruction and other projects**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 6:07 PM**

PIERRE — Republican lawmakers voted to replenish the state's Emergency and Disaster Fund on Monday, informally endorsing Governor Kristi Noem's impending National Guard deployment to the nation's southern border.

Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, said the flow of people across the border is "a failure by the federal government," and until the feds correct that failure, "we have to step up."

House Bill 1061 passed in a 63-5 vote. If signed into law, the bill would put \$4.28 million into the fund to cover the deployment costs and other emergencies and disasters.

The bill says the money can be used for "any emergency or disaster," and it relies on an existing state law's definitions of those terms. Those definitions include the phrase "in any part of the state."

Yet the money is sometimes used to assist other states, typically through agreements that require repayment. Noem has not required repayment of at least \$1.3 million in costs incurred during two previous National Guard deployments she ordered to assist Texas at the border.

Rep. Linda Duba, a Sioux Falls Democrat, voted no on the bill. She said the fund should only be used in other states if they intend to pay the state back. She said the Texas deployments are "the one case where this doesn't happen."

Noem announced last Tuesday that she will once again deploy National Guard troops to the U.S.-Mexico border. She said it will be the fifth deployment of South Dakota Guard troops to assist in border security efforts during her administration, including two deployments that she ordered and two that she approved in response to federal requests.

The legislation was one in a series of spending bills endorsed by the House on Monday, as a deadline arrived to pass the bills to the Senate.

#### **Teachers and literacy**

House Bill 1201 proposes to allocate \$800,000 to continue the teacher apprenticeship pathway program. It helps teaching aides become certified teachers.

"I've never seen a teacher shortage like we have today," said Rep. Roger DeGroot, R-Brookings, a retired educator.

The bill passed in a 69-5 vote.

House Bill 1022 would provide \$6 million to the Department of Education to train teachers in phonics-based reading instruction. The Joint Appropriations Committee had amended the amount down to \$3 million, but the House amended it back up to \$6 million.

Duba, a retired educator, said reading proficiency is the key building block in a child's education.

"When they have success with that, they read to learn," Duba said. If not, "everything becomes difficult."

The bill passed in a 62-6 vote.

#### **LifeScape in need**

House Bill 1093 would provide \$8 million — rather than the lesser, \$2 million amount endorsed by the Joint Appropriations Committee — to the Department of Social Services. The money is ultimately for LifeScape in Sioux Falls, to assist in the construction of a facility that would include a specialty rehabilitation pediatric



hospital, a specialty school for children, an intermediate health care facility for children, and outpatient rehabilitation pediatric services.

Rep. Marty Overweg, R-New Holland, sponsored the bill. He said LifeScape's current campus was built in 1948 and the organization raised \$72 million on its own.

Overweg said his autistic brother received services from LifeScape.

"You know what he had? He finally had a life," he said. "He felt human."

The bill passed in a 68-1 vote.

The lone no vote came from Rep. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, who said LifeScape should rely on private donors.

## **New State Fair building, dam projects**

House Bill 1065 would provide \$4 million for designing and building a sheep and multi-use facility on the State Fairgrounds. The total project cost is an estimated \$8 million, and fundraising is underway.

Rep. Roger Chase, R-Huron, said the project would be "the final piece of the puzzle" for several recent improvements at the fairgrounds in Huron.

The bill passed in a 57-12 vote.

House Bill 1064 would allocate about \$2 million to the Department of Game Fish and Parks for contracting, construction, reconstruction, renovation and modernization of dam infrastructure at Lake Alvin and Newell Lake.

That bill passed in a 65-4 vote.

*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.*

## **State Senate votes to back stricter version of ban on sale of 'diet weed'**

**Bill lacks carve-out for products made with naturally derived hemp components**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 5:11 PM**

The state Senate has voted to pass the original, stricter version of a ban on the widely available, hemp-derived "diet weed" products that induce highs similar to marijuana.

House Bill 1125 had originally targeted a wide swath of products. The gummies, vape pens, pre-rolled joints and smokable flowers can be produced using high concentrations of the psychoactive chemicals present in minuscule amounts in industrial hemp, or using synthetically derived versions of those same chemicals.

The chemical concoctions are an unexpected outgrowth of the legalization of industrial hemp at the federal level. The federal legality of the natural intoxicants made the use of them in large concentrations legal by extension, though there have been questions raised by the Drug Enforcement Administration about the legality of the lab-grown versions.

HB 1125 flip-flopped between which kinds of products would be covered as it moved through the law-making process.

Rep. Brian Mulder, R-Sioux Falls, moved his bill through the House Health and Human Services Committee in its original form, but saw it modified on the House floor to target only products made from the lab-grown chemicals, which are sold under names like THC-O.

Rep. Oren Lesmeister, D-Parade, told his fellow representatives that a ban on products made with naturally occurring chemicals would hurt small business owners and hemp growers alike. Under that change,

products sold under names like Delta-8 or Delta-10 THC would still be legal to sell.

The House passed Lesmeister's amendment, then passed HB 1125 on a unanimous vote.

All that changed again in the Senate Health and Human Services Committee last week. Sen. Brent Hoffman, R-Sioux Falls, successfully proposed an amendment putting the language of the hoped-for ban right back where it was when Mulder introduced it.

Sen. Ryan Maher, R-Isabel, tried to move the Lesmeister amendment on the Senate floor on Monday, though he saw none of Lesmeister's success.

The ban could result in a flood of products on South Dakota streets this spring as retailers move to clear their soon-to-be illegal inventory, Maher said. He also pointed to the easy accessibility of Delta-8 products online, and to the investments made by smoke shop owners who've invested in the state.

"We always want to tout that our state is open for business, until we don't like that business," Maher said.

Maher's amendment failed. Sen. Erin Tobin, R-Winner, echoed several of the amendment's other opponents with her remarks.

"If you think you should be able to walk into a gas station and buy a psychoactive product in a state that doesn't have recreational marijuana, I would say go ahead and vote for this amendment," Tobin said.

Moments after Maher's amendment failed on a voice vote, the Isabel Senator cast the only vote against HB 1125.

It will now move to a conference committee to reconcile it with the version passed by the House.

*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.*

## Senate sends bill creating Indian Child Advisory Council to governor's desk

**BY: ANNIE TODD - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 5:00 PM**

PIERRE — A bill to create an Indian Child Advisory Council passed the South Dakota Senate in a 31-1 vote on Monday and now heads to Gov. Kristi Noem's desk for her consideration.

House Bill 1232 would bring together stakeholders from the Department of Social Services, South Dakota's nine tribes, members of the Legislature, and child welfare experts annually to have formal conversations about the welfare of Native American children in the state's foster care system. Part of the group's work will also involve finding solutions to the disproportionate number of Native children in foster care.

A six-month joint investigation by South Dakota Searchlight and the Argus Leader following last year's legislative session explored the causes, effects and potential solutions to the decades-long overrepresentation of Native American children in South Dakota's foster care system. Native American children accounted for nearly 74% of the foster care system in June 2023, despite accounting for only 13% of the state's overall child population.

The bill was part of a package of legislation to address the issues Native children in foster care face. But three of the four bills were defeated in committee. Two of the bills would've put active efforts for reunification of families into state law while the third bill would've established a two-year task force to investigate why Native children enter into state foster care at a high rate.

Sen. Red Dawn Foster, D-Pine Ridge, told senators on the floor that the cost of the proposed council is an estimated \$300 to \$2,000 to cover the cost of the appointed legislators' attendance.

"It's been a long time coming and I'm excited to take this proactive step and collaborate in the best interest of Indian children," Foster said.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, who voted against the bill in the Senate Health and Human Services committee, said that he had changed his mind after learning that the Center for the Prevention of Child Maltreatment would be involved in the conversations about addressing the root causes of why Native children

are removed from their parents.

Neglect is the leading cause of why children are removed from their parents, with 68% of cases citing the reason. Parental substance abuse, at 57%, is the second-leading reason, according to federal data.

Sen. Michael Rohl, R-Aberdeen, who chaired the State-Tribal Relations Committee, said members of the interim committee heard from tribal stakeholders and child welfare officials that they wanted a clearer avenue for conversations about addressing the high rate of Native children in foster care.

"What this bill is really doing is providing an avenue for us to have very serious discussions," he said. "Whenever you have problems or disputes, the best way to handle those even if you don't agree is to be able to communicate with each other and find paths that work."

*Annie Todd covers state politics for the Argus Leader in Sioux Falls. She was born and raised in Colorado and graduated from the University of Wyoming.*

## Lawmakers advance bill allowing adult permit holders to carry concealed guns in schools

### Education groups object to vague language and designating principals as decision-makers

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 3:47 PM

Legislation that would allow adults to carry concealed pistols in schools after getting a permit and permission from a principal is two steps from becoming law in South Dakota.

The House Judiciary Committee voted 11-1 on Monday at the Capitol in Pierre to send the bill to the House floor. If it passes there without amendment, it will go to the governor's desk.

Rep. Mike Stevens, R-Yankton, cast the lone no vote in the committee.

"The inference," Stevens said of the bill, "is that the school boards and the teachers aren't concerned about public safety — that all of a sudden, we in the Legislature have to take over that responsibility because they're incompetent to do that."

Currently, law enforcement officers and school sentinels are the only people who are legally allowed to carry guns on school premises in the state.

There are numerous requirements to become a school sentinel, including 80 hours of training. Lawmakers created the sentinel program in 2013 as an option for schools — especially those in rural areas — that lack assigned law enforcement personnel known as school resource officers.

#### Bill details

Senate Bill 203 would establish a third legal path to allowing guns on school grounds. It would extend that right to anyone 21 years or older with an enhanced permit to carry a concealed pistol who also obtains written permission from a school principal "or other person who has general control and supervision of the building or grounds." Qualifications for an enhanced concealed carry permit include an FBI background check and completion of an approved handgun course.

Several legislators on the committee expressed concerns about designating principals as decision-makers rather than superintendents or school boards. Some lawmakers also described the "other person" language in the bill as vague, with Stevens asking if the language might apply to janitors.

The bill's prime sponsor, Sen. Brent Hoffman, R-Hartford, said he believes school boards could establish local policies requiring principals to additionally seek board approval. But the bill does not address that.

Hoffman said he chose principals because they know their staffs and their buildings, and because some other states already have similar laws designating principals as decision-makers.

This bill is Hoffman's third attempt to pass school safety legislation since the beginning of the legislative session in January. One of his earlier bills would have required schools to have a school resource officer



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or a sentinel, both of which are currently optional. The other bill would have mandated minimum safety standards such as locked doors and the posting of information about an anonymous school safety tip line. Both bills were rejected.

Hoffman said he wants to add proactive protections for students before South Dakota suffers a mass school shooting.

"Would I prefer that we have a pristine environment and we focus only on academics? That is exactly what schools are for, is for educating our students," Hoffman said. "But that doesn't mean we should bury our heads in the sand to ignore the problem that is before us."

## Education lobbyists express concerns, ask for changes

Lobbyists for the education community lined up to oppose Hoffman's latest bill, with some saying they don't oppose the concept or gun rights in general but do oppose specific language in the legislation. Some asked for amendments reassigning the decision-making authority to school boards or superintendents. Stevens and Rep. Tim Reisch, R-Howard, unsuccessfully proposed amendments to that effect.

Doug Wermedal, of Associated School Boards of South Dakota, said the bill lacks an advance notice provision such as the 24-hour notice required of enhanced permit holders who carry concealed pistols in the state Capitol. He also said the bill could foster confusion by allowing for different answers from multiple principals within the same district, and he said the "other person" language is too vague.

Rob Monson, of School Administrators of South Dakota, said enhanced permit holders from visiting schools could attend a high school basketball game and demand permission to carry a concealed gun into the host school's gym.

"You're putting a lot of pressure on a principal at that point in time," Monson said, "or whoever it is authorizing this, to try and determine, do I know this individual? Can I trust this individual? Is the permit he's handing me a legitimate permit?"

## Democrat votes yes

Several committee members who expressed concerns about the bill voted for it anyway, citing their support of gun rights and their desire to improve school safety.

One of the yes votes came from the committee's lone Democrat, Rep. Peri Pourier, of Rapid City.

"I am a mother who worries every single day if there's going to be a school shooting," Pourier said. "And if I can't be there to protect my child, the people who carry these enhanced permits are the people I would trust."

*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.*

## Pipeline bill amended to return rulemaking to counties — unless PUC says otherwise

**New version would require reconciliation with Senate version passed last week**

**BY: JOHN HULT - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 2:08 PM**

A state House panel updated a high-profile carbon pipeline bill to retain county rights to regulate pipeline locations.

But that change was accompanied by another that would force the state's Public Utilities Commission to overrule counties if their pipeline rules are too burdensome.

It's the latest twist for Senate Bill 201. The bill, which passed the full Senate last week, has been pitched as a compromise to protect landowners without letting locals shut down statewide pipeline projects.

The bill is one of a several related to a project proposed by Summit Carbon Solutions. It would collect

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carbon dioxide from ethanol plants in South Dakota and some of its neighbors and pipe it to North Dakota for underground storage. The project would take advantage of federal tax credits for carbon sequestration.

House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, brought his amendment to the House Commerce and Energy committee on Monday.

In its original form, SB 201 would have removed the right to require minimum setbacks between pipelines and property from counties altogether. Both that version and the Monday update would both offer per-foot annual payments to counties through which a pipeline runs and codify rules on pipeline depth and an operator's responsibility to repair disrupted drain tile.

Mortenson's update, added to the bill on a 7-6 vote by the committee, returns the right to regulate setbacks to counties. The big addition is the word "must," Mortenson said, to a section on the authority of the Public Utilities Commission. In the past, those commissioners have had the right to strike local pipeline regulations if they deem those regulations unreasonable.

The amendment would take away their discretion. If the rules are "unreasonably restrictive in view of existing technology, factors of cost, or economics, or needs of parties," or if those rules are preempted by federal law, the commissioners would have to overrule the counties.

"This approach is intended to present a clear path to permitting if (pipeline companies) meet all their requirements," Mortenson said.

The same supporters who spoke on the bill's behalf last week again asked lawmakers to advance the proposal on Monday. Nearly all of them, however, said they hope to see more changes in a conference committee if it passes the full House. Conference committees convene to reconcile differences between House- and Senate-passed versions of a bill.

Brett Koenecke, a lawyer and lobbyist for Summit Carbon Solutions, told the committee that the bill wouldn't work for his clients in its amended form, but pointed to a conference committee as he expressed hope for a workable final bill.

Koenecke's position is that a court decision from a federal judge in Iowa proves that counties and states do not and never have had the right to regulate pipeline safety, an umbrella under which he believes setbacks fall.

"We won't have a project if local government discretion or PUC discretion is left intact," Koenecke said.

He also said that Summit would win a legal challenge to state and county authority if it filed one in South Dakota.

One of his primary opponents on matters of pipelines and property rights disagreed.

Brian Jorde, a lawyer who represents landowners, said the notion that counties can't regulate setbacks – and that setbacks themselves amount to safety regulations at all – is "completely and totally and utterly wrong."

"The spin is that you can't take away something they don't have," Jorde said. "That is a lie."

Jorde was on the winning side of last fall's PUC hearing for Navigator CO2 Ventures, a now-scuttled pipeline project that failed to earn a permit.

Senate Bill 201, he said, cannot fairly be called a pro-property rights measure that also offers certainty to economic development projects.

"This isn't about certainty," Jorde said. "This is about rolling a red carpet over the backs of landowners, property owners and business owners in this state and giving profit certainty."

The amended bill passed 8-5 and heads to the House floor.

*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.*

## Bill protecting election officials, poll workers from threats passes state House committee

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 1:57 PM

A bill introduced at the request of the Secretary of State's Office aiming to protect election workers passed the House State Affairs Committee in an 8-5 vote on Monday in Pierre.

The bill would make it a Class 1 misdemeanor if a person directly or indirectly threatens or intimidates an election official or poll worker "with the intent to improperly influence an election." A Class 1 misdemeanor is punishable by up to one year in jail and up to a \$2,000 fine.

Election workers, staff and poll workers across the United States have seen a surge in threats in recent years, according to the MIT Election Data and Science Lab. A poll conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice last year found that 45% of local election workers were concerned for their safety and the safety of other election workers.

In response, 14 states across the country have passed legislation to specifically protect election officials and workers since 2020.

Deputy Secretary of State Tom Deadrick hopes the legislation will strengthen elections and encourage people to volunteer as poll workers. County auditors across the state report that it's difficult to find volunteers, Deadrick said.

But people who acted as independent poll watchers in recent elections (someone who observes the election process to watch for any election law violations) testified against the bill. The opponents said the bill could discourage people from volunteering as poll watchers and could have unintended consequences if an election worker feels intimidated by a poll watcher's questioning.

The bill originally contained an emergency provision so it would go into effect immediately after being signed into law and require a two-thirds majority vote in each chamber, but it failed to garner enough votes in the Senate. After removing the emergency provision, the bill passed the Senate 21-12. If it is signed into law, it'll go into effect on July 1, after the June 4 primary election but before the Nov. 5 general election.

Some lawmakers on the committee expressed concern that the bill would be too broad and redundant after the House and Senate passed a bill making it a Class 2 misdemeanor — which carries lesser penalties than a Class 1 misdemeanor — if anyone "interferes with the duties of poll workers or poll watchers." That bill heads to the governor's desk next.

But Deadrick said the option of a stronger criminal penalty is also needed to help election workers feel safe in South Dakota.

"Without election workers, we don't have elections," Deadrick said.

The bill heads to the House floor next.

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

## Biden and Trump both heading to the southern border on Thursday

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 26, 2024 11:34 AM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will visit the southern border in Texas on Thursday, according to a White House official, the same day as the GOP presidential front-runner, Donald Trump.

Their visits are a sign of the importance the immigration issue has assumed in what's expected to be a 2024 rematch in November between Biden and Trump.

During the trip to Brownsville, Texas, Biden will meet with U.S. Border Patrol agents, law enforcement and local leaders to "discuss the urgent need to pass the Senate bipartisan border security agreement, the toughest and fairest set of reforms to secure the border in decades," according to a White House official speaking on background.

"He will reiterate his calls for Congressional Republicans to stop playing politics and to provide the fund-

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ing needed for additional U.S. Border Patrol agents, more asylum officers, fentanyl detection technology and more," the White House official said in a statement.

Senate Republicans earlier this month walked away from the bipartisan border deal they brokered with the White House, following Trump's objection to the plan that would drastically overhaul U.S. immigration law. House Republicans also insisted they would not take up the Senate package.

As the Biden administration deals with the largest number of migrant encounters at the southern border in more than 20 years, Trump's campaign platform aims to stoke fears surrounding immigration — as he previously did for his 2016 presidential campaign.

The visit follows House Republicans' impeachment, on a second try, of Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, over the GOP's opposition to Biden administration immigration policies.

More than 300 miles away from Biden, Trump will visit Eagle Pass, Texas, which CNN first reported, on Thursday, following his GOP primary win in South Carolina last weekend.

He is also expected to win Michigan's presidential primary on Tuesday.

Biden is also planning to meet with congressional leaders Tuesday about passing the global securities supplemental package to unlock aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan and avoid a partial government shut-down Friday, according to the White House.

Those leaders he'll meet with at the White House include Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York and House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana.

This will be Biden's second trip to the southern border. His first visit to the border was in January 2023.

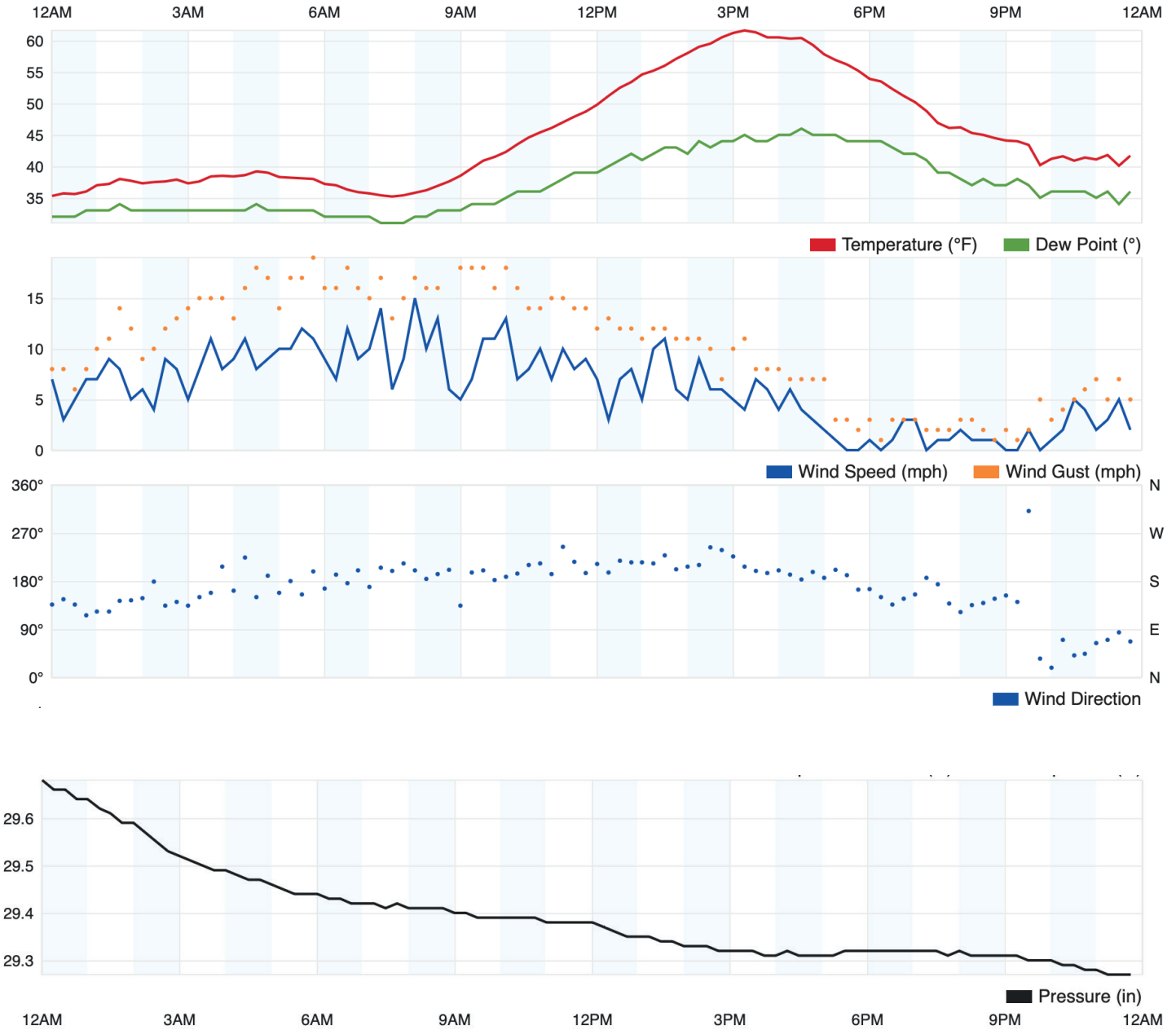
*Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.*



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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**Wind Advisory**

**Tuesday**




40%

Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow

**High: 20 °F**

**Tuesday Night**



Mostly Cloudy and Blustery then Mostly Clear

**Low: 2 °F**


**Wednesday**



Sunny

**High: 28 °F**

**Wednesday Night**



Mostly Clear

**Low: 20 °F**

**Thursday**



Sunny

**High: 54 °F**



## Blustery and Cold Today

February 27, 2024  
2:18 AM

Warmer up later this week



### Today

*Cold and windy with light snow possible*

*Areas blowing snow possible in the morning*

*Highs in the teens and 20s*

### Rest of the Work Week – Dry and Warming Up –

*Wednesday... Highs 20s east, 30s west*

*Thursday... Highs in the 50s*

*Friday... Highs 55-65°*



Blustery and cold today behind a cold front, but warming up later this week. Light snow possible this morning.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 62 °F at 3:17 PM

Low Temp: 35 °F at 7:18 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 5:44 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 04 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 68 in 2016

Record Low: -23 in 2001

Average High: 33

Average Low: 11

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.59

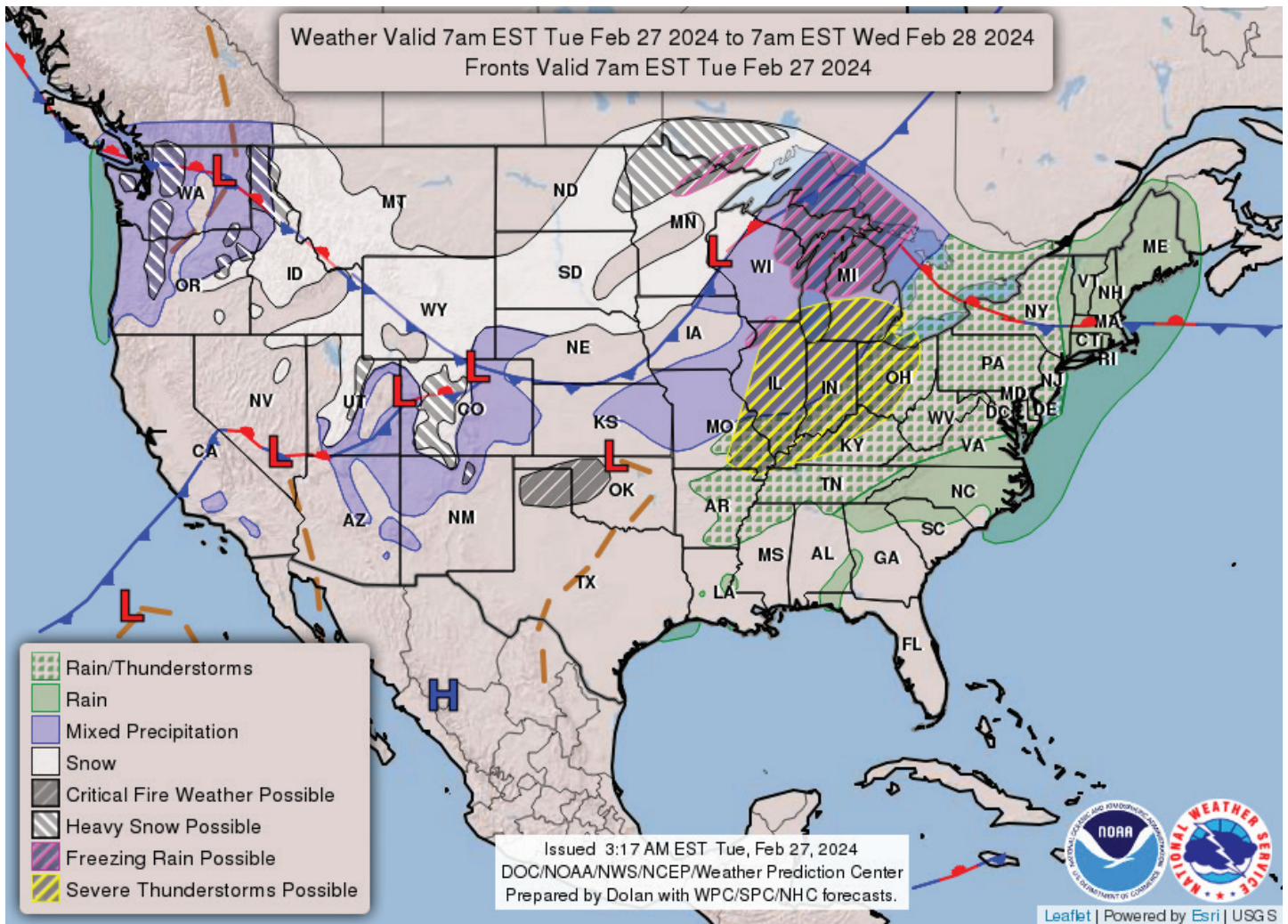
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.07

Average Precip to date: 1.14

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 6:17:21 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:11:07 am





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## Today in Weather History

February 27, 1969: Snowfall of up to 15 inches blocked many roads in South Dakota. In addition, freezing rain formed a glaze on many utility lines resulting in extensive damage. The most considerable damage occurred in the north-central part of the state.

February 27, 1996: Across central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, a strong area of low pressure brought 4 to 11 inches of snow from the late afternoon of the 26th to the evening of the 27th. Along with the snow came strong north winds of 20 to 40 mph, creating near-blizzard conditions. Wind chills were from 20 below to 60 below. As a result, some schools were closed or started late on the 27th, along with some activities canceled. Snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Sisseton, 5 inches at Aberdeen, Redfield, near Reliance, Wheaton, Browns Valley, Britton, and Gettysburg. Other snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Lebanon, Hoven, Miller, Webster, Eden, Frederick, and Seneca, 7 inches near Chelsea and Mellette, 8 inches at Roscoe and east of Hosmer, Tulare, and near Milbank, 9 inches south of Ree Heights, 8 to 10 inches in the Ortonville area, and 11 inches at Wilmot.

1717 - What was perhaps the greatest snow in New England history commenced on this date. During a ten day period a series of four snowstorms dumped three feet of snow upon Boston, and the city was snowbound for two weeks. Up to six feet of snow was reported farther to the north, and drifts covered many one story homes. (David Ludlum)

1969 - A record snowstorm in Maine came to an end. Two to four feet of snow buried southern and central Maine, with a state record of 57 inches reported at West Forks. Drifts covered many single story homes, and the weight of the snow collapsed many roofs. Two to four feet of snow also buried northeastern Vermont and northeastern Massachusetts. In New Hampshire, Mount Washington NH reported 97.8 inches of snow, a record storm total for New England. (24th-28th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1986: It was 99 degrees in Palm Springs, California, the highest temperature on record for February. Palm Springs also reached 99 degrees on February 26, 1986.

1987 - A storm spread heavy snow into the Central High Plains Region, and produced severe thunderstorms in the Southern Plains. Snowfall totals in western Nebraska ranged up to 19 inches at Sydney. Severe thunderstorms in Oklahoma produced baseball size hail at Stringtown and Atoka. A storm in the eastern U.S. produced heavy rain over the Carolinas and heavy snow in the southern Appalachians and piedmont region. Five inches of rain left four feet of water in the streets of Greenville SC. Snowfall totals in southwestern Virginia ranged up to 20 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms along a cold front produced heavy rain in southern California, with up to 2.52 inches reported in Ventura County. Strong winds accompanying the rain gusted to 55 mph in the Tehachapi Mountains. Rapid City SD established a February record with an afternoon high of 75 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Rain and snow prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Up to eight inches of snow blanketed north central Tennessee, and snowfall totals in western North Carolina ranged up to 14 inches at Mount Mitchell. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in southeastern Colorado, with 12 inches reported at Lamar. The same storm produced severe thunderstorms over the Southern High Plains, with wind gusts to 93 mph reported at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. Low pressure brought high winds to the Prince William Sound area of Alaska. Big River Lakes reported wind gusts to 92 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010 - A weak EF0 tornado causes no damage as it moved across California's southern San Joaquin Valley. However it is the only tornado reported in the United States during the month. According to the Storm Prediction Center only five months since 1950 have lacked a tornado report. The Weather Doctor

2010: A magnitude 8.8 earthquake occurred off the coast of central Chile at 3:34 local time. The quake triggered a tsunami that devastated several coastal towns in south-central Chile. Tsunami warnings were issued in 53 countries. In addition, waves caused minor damage in the San Diego area and the Tohoku region of Japan.



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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### AS BIG AS WE MAKE IT!

Herb had been dating Liz for about a year. He was deeply in love with her and finally decided that he would ask her to marry him. So, he went to a jewelry store and used all of his hard-earned savings to purchase an engagement ring for her.

Unfortunately, the rings were more expensive than he imagined, and he had little money to spend and had to settle for one with a small diamond.

One evening he took her to dinner, and after they ordered their meal, with a shy, trembling voice, he asked, "Liz, will you marry me?"

"Oh yes, of course, I will," said Liz.

With tears in his eyes, he presented the ring to her and said, "Liz, I'm sorry, so sorry that the diamond is not as big as I wanted it to be or as large as my love."

"Oh my," said Liz, "that doesn't matter. The diamond is as big as we make it!"

How very true! Value is always in the eye of the beholder, isn't it?

We often substitute "things" for thoughtfulness or gifts with goodness. We even confuse large with lovely or big with beauty. Often we substitute spending time with someone by offering them a present instead of ourselves.

When we give something to someone, especially to God, the cost of the item is not, in the final analysis, what matters most. What matters most is our attitude and reason for giving.

Prayer: May we realize, Lord, that giving reflects the sincerity of our heart, not the size of the gift. May we also show our love by what we do as well as what we give. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting for those who belong to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly. Colossians 3:14-25



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:  
02.23.24

4 6 40 41 60 11

MegaPlier: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$563,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 4 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.26.24

21 30 36 38 49 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$3,490,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 19 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.26.24

1 7 17 38 46 12

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 34 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.24.24

5 7 18 20 27

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 34 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.26.24

1 3 8 30 41 8

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 3 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
02.26.24

24 29 42 51 54 16

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$412,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 3 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

## Monday's Scores

The Associated Press

### BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A Region 2=

Play-in=

Florence-Henry 58, Elkton-Lake Benton 57

Class a Region 5=

First Round=

Kimball-White Lake 62, Chamberlain 59

Class B Region 1=

First Round=

Wilmot 51, Langford 22

Class B Region 2=

First Round=

Arlington 61, Flandreau Indian 20

Class B Region 3=

First Round=

Mitchell Christian 69, Sioux Falls Lutheran 49

Class B Region 4=

First Round=

Scotland 48, Irene-Wakonda 47

Class B Region 5=

First Round=

Avon 78, Colome 57

Class B Region 6=

First Round=

Herreid-Selby 66, Sunshine Bible Academy 59, 2OT

Class B Region 7=

First Round=

Oelrichs 47, Edgemont 46, OT

Class B Region 8=

First Round=

Bison 69, McIntosh High School 46

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

## Wild weather hits Northwest with snow even as Midwest gets a taste of summer

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — February's end is bringing wild weather to much of the United States, with record heat allowing for golf in Wisconsin and outdoor food trucks in Minnesota, along with an increased fire risk across much of the Great Plains. But blinding snow in the Northwest is blowing eastward, and places like Chicago should see temperatures swinging dramatically from balmy to bitter cold again.

"Definitely not the weather we would expect in February. It's usually super snowy, freezing, you know,



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ice everywhere. And so we are just trying to take advantage of a very nice week this week," said Tania Sepulveda, a 30-year-old Chicago therapist who was "working from home" Monday, using her laptop in a grassy spot along the Lake Michigan shoreline.

The sunny weather won't last that long. A powerful storm started dumping snow that could reach several feet in higher elevations of the West promises a return of winter conditions to the central U.S., where it's been unseasonably warm. High winds are already blowing, raising the risk of wildfires across the Great Plains.

The National Weather Service warned that travel could be dangerous later Monday across parts of the Oregon Cascades and Northern Rockies, predicting near-blizzard conditions with one to two inches of snow an hour and winds reaching upwards of 65 mph (104 kph).

The storm will move into the Great Basin and Central Rockies Tuesday, carrying much colder temperatures and strong winds across the inner mountain West, said Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland. "We'll be very wintry like for the next two days," he added.

The West is just one place with unusual, and in some cases, dangerous weather conditions. Here is what to expect elsewhere.

## IT'S WARM IN THE HEARTLAND

This time of year should be the coldest in places like Chicago. But the city and many others across the central U.S. are getting an early taste of summer with temperatures in the 60s and 70s.

The warm conditions have continued since a balmy weekend brought temperatures reaching into the 60s in Denver, Chicago and Des Moines, Iowa. Kansas City, Missouri, enjoyed temperatures in the mid-70s.

In Chicago, temperatures reached 72 degrees (22 Celsius) by Monday afternoon, breaking Chicago's old record of 64 degrees (18 Celsius). Winds were expected to ramp up to 25 mph (40 kph).

Highs on Monday were expected to reach the mid-60s across southern Wisconsin and extend as far north as Rhinelander, a city of 8,000 just below Michigan's Upper Peninsula. It reached 64 degrees (18 Celsius) in La Crosse, eclipsing the record for the date of 61 degrees (16 Celsius).

"We're blowing away the records in northern Illinois into south central and southwestern Wisconsin," said Mark Gehring, a weather service meteorologist in Sullivan, Wisconsin.

Monday's warm temperatures will "just about guarantee" that the typically chilly Minneapolis area will have its warmest winter on record, the local weather service office said. While Monday's forecast high of 63 (17 Celsius) at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport would be one degree below the record set in 1896, St. Cloud in central Minnesota was expected to reach 59 (15 Celsius), breaking the old record of 55 (13 Celsius) set in 1958.

But it isn't quite time for scarves and gloves to be stored until next winter.

Places like Chicago will see a dramatic drop in temperatures by Wednesday, with highs just below freezing and winds gusting as hard as 30 mph (48 kph). In Minnesota, colder weather Tuesday and Wednesday could bring an inch or two of slushy snow that could freeze and make for a dangerous Wednesday morning commute, the weather service said.

## GOLF, IN WISCONSIN, IN FEBRUARY?

Weeks of unusually warm weather drove Jessica Blaska-Grady, general manager of the Oaks golf course in the town of Sun Prairie just east of Madison, to reopen for the season on Feb. 9. She said she can remember only one other winter — 2017 — when the course was open in February.

"It's definitely kind of crazy," she said. "This is incredibly unusual but I'm not going to lie and say it's unwelcome. It's a nice little boost. You've got to make hay when the sun shines."

Lori Cervantes, 53, doesn't remember a winter like this during the 20 years she lived in Iowa. She moved back eight months ago after living in Portland, Oregon, and said "this weather is such a nice treat."

She took her dog, Gus, on their daily walk in the "unprecedented" weather and meditated in the sunshine outside the gold-domed Iowa Capitol in Des Moines.

"It's a little scary, actually," she said, noting that flower bulbs are already emerging from the ground and wondering how it might affect farmers and fields this growing season. "It's way too early to be this warm — and dry."

Gehring attributed the unseasonable warmth to an El Nino pattern, the term for warming in the equatorial region of the Pacific Ocean that pushes the jet stream further north. These bands of strong wind form a boundary between cold northern air and warm southern air. Gehring also noted that climate change has been playing in a role in warming temperatures for decades.

The warmer conditions in many parts of the country have led to the cancellation of winter events like ski races and pond hockey tournaments. The latest cancellation was the longest sled dog race in the eastern United States.

## FIRE RISK IN THE PLAINS

But the warmer temperatures have brought increased risk of fires across the Great Plains.

The National Weather Service said dry, gusty winds were creating what it called critical fire weather conditions, and issued red flag warnings and fire weather watches in parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, up to Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and east to Iowa, Illinois and Missouri.

Nearby states, including parts of Arkansas, Minnesota and Wisconsin, were under hazardous weather outlooks because of an increased fire danger, according to weather service maps. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources issued an advisory Monday morning discouraging burning anything outdoors, noting that 15 wildfires sprang up over the weekend, consuming more than 30 acres.

## Israel is ready to pause its war in Gaza during Ramadan if a hostage deal is reached, Biden says

By TIA GOLDENBERG, WAFAA SHURAFU and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel would be willing to pause its war on Hamas in Gaza during the upcoming Muslim holy month of Ramadan if a deal is reached to release some of the hostages held by the militants, U.S. President Joe Biden said.

Negotiators from the United States, Egypt and Qatar have been working to broker a cease-fire deal that would see Hamas free some of the dozens of hostages it holds in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners and a six-week halt in fighting. During the pause, talks would continue over the release of the remaining hostages and additional Palestinian prisoners held by Israel.

Israeli officials said Biden's comments on a late-night talk show filmed Monday came as a surprise and were not made in coordination with the country's leadership. A Hamas official played down any sense of progress, saying the group wouldn't soften its demands.

Negotiations were still underway Tuesday in Qatar. A senior official from Egypt has said the draft deal includes the release of up to 40 women and older hostages in return for up to 300 Palestinian prisoners — mostly women, minors and older people.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the negotiations, said the proposed six-week pause in fighting would allow hundreds of trucks to bring desperately needed aid into Gaza every day, including to the hard-hit north.

The start of Ramadan, which is expected to be around March 10, is seen as an unofficial deadline for a cease-fire deal. The month is a time of heightened religious observance and dawn-to-dusk fasting for hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world. Israeli-Palestinian tensions have flared in the past during the holy month.

"Ramadan's coming up and there has been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out," Biden said in an appearance on NBC's "Late Night With Seth Meyers."

In separate comments Monday, Biden said that he hoped a cease-fire deal could take effect by next week.

At the same time, Biden did not call for an end to the war, which was triggered by the deadly Hamas attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, when militants killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted roughly 250 people, according to Israeli authorities.

The Israeli officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the sensitive talks with the media, said Israel wants a deal immediately, but that Hamas continues to push

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excessive demands. They also said that Israel is insisting that female soldiers be part of the first group of hostages released under any truce deal.

Hamas official Ahmad Abdel-Hadi indicated that optimism on a deal was premature.

"The resistance is not interested in giving up any of its demands, and what is proposed does not meet what it had requested," he told the Pan-Arab TV channel Al Mayadeen.

Hamas has previously demanded that Israel end the war as part of any deal, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called "delusional."

Biden, who has shown staunch support for Israel throughout the war, left open the door in his remarks for an eventual Israeli ground offensive in the city of Rafah in southern Gaza, on the border with Egypt, where more than half of the enclave's 2.3 million people have fled under Israeli evacuation orders.

The prospect of an invasion of Rafah has prompted global alarm over the fate of civilians trapped there. Netanyahu has said a ground operation in Rafah is an inevitable component of Israel's strategy for crushing Hamas. This week, the military submitted for Cabinet approval operational plans for the offensive, as well as evacuation plans for civilians there.

Biden said he believes Israel has slowed its bombardment of Rafah.

"They have to and they have made a commitment to me that they're going to see to it that there's an ability to evacuate significant portions of Rafah before they go and take out the remainder Hamas," he said. "But it's a process."

Israel's devastating air, sea and ground campaign in Gaza has killed more than 29,700 people, most of them women and children, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. It does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count.

The fighting has obliterated large swaths of the urban landscape, displaced 80% of the battered enclave's population and sparked concerns that a famine could be imminent, according to the United Nations.

The first and only cease-fire in the war, in late November, brought about the release of about 100 hostages — mostly women, children and foreign nationals — in exchange for about 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel, as well as a brief halt in the fighting.

Roughly 130 hostages remain in Gaza, but Israel says about a quarter of them are dead.

## **NATO's chief says the alliance has no plans to send troops to Ukraine**

Associated Press undefined

BRUSSELS (AP) — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told The Associated Press that the military alliance has no plans to send combat troops into Ukraine amid reports that some Western countries may be considering putting boots on the ground in the war-ravaged country.

Stoltenberg said that "NATO allies are providing unprecedented support to Ukraine. We have done that since 2014 and stepped up after the full-scale invasion. But there are no plans for NATO combat troops on the ground in Ukraine."

Ahead of a trip to Paris on Monday, where top officials from over 20 countries discussed options to increase help for Ukraine, Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico said that some countries are weighing whether to strike bilateral deals to send troops to Ukraine to help it fend off the Russian invasion.

Fico said that his government is not planning to propose to send Slovak soldiers, but did not provide details about what countries might be considering such deals, or what the troops would do in Ukraine.

Slovak Parliament speaker Peter Pellegrini said Slovakia won't deploy troops to Ukraine.

Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala declined to comment before leaving for Paris, saying the leaders were meeting to discuss possible options, but he underlined that "the Czech Republic certainly doesn't want to send its soldiers to Ukraine."

French President Emmanuel Macron said Monday that sending Western troops on the ground in Ukraine should not be "ruled out" in the future, as Russia's full-scale invasion grinds into a third year.

While ruling out NATO military action, Stoltenberg told AP "that this is a war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine, blatantly violating international law. According to international law, Ukraine of course has

the right to self-defense, and we have the right to support them in upholding that right.”

NATO as an alliance provides Ukraine only non-lethal aid and support like medical supplies, uniforms and winter equipment, but some members send weapons and ammunition bilaterally or in groups. Any decision to send troops would require unanimous support from all member countries.

## Photographer accuses Taylor Swift’s dad of punching him in the face on Sydney waterfront

By ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — A photographer told police he was punched in the face by Taylor Swift’s father on the Sydney waterfront on Tuesday, hours after the pop star’s Australian tour ended.

Ben McDonald said he provided police with a statement alleging that Scott Swift assaulted him at the Neutral Bay Wharf, where the father and daughter had just come ashore from a yacht.

The veteran paparazzo said he decided to report the attack to police despite not being seriously injured. “It was just a punch in the chops. It’s a little tender, but I don’t have any bruising and it didn’t require medical assistance,” McDonald said.

“In 23 years, I haven’t been assaulted and punched in the chops, particularly by the talent’s dad,” he added.

Taylor Swift’s representative accused members of the media of aggression during the interaction.

“Two individuals were aggressively pushing their way towards Taylor, grabbing at her security personnel, and threatening to throw a female staff member into the water,” the representative said in an email.

The New South Wales Police Force media office confirmed that police were investigating the alleged assault of a 51-year-old man by a 71-year-old man at 2:30 a.m. Police did not release names, in accordance with their policy for such allegations.

Taylor Swift left the country on a private jet Tuesday, after more than 600,000 fans saw the Australian leg of her Eras Tour at seven Australian stadium concerts.

McDonald said media had been waiting to photograph the star as she walked with her entourage from a jetty to two waiting cars.

“There were about four or five security there and at one point, one of the American security started shoving his umbrella into me and my camera and then Taylor got in her car,” McDonald told The Associated Press.

“Someone else came running at me and punched me in the left side of my face. Initially, I thought it was an Australian security that was trying to be the hero of the moment in the front of the Americans, but as it turned out it was her father,” McDonald added.

McDonald said he realized that his alleged assailant was not a part of the security detail after seeing a photo of him holding Swift’s hand while reviewing photos from the evening. McDonald later identified Scott Swift from an online picture.

McDonald said there had been no cause for violence.

“We didn’t go rushing down the jetty. We didn’t go rushing to the back of the boat. We waited for her to come up. Kept it very civil,” he said.

“But no, they had to be (expletives) and put the umbrellas up and umbrellas over her and then shove the umbrellas into our faces and then make out that we’re the ones making contact with them,” he added.

## The Latest | Biden says Israel is willing to halt war during Ramadan if a hostage deal is reached

By The Associated Press undefined

President Joe Biden says Israel would be willing to halt its war on Hamas in Gaza during the upcoming Muslim fasting month of Ramadan if a deal is reached to release some of the hostages held by the militants.

Negotiators from the U.S., Egypt and Qatar are working on a framework deal under which Hamas would



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free some of the dozens of hostages it holds, in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners and a six-week halt in fighting. During the temporary pause, negotiations would continue over the release of the remaining hostages.

Biden's comments in an interview taped Monday for NBC's "Late Night With Seth Meyers" were the most detailed yet about a possible halt in fighting during the holy month, a time of heightened religious observance and dawn-to-dusk fasting.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said earlier that the army had presented to the War Cabinet its operational plan for a ground offensive into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town along the border with Egypt, where 1.4 million Palestinians have sought safety.

The situation in Rafah, where dense tent camps have sprouted to house the displaced, has sparked global concern and Israel's allies have warned that it must protect civilians in its battle against Hamas.

The war began after Hamas-led militants stormed across southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking about 250 others hostage.

The war has unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and has killed nearly 30,000 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry, which does not distinguish in its count between fighters and noncombatants. Israel says it has killed 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Currently:

- Biden hopes cease-fire, hostage deal to pause Israel-Hamas war can take effect by next Monday
- Human Rights Watch accuses Israel of blocking aid to Gaza in violation of a UN court order
- Palestinian prime minister submits government's resignation, a move that could open door to reforms
- Israel's air force strikes deep inside Lebanon, killing 2 people, after Hezbollah downs a drone
- Air Force member dies after setting himself on fire outside the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

**NEARLY 100 BODIES BROUGHT TO GAZA HOSPITALS IN PAST 24 HOURS**

**RAFAH, Gaza Strip** — The bodies of 96 people killed in Israeli bombardments have been brought to hospitals in the war-wrecked Gaza Strip in the past 24 hours, the Hamas-run Health Ministry there said Tuesday. Hospitals also received 144 wounded, it added.

The new fatalities brought the death toll in the strip to 29,878 since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct. 7, the ministry said in its daily briefing. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants, but said two-thirds of the dead were children and women.

Another 70,215 have been wounded in the war, it said.

The ministry said many casualties remain under the rubble and first responders have been unable to retrieve them amid the relentless bombing.

The war, launched after Hamas-led militants rampaged across southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 people hostage, has unleashed unprecedented devastation in Gaza.

**ISRAELI TROOPS SHOOT AND KILL 3 PALESTINIANS IN WEST BANK**

**CAIRO** — Israeli troops shot and killed three Palestinian men early Tuesday in the occupied West Bank, Palestinian health authorities said.

The military wing of the militant group Islamic Jihad claimed the three as members. One of those killed, identified as Mohammed Daraghmeh, 26, was a co-founder of the local branch of Islamic Jihad in the northern town of Tubas, the group said.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said the men, who ranged in age from 26 to 32, were shot in the head, chest and neck.

Palestinian media reported that they were killed in Faraa refugee camp near Tubas.

The West Bank has seen a surge of violence since the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza broke out Oct. 7. More than 400 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire there during that time, most in confrontations sparked by near-daily military raids in search of suspected militants.

**BIDEN SAYS ISRAEL IS WILLING TO HALT WAR DURING RAMADAN IF A HOSTAGE DEAL IS REACHED**

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WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden says Israel would be willing to halt its war on Hamas in Gaza during the upcoming Muslim fasting month of Ramadan if a deal is reached to release some of the hostages held by the militants.

Negotiators from the U.S., Egypt and Qatar are working on a framework deal under which Hamas would free some of the dozens of hostages it holds, in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners and a six-week halt in fighting. During the temporary pause, negotiations would continue over the release of the remaining hostages.

If a deal is reached in coming days, this timeline would also include Ramadan, which starts around March 10.

Biden's comments in an interview taped Monday for NBC's "Late Night With Seth Meyers" were the most detailed yet about a possible halt in fighting during the holy month, a time of heightened religious observance and dawn-to-dusk fasting.

"Ramadan's coming up and there has been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out," Biden said.

## BIDEN HOPES A CEASE-FIRE AND HOSTAGE DEAL CAN TAKE EFFECT BY NEXT MONDAY

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Monday that he hopes a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas that would pause hostilities and allow for the remaining hostages to be released can take effect by early next week.

Asked when he hoped such a deal could be finalized, Biden said: "Well I hope by the beginning of the weekend. The end of the weekend. My national security adviser tells me that they're close. They're close. They're not done yet. My hope is by next Monday we'll have a ceasefire."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had said Sunday that an Israeli military offensive in the southernmost city of Rafah could be "delayed somewhat" if a deal for a weeklong cease-fire between Israel and Hamas is reached. He claims that total victory in Gaza is "weeks away" once the offensive begins.

Talks toward a deal have resumed at the specialist level in Qatar, which is one of the mediators.

## ISRAEL SAYS IT FOUND A 10-KILOMETER TUNNEL CONNECTING GAZA CITY TO CENTRAL GAZA

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says it uncovered a 10-kilometer (6-mile) long tunnel connecting parts of central Gaza to Gaza City in the north.

The military said the tunnel network ran near the Turkish Hospital in central Gaza and Israa University in Gaza City. It released photos and video footage it said was taken inside the tunnels showing long corridors, staircases, beds, weapons and other supplies.

The military destroyed a number of buildings at the Israa University campus in January, claiming that the facility had been used for military purposes by Hamas.

Hamas has acknowledged building hundreds of kilometers (miles) of tunnels across Gaza. One of the main objectives of the Israeli offensive has been to destroy that network, which it says is used by Hamas to move fighters, weapons and supplies throughout the territory.

Israel accuses Hamas of using civilians as human shields and has exposed many tunnels running near mosques, schools, hospitals and U.N. facilities. Some of the hostages who were held captive in Gaza have said they were kept in tunnels.

Israel has found similar tunnels across Gaza over the course of its nearly five-month military campaign.

## ISRAELI COURT HEARS ARGUMENTS IN CASE OF ULTRA-ORTHODOX MEN SERVING IN ARMY

JERUSALEM — Israel's Supreme Court has heard arguments in cases that would force ultra-Orthodox men to serve in the army, as the military is strained by the nearly five-month war in Gaza.

Hundreds of people protested outside the court in Jerusalem on Monday, waving flags and chanting for equal service, as the court began to hear arguments that would cancel the exemption for ultra-Orthodox men.

Military service is compulsory for Jewish men, but politically powerful ultra-Orthodox parties have won exemptions for their communities to allow men to study full-time in religious seminaries. These exemptions have prompted widespread anger and resentment from the secular majority, especially as the army has

recently announced that compulsory service may be extended and reserve duty will be more frequent as the war continues in Gaza and tensions on the northern border escalate.

The government is required to submit a new draft law in the coming months. Ultra-Orthodox parties, which are a key coalition partner of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, hope to continue the system of exemptions.

Opponents, including key members of a mass protest movement against Netanyahu's judicial overhaul, say the exemptions are unfair and must end.

Activist groups filed petitions last year to force the state to strike down the exemptions and subsidies for young ultra-Orthodox men who study full-time in religious institutions called yeshivas. In the past, attempts to overhaul the draft law to include ultra-Orthodox have drawn tens of thousands of community members to the streets in large, violent protests.

## 90 PEOPLE REPORTED KILLED ACROSS GAZA IN THE LAST 24 HOURS

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The bodies of 90 people killed in Israel's bombardment have been brought to hospitals in the war-wrecked Gaza Strip in the past 24 hours, the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory reported Monday.

Hospitals had also received 164 wounded, it said.

The fresh fatalities brought the death toll in Gaza to 29,782 since the Israel-Hamas war began on Oct. 7, the ministry said in its daily briefing. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants, but said two thirds of the dead are children and women.

Another 70,043 had been wounded since Oct. 7, it said.

The ministry said many casualties remain under the rubble and first responders have been unable to retrieve them amid the relentless bombing.

The war began after Hamas-led militants rampaged across southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 people hostage.

## Court documents shed new details in killing of nursing student at University of Georgia

By JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The suspect in the killing of a nursing student on the University of Georgia campus used an object as a weapon in the crime and he's also accused of "disfiguring her skull," according to newly filed arrest affidavits.

Jose Ibarra, who faces multiple murder and assault charges, is also accused of dragging 22-year-old Laken Riley to a secluded area on Thursday, according to one of the affidavits obtained Tuesday by The Associated Press. The allegation that he dragged Riley's body was filed to support the charge of concealing the death of another person.

Authorities have not said exactly how Riley was killed, only that her death was caused by blunt force trauma. Further details about the type of object used, or exactly how she was killed, are not included in the affidavits for arrest.

The affidavits, filed in Athens-Clarke County Superior Court, state that the crimes were committed between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Thursday.

Ibarra, 26, is a Venezuelan citizen who immigration authorities say unlawfully crossed into the United States in 2022.

Riley was a nursing student at Augusta University's Athens campus, after starting her college career at the much larger Athens campus of the University of Georgia. She was found dead Thursday after a roommate reported she didn't return from a morning run in a wooded area of the University of Georgia campus near its intramural fields.

Hundreds of students and faculty members gathered Monday afternoon for a vigil for Riley organized by her sorority sisters at the University of Georgia campus. Many people cried and members of Alpha Chi Omega held carnations, a symbol of the sorority.

"Laken showed devotion with every aspect of her life," said Chloe Mullis, president of the University of Georgia chapter of Alpha Chi Omega. "Doing things halfway just wasn't an option. We lost one of the brightest lights that has ever been."

Republicans including former President Donald Trump and Gov. Brian Kemp have used the killing to attack the immigration policies of President Joe Biden.

U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement says Ibarra was detained by the Border Patrol on Sept. 8, 2022, after entering from Mexico near El Paso, Texas. He was released for further processing, according to ICE. It's unclear if Ibarra applied for asylum.

According to ICE, Ibarra was arrested by New York police on Aug. 31 and charged with acting in a manner to injure a child less than 17 and a motor vehicle license violation. Ibarra was released before ICE could ask New York officials to hold him until immigration authorities could take him into custody, ICE said. New York officials said Sunday they had no record of the arrest.

The White House expressed condolences to Riley's family and referred questions about the case to ICE and local law enforcement.

## Phones are distracting students in class. More states are pressing schools to ban them

By JOCELYN GECKER AP Education Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — In California, a high school teacher complains that students watch Netflix on their phones during class. In Maryland, a chemistry teacher says students use gambling apps to place bets during the school day.

Around the country, educators say students routinely send Snapchat messages in class, listen to music and shop online, among countless other examples of how smartphones distract from teaching and learning.

The hold that phones have on adolescents in America today is well-documented, but teachers say parents are often not aware to what extent students use them inside the classroom. And increasingly, educators and experts are speaking with one voice on the question of how to handle it: Ban phones during classes.

"Students used to have an understanding that you aren't supposed to be on your phone in class. Those days are gone," said James Granger, who requires students in his science classes at a Los Angeles-area high school to place their phones in "a cellphone cubby" with numbered slots. "The only solution that works is to physically remove the cellphone from the student."

Most schools already have rules regulating student phone use, but they are enforced sporadically. A growing number of leaders at the state and federal levels have begun endorsing school cellphone bans and suggesting new ways to curb access to the devices.

The latest state intervention came in Utah, where Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, last month urged all school districts and the state Board of Education to remove cellphones from classrooms. He cited studies that show learning improves, distractions are decreased and students are more likely to talk to each other if phones are taken away.

"We just need a space for six or seven hours a day where kids are not tethered to these devices," Cox told reporters this month. He said his initiative, which is not binding, is part of a legislative push to protect kids in Utah from the harms of social media.

Last year, Florida became the first state to crack down on phones in school. A law that took effect in July requires all Florida public schools to ban student cellphone use during class time and block access to social media on district Wi-Fi. Some districts, including Orange County Public Schools, went further and banned phones the entire school day.

Oklahoma, Vermont and Kansas have also recently introduced what is becoming known as "phone-free schools" legislation.

And two U.S. senators — Tom Cotton, an Arkansas Republican, and Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat — introduced legislation in December that would require a federal study on the effects of cellphone use in



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schools on students' mental health and academic performance. There is one of several bipartisan alliances calling for stiffer rules for social media companies and greater online safety for kids.

Nationally, 77% of U.S. schools say they prohibit cellphones at school for non-academic use, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But that number is misleading. It does not mean students are following those bans or all those schools are enforcing them.

Just ask teachers.

"Cellphone use is out of control. By that, I mean that I cannot control it, even in my own classroom," said Patrick Truman, who teaches at a Maryland high school that forbids student use of cellphones during class. It is up to each teacher to enforce the policy, so Truman bought a 36-slot caddy for storing student phones. Still, every day, students hide phones in their laps or under books as they play video games and check social media.

Tired of being the phone police, he has come to a reluctant conclusion: "Students who are on their phones are at least quiet. They are not a behavior issue."

A study last year from Common Sense Media found that 97% of kids use their phones during school hours, and that kids say school cellphone policies vary — often from one classroom to another — and aren't always enforced.

For a school cellphone ban to work, educators and experts say the school administration must be the one to enforce it and not leave that task to teachers. The Phone-Free Schools Movement, an advocacy group formed last year by concerned mothers, says policies that allow students to keep phones in their backpacks, as many schools do, are ineffective.

"If the bookbag is on the floor next to them, it's buzzing and distracting, and they have the temptation to want to check it," said Kim Whitman, a co-founder of the group, which advises schools to require phones be turned off and locked away all day.

Some students say such policies take away their autonomy and cut off their main mode of communication with family and friends. Pushback also has come from parents who fear being cut off from their kids if there is a school emergency. Whitman advises schools to make exceptions for students with special educational and medical needs, and to inform parents on expert guidance that phones can be a dangerous distraction for students during an emergency.

Jaden Willoughey, 14, shares the concern about being out of contact with his parents if there's a crisis. But he also sees the upsides of turning in his phone at school.

At Delta High School in rural Utah, where Jaden is a freshman, students are required to check their phones at the door when entering every class. Each of the school's 30 or so classrooms has a cellphone storage unit that looks like an over-the-door shoe bag with three dozen smartphone-sized slots.

"It helps you focus on your work, and it's easier to pay attention in class," Jaden said.

A classmate, Mackenzie Stanworth, 14, said it would be hard to ignore her phone if it was within reach. It's a relief, she said, to "take a break from the screen and the social life on your phone and actually talk to people in person."

It took a few years to tweak the cellphone policy and find a system that worked, said Jared Christensen, the school's vice principal.

"At first it was a battle. But it has been so worth it," he said. "Students are more attentive and engaged during class time. Teachers are able to teach without competing with cellphones. And student learning has increased," he said, citing test scores that are at or above state averages for the first time in years. "I can't definitively say it's because of this policy. But I know it's helping."

The next battle will be against earbuds and smartwatches, he said. Even with phones stashed in pouches, students get caught listening to music on air pods hidden under their hair or hoodies. "We haven't included earbuds in our policy yet. But we're almost there."

## Could Missouri's 'stand your ground' law apply to the Super Bowl celebration shooters?

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH, SUMMER BALLENTINE and JIM SALTER Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — The man accused of firing the first shots at the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl rally told authorities he felt threatened, while a second man said he pulled the trigger because someone was shooting at him, according to court documents.

Experts say that even though the shooting left one bystander dead and roughly two dozen people injured, 23-year-old Lyndell Mays and 18-year-old Dominic Miller might have good cases for self-defense through the state's "stand your ground" law.

Missouri is among more than 30 states that have adopted some version of stand your ground laws over the past two decades, said Robert Spitzer, a professor emeritus of political science at the State University of New York, Cortland, whose research focuses on gun policy and politics. While earlier laws allowed people to use force to protect themselves in their homes, stand your ground provides even broader self-defense rights regardless of the location.

Now, the mass shooting at the Kansas City Chiefs Super Bowl celebration could be a new test of those expanded protections, and comes as self-defense already is at the center of another high-profile Kansas City shooting that left Ralph Yarl wounded.

"This illustrates in a dramatic way the fundamental problem, especially when it's a public gathering where there are thousands and thousands of people, and even a highly trained police officer often cannot avoid injuring others in a gunfire exchange in a public place," said Spitzer, who wrote the book "Guns Across America: Reconciling Gun Rules and Rights."

Trial attorney Daniel Ross described the stand your ground law as a "formidable defense" that he and many other Kansas City defense attorneys anticipate will be used in Mays' and Miller's cases. He said the law puts the onus on the prosecution to disprove claims that a shooting is lawful self-defense.

"Collateral damage under Missouri law is excused if you're actually engaged in lawful self-defense and there's other folks injured," he said.

There are limits to the defense, however, said Eric Ruben, a law professor at the S.M.U. Dedman School of Law in Dallas who has written on stand your ground and self-defense immunity.

"Even though Missouri has robust stand-your-ground laws, that doesn't mean you can spray bullets into a crowd in the name of defending yourself or others," Ruben said.

The barrage of gunfire Feb. 14 outside Kansas City's historic Union Station happened as the celebration that drew an estimated 1 million fans was concluding. A woman died while watching the rally with her family, and nearly two dozen others — more than half of them children — were injured and survived.

Kansas City already was grappling with the shooting of Yarl, a Black teenager, who survived a bullet wound to the head when he went to the wrong house in April 2023 to pick up his brothers. Andrew Lester, an 85-year-old white man, is planning to claim self-defense when he goes to trial in October. His attorney said the retiree was terrified by the stranger on his doorstep.

While the Super Bowl celebration shooting was a far different scenario, it raises anew questions about how far people can go to protect themselves and what happens when the innocent become victims.

Mays and Miller are each charged with second-degree murder and other counts.

Probable cause statements suggest that both men felt threatened. Mays said he picked out one person in a group at random and started shooting because they said, "I'm going to get you," and he took that to mean, "I'm going to kill you," the statement said.

Miller said under questioning that he fired four or five times because someone was shooting at him. His friend, Marques Harris, told WDAF-TV that Miller was only trying to protect him after he was shot in the neck.

Miller's attorney didn't return phone and email messages seeking comment. No attorney was listed for Mays in online court records.

Two juveniles also face gun-related and resisting arrest charges.

Missouri has few firearm regulations, and two of its cities — Kansas City and St. Louis — annually have among the nation's highest homicide rates. Missouri's current Republican lawmakers have largely defended the state's gun laws, instead blaming prosecutors and other local elected officials in the two cities.

And Republican Gov. Mike Parson, speaking to reporters last week, cited societal problems — not guns — as the reason for the violence. "I believe it's much more than a gun," he said.

When Republican lawmakers in 2016 expanded the state's already-extensive self-defense protections by enacting the current stand your ground law, Black Missouri lawmakers raised concerns. The law also allowed most adults to carry concealed guns without a permit.

Racial disparities are rife among those who invoke the defense, with an Urban Institute study showing white shooters are more likely to benefit than Black defendants.

The issue was raised when Kyle Rittenhouse, a white teen, was acquitted of killing two people and wounding a third during a 2020 protest against racism and police brutality in Kenosha, Wisconsin, after testifying he acted in self-defense. Rittenhouse's actions became a flashpoint in the debate over guns, vigilantism and racial injustice in the U.S.

The 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin, a Black 17-year-old, by George Zimmerman also spurred a landmark case involving Florida's stand your ground law. Zimmerman, a self-appointed neighborhood watchman who thought Martin looked suspicious, was acquitted.

In Georgia, which also has a stand your ground law, three white men accused of fatally shooting Ahmaud Arbery in 2020 claimed self-defense. Travis McMichael, his father Greg McMichael and neighbor William "Roddie" Bryan claimed they chased Arbery, who was Black, because they thought he was a burglar. All three were convicted of murder.

In 2022, Wichita, Kansas, area district attorney Marc Bennett was critical of the state's stand your ground law when he announced that he wouldn't file charges over the death of Cedric Lofton, a Black 17-year-old who was restrained facedown for more than 30 minutes at a juvenile detention center. Bennett said the law prevented him from bringing charges because staff members were protecting themselves.

With the Chiefs parade case unfolding, it is time to look anew at these laws, said Melba Pearson, a former homicide prosecutor who is now the director of prosecution projects at the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy at Florida International University.

"What are truly the limits in terms of stand your ground and what really falls into the category of self-defense?" she asked. "Do we need to revisit what stand your ground looks like?"

## **By defining sex, some states are denying transgender people of legal recognition**

By ANDREW DeMILLO and JOHN HANNA Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Mack Allen, an 18-year-old high school senior from Kansas, braces for sideways glances, questioning looks and snide comments whenever he has to hand over his driver's license, which still identifies him as female.

They've come from a police officer responding to a car accident. They've come from an urgent care employee loudly using the wrong name and pronouns. They've come from the people in the waiting room who overheard.

"It just feels gross because I've worked so hard to get to where I am now in my transition, and obviously I don't look like a woman and I don't sound like a woman," said Allen, who has been on testosterone for two years.

Kansas enacted a law last year that ended legal recognition of transgender identities. The measure says there are only two sexes, male and female, that are based on a person's "biological reproductive system" at birth.

That law and others introduced around the nation this year — often labeled as "bills of rights" for women — are part of a push by conservatives who say states have a legitimate interest in restricting transgender

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people from competing on sports teams or using bathrooms that align with their gender identity.

Critics argue the proposals to legally define sex as binary are essentially erasing transgender and nonbinary people's existences by making it as difficult as possible for them to update documents, use facilities and generally participate authentically in public life.

They're also creating uncertainty for the many intersex people — those born with physical traits that don't fit typical definitions of male or female — with the measures unclear on how people would prove they're exempt.

Some of the measures would remove the word gender, which refers to social and self-identity, from state code and replace it with sex, which refers to biological traits, conflating the two terms. Others make gender a synonym for sex. Medical experts say the efforts rely on an outdated idea of gender by defining it as binary rather than a spectrum.

"You pass a law because there's a problem. The medical community doesn't see people having different gender identities or being born with an intersex condition as a problem for society," said Dr. Jack Drescher, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Columbia University who edited the section about gender dysphoria in the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual. "The medical community can only stand back to say, what exactly are you passing this law to protect?"

Measures have been proposed this year in at least 13 states — Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Utah, West Virginia and Wyoming — and advocates expect that number to grow. The bills follow a historic push for restrictions on transgender people, especially youths, by Republican lawmakers last year. At least 23 states have banned gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors, and some states are now shifting their focus to trying to restrict that care for adults, as well. Others have moved on restroom and sports restrictions.

Many political observers say the Republican focus on transgender people is an attempt to rally a voting base with a "wedge issue" to replace abortion rights, which the public has largely favored, notably in Kansas. The efforts also worry transgender people and their allies that they're further stigmatizing and threatening a community already at high risk of stress, depression and suicidal behavior.

With the latest round of bills defining man and woman, it's clear "the intent is to make it as difficult as possible for transgender people to operate within a state," said Sarah Warbelow, legal vice president of the Human Rights Campaign, a large LGBTQ+ rights group.

"It's an attempt to deny transgender people's existence," she said.

A similar proposal in Iowa put forward by Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds led to protests at the state Capitol. The bill was introduced soon after the failure of a lawmaker's effort to remove gender identity from the state's civil right law. It would narrowly define male and female and require a transgender person's assigned sex at birth to be listed alongside their gender identity on their birth certificate.

"Women and men are not identical; they possess unique biological differences," Reynolds said after introducing the measure. "That's not controversial, it's common sense."

The sponsor of a similar bill passed by the West Virginia House said the legislation is needed to allow restrictions on who can use single-sex restrooms, locker rooms and changing areas.

"At any given time, we're unable to protect single-sex spaces," said Del. Kathie Hess Crouse, the measure's sponsor, said. "If we don't have a definition, we can't protect them."

Jocelyn Krueger, of Grinnell, Iowa, joined protesters at the statehouse days after testifying to lawmakers that she opposed the failed effort to remove gender identity from the civil rights law.

Krueger said she's concerned about potential repercussions of the bill, given that a person's identifying documents "unlock basic participation" in everyday life.

She compared it to how she was temporarily unable to get money from her bank account when she was updating her documents. Krueger worries the Iowa bill could create similar challenges for trans residents, but longer term.

"Not having access to documentation, or things that out you in a way, or where your documentation doesn't match, puts you at risk for all of those daily interactions where people are looking at your docu-



mentation," Krueger said.

The Williams Institute, a think tank at UCLA Law, estimates there are 1.3 million transgender adults in the U.S. But it's believed that intersex people represent 1.7% of humans, which would translate to over 5 million in the U.S. alone.

In Alabama, lawmakers added language to legislation defining male and female that sex can be designated as unknown on state records "when sex cannot be medically determined for developmental or other reasons."

West Virginia's proposal specifically states that someone who is intersex is "not considered a third sex." But the measure says people with a "medically verifiable" diagnosis of it should be accommodated.

Before this year, Kansas and Montana, North Dakota and Tennessee had enacted laws defining man and woman in state code. Oklahoma — where advocates say a law restricting bathroom access helped create a climate that led to the bullying of nonbinary teenager Nex Benedict, who died after a fight in a girls bathroom at a school — already has a measure by executive order, as does Nebraska.

Before Tennessee's law took effect, advocates held events to assist people on changing their names and gender identities on government documents.

"There's a lot of potential for harm that seems ready to explode at any moment," said Dahron Johnson, of the Tennessee Equality Project.

In South Carolina, amendments have been proposed to the state constitution to narrowly define male and female. But the measures face an uphill battle in clearing the Legislature by an April 10 deadline in order to make this fall's ballot.

Opponents say efforts to codify sex are likely to face court challenges, just as other restrictions such as youth medical care have.

"We've already lost this case," said Idaho Rep. Ilana Rubel, a Democrat who voted against a definition bill approved by the state's Republican-led House, predicting the state would get sued. "This is really just an unfortunate gesture that makes people in our community feel unwanted and unloved by their government."

## **Biden will urge Congress' top leaders to keep the government open and send aid to Ukraine and Israel**

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden was meeting Tuesday with the top four leaders of Congress to press them to act quickly to avoid a looming government shutdown early next month and to pass emergency aid for Ukraine and Israel.

Biden was hosting House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. Vice President Kamala Harris also was attending.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden invited the leaders to the Oval Office meeting because he wants to make sure U.S. national security interests are "put first." She said those interests include continuing to fund the government.

"Look, what the president wants to see is we want to make sure that the national security interests of the American people gets put first, right?" she said Monday as Biden flew to New York. "It is not used as a political football, right? We want to make sure that gets done.

"And we also want to see that, you know, that the government does not get shut down," Jean-Pierre said, adding that keeping the government open and functioning is a "basic, basic priority" of Congress.

The Senate's top two leaders also urged that the government be kept open.

Parts of the government could start to scale back operations as early as Friday unless a deal is reached on spending and legislation is sent to Biden for his signature.

"We want to avoid a government shutdown," Schumer said Monday on the Senate floor. "We want to work with all our House counterparts to spare the American people the pain that a shutdown would bring."

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McConnell likewise urged the political parties to work together to avert an "entirely avoidable" shutdown. "Shutting down the government is harmful to the country," he said Monday in a separate floor speech. "And it never produces positive outcomes on policy or politics."

The House, under Johnson's leadership, is under pressure to pass the \$95 billion national security package that bolsters aid for Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific. That measure cleared the Senate on a bipartisan 70-29 vote this month, but Johnson has resisted scheduling it for a vote in the House.

Apart from the national security package, government funding for agriculture, transportation, military construction and some veterans' services expires Friday. Funding for the rest of the government, including the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, expires a week later, on March 8.

## San Francisco is ready to apologize to Black residents. Reparations advocates want more

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — San Francisco's supervisors plan to offer a formal apology to Black residents for decades of racist laws and policies perpetrated by the city, a long-awaited first step as it considers providing reparations.

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors is scheduled to vote Tuesday on the resolution apologizing to African Americans and their descendants. All 11 members have signed on as sponsors, guaranteeing its passage. It would be one of the first major U.S. cities to do so.

The resolution calls on San Francisco to not repeat the harmful policies and practices, and to commit "to making substantial ongoing, systemic, and programmatic investments" in Black communities. There are about 46,000 Black residents in San Francisco.

"An apology from this city is very concrete and is not just symbolic, as admitting fault is a major step in making amends," Supervisor Shamann Walton, the only Black member of the board and chief proponent of reparations, said at a committee hearing on the resolution earlier this month.

Others say the apology is insufficient on its own for true atonement.

"An apology is just cotton candy rhetoric," said the Rev. Amos C. Brown, a member of the San Francisco reparations advisory committee that proposed the apology among other recommendations. "What we need is concrete actions."

An apology would be the first reparations recommendation to be realized of more than 100 proposals the city committee has made. The African American Reparations Advisory Committee also proposed that every eligible Black adult receive a \$5 million lump-sum cash payment and a guaranteed income of nearly \$100,000 a year to remedy San Francisco's deep racial wealth gap.

But there has been no action on those and other proposals. Mayor London Breed, who is Black, has stated she believes reparations should be handled at the national level. Facing a budget crunch, her administration eliminated \$4 million for a proposed reparations office in cuts this year.

Reparations advocates at the previous hearing expressed frustration with the slow pace of government action, saying that Black residents continue to lag in metrics related to health, education and income.

Black people, for example, make up 38% of San Francisco's homeless population despite being less than 6% of the general population, according to a 2022 federal count.

In 2020, California became the first state in the nation to create a task force on reparations. The state committee, which dissolved in 2023, also offered numerous policy recommendations, including methodologies to calculate cash payments to descendants of enslaved people.

But reparations bills introduced by the California Legislative Black Caucus this year also leave out financial redress, although the package includes proposals to compensate people whose land the government seized through eminent domain, create a state reparations agency, ban forced prison labor and issue an apology.

Cheryl Thornton, a San Francisco city employee who is Black, said in an interview after the committee hearing that an apology alone does little to address current problems, such as shorter lifespans for Black

people.

"That's why reparations is important in health care," she said. "And it's just because of the lack of healthy food, the lack of access to medical care and the lack of access to quality education."

Other states have apologized for their history of discrimination and violence and role in the enslavement of African Americans, according to the resolution.

In 2022, Boston became the first major city in the U.S. to issue an apology. That same year, the Boston City Council voted to form a reparations task force.

## **Biden and Trump will face tests in Michigan's primaries that could inform a November rematch**

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — While Joe Biden and Donald Trump are marching toward their respective presidential nominations, Michigan's primary on Tuesday could reveal significant political perils for both of them.

Trump, despite his undoubted dominance of the Republican contests this year, is facing a bloc of stubbornly persistent GOP voters who favor his lone remaining rival, former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, and who are skeptical at best about the former president's prospects in a rematch against Biden.

As for the incumbent president, Biden is confronting perhaps his most potent electoral obstacle yet: an energized movement of disillusioned voters upset with his handling of the war in Gaza and a relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that critics say has been too supportive.

Those dynamics will be put to the test in Michigan, the last major primary state before Super Tuesday and a critical swing state in November's general election. Even if they post dominant victories as expected on Tuesday, both campaigns will be looking at the margins for signs of weakness in a state that went for Biden by just 3 percentage points last time.

Biden said in a local Michigan radio interview Monday that it would be "one of the five states" that would determine the winner in November.

Michigan has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation, and more than 310,000 residents are of Middle Eastern or North African ancestry. Nearly half of Dearborn's roughly 110,000 residents claim Arab ancestry.

It has become the epicenter of Democratic discontent with the White House's actions in the Israel-Hamas war, now nearly five months old, following Hamas' deadly Oct. 7 attack and kidnapping of more than 200 hostages. Israel has bombarded much of Gaza in response, killing nearly 30,000 people, two-thirds of them women and children, according to Palestinian figures.

Democrats angry that Biden has supported Israel's offensive and resisted calls for a ceasefire are rallying voters on Tuesday to instead select "uncommitted."

The "uncommitted" effort, which began in earnest just a few weeks ago, has been backed by officials such as Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib, the first Palestinian-American woman in Congress, and former Rep. Andy Levin, who lost a Democratic primary two years ago after pro-Israel groups spent more than \$4 million to defeat him.

Abbas Alawieh, spokesperson for the Listen to Michigan campaign that has been rallying for the "uncommitted" campaign, said the effort is a "way for us to vote for a ceasefire, a way for us to vote for peace and a way for us to vote against war."

Trump won the state by just 11,000 votes in 2016 over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, and then lost the state four years later by nearly 154,000 votes to Biden. Alawieh said the "uncommitted" effort wants to show that they have at least the number of votes that were Trump's margin of victory in 2016, to demonstrate how influential that bloc can be.

"The situation in Gaza is top of mind for a lot of people here," Alawieh said. "President Biden is failing to provide voters for whom the war crimes that are being inflicted by our U.S. taxpayer dollars – he's failing to provide them with something to vote for."

Our Revolution, the organizing group once tied to Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., has also urged progressive

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voters to choose "uncommitted" on Tuesday, saying it would send a message to Biden to "change course NOW on Gaza or else risk losing Michigan to Trump in November."

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., a Biden backer who held several meetings and listening sessions in Michigan late last week, said he told community members that, despite his disagreements over the war, he would nonetheless support Biden because he represents a much better chance of peace in the Middle East than Trump.

"I also said that I admire those who are using their ballot in a quintessentially American way to bring about a change in policy," Khanna said Monday, adding that Biden supporters need to proactively engage with the uncommitted voters to try and "earn back their trust."

"The worst thing we can do is try to shame them or try to downplay their efforts," he said.

Trump has drawn enthusiastic crowds at most of his rallies, including a Feb. 17 rally outside Detroit drawing more than 2,000 people who packed into a frigid airplane hangar.

But data from AP VoteCast, a series of surveys of Republican voters in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, reveals that his core voters so far are overwhelmingly white, mostly older than 50 and generally without a college degree. He will likely have to appeal to a far more diverse group of voters in November. And he has underperformed his statewide results in suburban areas that are critical in states like Michigan.

Several of Trump's favored picks in Michigan's 2022 midterm contests lost their campaigns, further underscoring his loss of political influence in the state. Meanwhile, the state GOP has been riven with divisions among various pro-Trump factions, potentially weakening its power at a time when Michigan Republicans are trying to lay the groundwork to defeat Biden this fall.

Both Biden and Trump have so far dominated their respective primary bids. Biden has sailed to wins in South Carolina, Nevada and New Hampshire, with the latter victory coming in through a write-in campaign. Trump has swept all the early state contests and his team is hoping to lock up the delegates needed to secure the Republican nomination by mid-March.

Nonetheless, an undeterred Haley has promised to continue her longshot presidential primary campaign through at least Super Tuesday on March 5, when 15 states and one territory hold their nominating contests.

As Haley stumped across Michigan on Sunday and Monday, voters showing up to her events expressed enthusiasm for her in Tuesday's primary -- even though, given her losses in the year's first four states, it seemed increasingly likely she wouldn't win the nomination.

"She seems honorable," said Rita Lazdins, a retired microbiologist from Grand Haven, Michigan, who in an interview Monday refused to say Trump's name. "Honorable is not what that other person is. I hate to say that, but it's so true."

## **What's life like for Russia's political prisoners? Isolation, poor food and arbitrary punishment**

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — Vladimir Kara-Murza could only laugh when officials in Penal Colony No. 6 inexplicably put a small cabinet in his already-cramped concrete cell, next to a fold-up cot, stool, sink and latrine.

That moment of dark humor came because the only things he had to store in it were a toothbrush and a mug, said his wife, Yevgenia, since the opposition activist wasn't allowed any personal belongings in solitary confinement.

Another time, she said, Kara-Murza was told to collect his bedding from across the corridor — except that prisoners must keep their hands behind their backs whenever outside their cells.

"How was he supposed to pick it up? With his teeth?" Yevgenia Kara-Murza told The Associated Press. When he collected the sheets, a guard with a camera appeared and told him he violated the rules, bringing more discipline.

For political prisoners like Kara-Murza, life in Russia's penal colonies is a grim reality of physical and psychological pressure, sleep deprivation, insufficient food, health care that is poor or simply denied, and



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a dizzying set of arbitrary rules.

This month brought the stunning news from a remote Arctic penal colony, one of Russia's harshest facilities: the still-unexplained death of Alexei Navalny, the Kremlin's fiercest foe.

"No one in the Russian penitentiary system is safe," says Grigory Vaypan, a lawyer with Memorial, a group founded to document repression in the Soviet Union, especially from the Stalinist prison system known as the gulag.

"For political prisoners, the situation is often worse, because the state aims to additionally punish them, or additionally isolate them from the world, or do everything to break their spirit," Vaypan said. His group counts 680 political prisoners in Russia.

Kara-Murza was convicted of treason last year for denouncing the war in Ukraine. He is serving 25 years, the stiffest sentence for a Kremlin critic in modern Russia, and is among a growing number of dissidents held in increasingly severe conditions under President Vladimir Putin's political crackdown.

## THE GULAG'S LEGACY

Former inmates, their relatives and human rights advocates paint a bleak picture of a prison system that descended from the USSR's gulag, documented by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" and "The Gulag Archipelago."

While undergoing reforms, it "more or less still has the backbone of the Soviet system," says Oleg Kozlovsky, Amnesty International's Russia researcher.

Most often, inmates live in barracks tightly packed with bunk beds. Konstantin Kotov, an activist who spent over a year in Penal Colony No. 2 in the Vladimir region — Navalny's prison from 2021 until June 2022 — recalls cramped quarters of up to 60 men per room.

Not even the pandemic changed that, Kotov told AP. Masks were required from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m., but he doubts they helped much. "Every now and then, people had high fever. They were taken to the infirmary, then brought back, and that was it," he said.

Meals are basic and unsatisfying.

Breakfast was porridge, lunch was soup with little or no meat, mashed potatoes and a meat or fish cutlet; as was dinner, Kotov said. Inmates got two eggs a week, and fruit and vegetables were a luxury almost always sold out at prison kiosks, he added.

"The ration is not enough, and often it's inedible. So almost no one lives on rations alone," Navalny once said. His wife described his meals as porridge for breakfast, soup and porridge for lunch, and porridge with herring for dinner.

Additional food is sold, or relatives can send parcels, within limits. Those in punishment cells get no packages.

There is a strict regimen of menial tasks and duties, like cleaning and standing at attention.

Andrei Pivovarov, serving four years for running a banned political organization, must clean his solitary cell for several hours a day and listen to a recording of prison regulations, says his wife, Tatyana Usmanova. But he can't do both at the same time, or finish quickly and rest, she added. Guards watching via CCTV punish rule-breakers.

## A "SYSTEM OF SLAVERY"

There are just under 700 penitentiary facilities in Russia, and most are penal colonies of varying security, from minimum to "special regime." There are about 30-40 penal colonies for women.

Political prisoners tend to be sent to those whose administrations hold tighter controls, says Zoya Svetova, a journalist and prisoner rights advocate.

Inmates are required to work, but often there are not enough tasks for men. Women usually sew uniforms for the military, police and construction workers, working long hours for meager pay, said prisoner advocate Sasha Graf.

Nadya Tolokonnikova, a member of Pussy Riot protest group who was in prison for nearly 22 months in 2012-13, recalls sewing for 16- to 18-hour shifts. "It's a system of slavery, and it is truly horrible," she told AP.

Inmates are supposed to be paid not less than minimum wage — 19,242 rubles (about \$200) a month

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in 2024 -- but in reality it's as little as 300 rubles (about \$3.20) — enough to buy cigarettes and sanitary products at the prison kiosk, Graf said.

## INTIMIDATION AND REPRESSION

Tolokonnikova said when she arrived at Penal Colony No. 14 in the Mordovia region, the warden described himself as a "Stalinist." She said he told her: "You may be a somebody outside of this colony, have a voice, people who support you and care for you, but here, you are in completely in my power, and you need to understand this."

Although prisons are technically overseen by commissions that do inspections and advocate for inmates, their members in recent years have been replaced by government loyalists, says Svetova, who served on a commission from 2008-16.

She said the current government uses prisons for intimidation and oppression.

Reports of physical abuse are common for ordinary inmates but rare for political prisoners, advocates say. Instead, intimidation often comes via enforcing minor infractions, said Amnesty's Kozlovsky.

Navalny spent months in a punishment cell for not buttoning his uniform properly or not putting his hands behind his back when required. He once described it as a "concrete kennel" of 2½-by-3 meters (8-by-10-feet) that, depending on the season, was "cold and damp," or "hot and there's almost no air."

Long stints in punishment cells or other types of solitary confinement are a reality for many, and their only lifeline is a visit from a lawyer or writing letters that are censored and sometimes take weeks to arrive; some colonies use a faster online service.

## A TOLL ON PRISONERS' HEALTH

Health care is almost nonexistent, current and former inmates and advocates say, with only basic drugs available, if at all.

"Prison guards by default believe the inmate is faking and only complaining about health issues to get some kind of extra privileges," said Tolokonnikova.

Not surprisingly, inmates don't fare well in such conditions.

Yevgenia Kara-Murza said her 42-year-old husband's health has worsened in solitary.

He suffered two near-fatal poisonings in 2015 and 2017 and developed polyneuropathy, a condition that deadens the feeling in his limbs. While he received some treatment in pretrial detention in Moscow, there has been none at the penal colony in Omsk.

"He needs physical therapy, exercise," which is hardly possible in his cell, she said.

Alexei Gorinov, a former member of a Moscow municipal council serving seven years for speaking against the war in Ukraine, suffers from a chronic respiratory condition and had part of a lung removed before imprisoned. His health deteriorated during six weeks in solitary confinement, and he is still recovering.

In December, Gorinov, 62, was not strong enough to sit up in a chair or even speak, his allies quoted his lawyer as saying. Eventually moved to a prison hospital, he is still awakened every two hours because he's labeled a flight risk and authorities must regularly confirm his whereabouts, supporters say. He considers it a form of torture.

While public pressure helped stop prison abuses in recent years, Memorial's Vaypan believes a line has been crossed with Navalny's death.

It's a "worrying signal" that things could get worse, he said.

## **Biden hopes cease-fire, hostage deal to pause Israel-Hamas war can take effect by next Monday**

By WAFAA SHURAF, TIA GOLDENBERG KAREEM CHEHAYEB and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press  
NEW YORK (AP) — President Joe Biden said Monday that he hopes a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas that would pause hostilities and allow for remaining hostages to be released can take effect by early next week.

Asked when he thought a cease-fire could begin, Biden said: "Well I hope by the beginning of the weekend. The end of the weekend. My national security adviser tells me that we're close. We're close. We're

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not done yet. My hope is by next Monday we'll have a ceasefire."

Biden commented in New York after taping an appearance on NBC's "Late Night With Seth Meyers."

Negotiations are underway for a weeklong cease-fire between Israel and Hamas to allow for the release of hostages being held in Gaza by the militant group in return for Israel releasing hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. The proposed six-week pause in fighting would also include allowing hundreds of trucks to deliver desperately needed aid into Gaza every day.

Negotiators face an unofficial deadline of the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan around March 10, a period that often sees heightened Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

Meanwhile, Israel has failed to comply with an order by the United Nations' top court to provide urgently needed aid to desperate people in the Gaza Strip, Human Rights Watch said Monday, a month after a landmark ruling in The Hague ordered Israel to moderate its war.

In a preliminary response to a South African petition accusing Israel of genocide, the U.N.'s top court ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in the tiny Palestinian enclave. It stopped short of ordering an end to the military offensive that has triggered a humanitarian catastrophe.

Israel denies the charges against it, saying it is fighting in self-defense.

Nearly five months into the war, preparations are underway for Israel to expand its ground operation into Rafah, Gaza's southernmost town along the border with Egypt, where 1.4 million Palestinians have sought safety.

Early Monday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the army had presented to the War Cabinet its operational plan for Rafah as well as plans to evacuate civilians from the battle zones. It gave no further details.

The situation in Rafah has sparked global concern. Israel's allies have warned that it must protect civilians in its battle against the Hamas militant group.

Also Monday, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh submitted his government's resignation, and President Mahmoud Abbas is expected to appoint technocrats in line with U.S. demands for internal reform. The U.S. has called for a revitalized Palestinian Authority to govern postwar Gaza ahead of eventual statehood — a scenario rejected by Israel.

In its Jan. 26 ruling, the International Court of Justice ordered Israel to follow six provisional measures, including taking "immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance" to Gaza.

Israel also must submit a report on what it is doing to adhere to the measures within a month. The Israeli Foreign Ministry said late Monday that it has filed such a report. It declined to share it or discuss its contents.

Israel said 245 trucks of aid entered Gaza on Sunday. That's less than half the amount that entered daily before the war.

Human Rights Watch, citing U.N. figures, noted a 30% drop in the daily average number of aid trucks entering Gaza in the weeks following the court's ruling. It said that between Jan. 27 and Feb. 21, the daily average of trucks entering was 93, compared to 147 trucks a day in the three weeks before the ruling. The daily average dropped to 57, between Feb. 9 and 21, the figures showed.

The rights group said Israel was not adequately facilitating fuel deliveries to hard-hit northern Gaza and blamed Israel for blocking aid from reaching the north, where the World Food Program said last week it was forced to suspend aid deliveries.

"The Israeli government has simply ignored the court's ruling, and in some ways even intensified its repression," said Omar Shakir, Israel and Palestine director at Human Rights Watch.

The Association of International Development Agencies, a coalition of over 70 humanitarian organizations working in Gaza and the West Bank, said almost no aid had reached areas in Gaza north of Rafah since the court's ruling.

Israel denies it is restricting the entry of aid and has instead blamed humanitarian organizations operat-

ing in Gaza, saying large aid shipments sit idle on the Palestinian side of the main crossing. The U.N. says it can't always reach the crossing because it is at times too dangerous.

In some cases, crowds of desperate Palestinians have surrounded delivery trucks and stripped them of supplies. The U.N. has called on Israel to open more crossings, including in the north, and to improve the process.

Netanyahu's office said that the War Cabinet had approved a plan to deliver humanitarian aid safely into Gaza in a way that would "prevent the cases of looting." It did not disclose further details.

The war, launched after Hamas-led militants rampaged across southern Israel, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking roughly 250 people hostage, has caused vast devastation in Gaza.

Nearly 30,000 people have been killed in Gaza, two-thirds of them women and children, according to the Gaza Health Ministry which does not distinguish in its count between fighters and noncombatants. Israel says it has killed 10,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Fighting has flattened large swaths of Gaza's urban landscape, displacing about 80% of the territory's 2.3 million people, who have crammed into increasingly smaller spaces looking for elusive safety.

The crisis has pushed a quarter of the population toward starvation and raised fears of imminent famine, especially in the northern part of Gaza, the first focus of Israel's ground invasion. Starving residents have been forced to eat animal fodder and search for food in demolished buildings.

"I wish death for the children because I cannot get them bread. I cannot feed them. I cannot feed my own children!" Naim Abouseido yelled as he waited for aid in Gaza City. "What did we do to deserve this?"

Bushra Khalidi with U.K. aid organization Oxfam told The Associated Press that it had verified reports that children have died of starvation in the north in recent weeks, which she said indicated aid was not being scaled up despite the court ruling.

Aid groups say deliveries also continue to be hobbled by security issues. The French aid groups Médecins du Monde and Doctors Without Borders each said that their facilities were struck by Israeli forces in the weeks following the court order.

## **Putting Western troops on the ground in Ukraine is not 'ruled out' in the future, French leader says**

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron said Monday that sending Western troops on the ground in Ukraine is not "ruled out" in the future after the issue was debated at a gathering of European leaders in Paris, as Russia's full-scale invasion grinds into a third year.

The French leader said that "we will do everything needed so Russia cannot win the war" after the meeting of over 20 European heads of state and government and other Western officials.

"There's no consensus today to send in an official, endorsed manner troops on the ground. But in terms of dynamics, nothing can be ruled out," Macron said in a news conference at the Elysee presidential palace.

Macron declined to provide details about which nations were considering sending troops, saying he prefers to maintain some "strategic ambiguity."

The meeting included German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and Poland's President Andrzej Duda as well as leaders from the Baltic nations. The United States was represented by its top diplomat for Europe, James O'Brien, and the U.K. by Foreign Secretary David Cameron.

Duda said the most heated discussion was about whether to send troops to Ukraine and "there was no agreement on the matter. Opinions differ here, but there are no such decisions."

Poland's president said he hopes that "in the nearest future, we will jointly be able to prepare substantial shipments of ammunition to Ukraine. This is most important now. This is something that Ukraine really needs."

Macron earlier called on European leaders to ensure the continent's "collective security" by providing unwavering support to Ukraine in the face of tougher Russian offensives on the battlefield in recent months.

"In recent months particularly, we have seen Russia getting tougher," Macron said.



Macron cited the need to solidify security to head off any Russian attacks on additional countries in the future. Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia as well as much larger Poland have been considered among possible targets of future Russian expansionism. All four countries are staunch supporters of Ukraine.

Estonia's foreign minister said earlier this month that NATO has about three or four years to strengthen its defenses.

In video speech, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called on the leaders gathered in Paris to "ensure that Putin cannot destroy our achievements and cannot expand his aggression to other nations."

Several European countries, including France, expressed their support for an initiative launched by the Czech Republic to buy ammunition and shells outside the EU, participants to the meeting said.

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said his country decided to provide over 100 million euros for that purpose.

In addition, a new coalition is to be launched to further "mobilize" nations with capabilities to deliver medium and long-range missiles, Macron said, as France announced last month the delivery of 40 additional long-range Scalp cruise missiles.

European nations are worried that the U.S. will dial back support as aid for Kyiv is teetering in Congress. They also have concerns that former U.S. President Donald Trump might return to the White House and change the course of U.S. policy on the continent.

The Paris conference comes after France, Germany and the U.K. recently signed 10-year bilateral agreements with Ukraine to send a strong signal of long-term backing as Kyiv works to shore up Western support.

## Supreme Court casts doubt on GOP-led states' efforts to regulate social media platforms

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court cast doubt Monday on state laws that could affect how Facebook, TikTok, X, YouTube and other social media platforms regulate content posted by their users. The cases are among several this term in which the justices could set standards for free speech in the digital age.

In nearly four hours of arguments, several justices questioned aspects of laws adopted by Republican-dominated legislatures and signed by Republican governors in Florida and Texas in 2021. But they seemed wary of a broad ruling, with Justice Amy Coney Barrett warning of "land mines" she and her colleagues need to avoid in resolving the two cases.

While the details vary, both laws aimed to address conservative complaints that the social media companies were liberal-leaning and censored users based on their viewpoints, especially on the political right.

Differences on the court emerged over how to think about the platforms — as akin to newspapers that have broad free-speech protections, or telephone companies, known as common carriers, that are susceptible to broader regulation.

Chief Justice John Roberts suggested he was in the former camp, saying early in the session, "And I wonder, since we're talking about the First Amendment, whether our first concern should be with the state regulating what we have called the modern public square?"

Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas appeared most ready to embrace arguments made by lawyers for the states. Thomas raised the idea that the companies are seeking constitutional protection for "censoring other speech."

Alito complained about the term "content moderation" that the sites employ to keep material off their platforms.

"Is it anything more than a euphemism for censorship?" he asked, later musing that term struck him as Orwellian.

But Justice Brett Kavanaugh, seemingly more favorable to the companies, took issue with calling the actions of private companies censorship, a term he said should be reserved for restrictions imposed by the government.

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"When I think of Orwellian, I think of the state, not the private sector, not private individuals," Kavanaugh said.

The precise contours of rulings in the two cases were not clear after arguments, although it seemed likely the court would not let the laws take effect. The justices posed questions about how the laws might affect businesses that are not their primary targets, including e-commerce sites like Uber and Etsy and email and messaging services.

The cases are among several the justices have grappled with over the past year involving social media platforms. Next month, the court will hear an appeal from Louisiana, Missouri and other parties accusing administration officials of pressuring social media companies to silence conservative points of view. Two more cases awaiting decision concern whether public officials can block critics from commenting on their social media accounts, an issue that previously came up in a case involving then-President Donald Trump. The court dismissed the Trump case when his presidential term ended in January 2021.

The Florida and Texas laws were passed in the months following decisions by Facebook and Twitter, now X, to cut Trump off over his posts related to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol by his supporters.

Trade associations representing the companies sued in federal court, claiming that the laws violated the platforms' speech rights. One federal appeal struck down Florida's statute, while another upheld the Texas law. But both are on hold pending the outcome at the Supreme Court.

In a statement when he signed the bill into law, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said the measure would be "protection against the Silicon Valley elites."

When Gov. Greg Abbott signed the Texas law, he said it was needed to protect free speech in what he termed the new public square. Social media platforms "are a place for healthy public debate where information should be able to flow freely — but there is a dangerous movement by social media companies to silence conservative viewpoints and ideas. That is wrong, and we will not allow it in Texas," Abbott said.

But much has changed since then. Elon Musk purchased Twitter and, in addition to changing its name, eliminated teams focused on content moderation, welcomed back many users previously banned for hate speech and used the site to spread conspiracy theories.

The Biden administration is siding with the challengers. Lawyers for Trump have filed a brief in the Florida case urging the court to uphold the state law.

Still, Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer, cautioned the court to seek a narrow ruling that blocked the laws. Prelogar said governments maintain the ability to impose regulations to ensure competition, preserve data privacy and protect consumer interests.

Several academics and privacy advocacy groups told the court that they view the laws at issue in these cases as unconstitutional, but want the justices to preserve the government's ability to regulate social media companies to some extent.

## **US airman dies after setting himself ablaze outside Israeli Embassy in Israel-Hamas war protest**

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An active-duty member of the U.S. Air Force has died after he set himself ablaze outside the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., while declaring that he "will no longer be complicit in genocide."

The 25-year-old airman, Aaron Bushnell, of San Antonio, Texas, died from his injuries, the Metropolitan Police Department said Monday.

Bushnell had walked up to the embassy shortly before 1 p.m. Sunday and began livestreaming on the video streaming platform Twitch, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. Law enforcement officials believe he set his phone down and then doused himself in accelerant and ignited the flames. At one point, he said he "will no longer be complicit in genocide," the person said. The video was later removed from the platform, but law enforcement officials have obtained and reviewed a copy.

The person was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the ongoing investigation and spoke to the

AP on condition of anonymity.

Investigators believe Bushnell had been staying at a Travelodge in Silver Spring, Maryland, which was searched Monday by federal agents, a law enforcement official said. That official was not authorized to disclose details of the investigation publicly and also spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

In a statement Monday, the Air Force said, "The individual involved in yesterday's incident succumbed to his injuries and passed away last night."

Later Monday, the Air Force said Bushnell was a cyber defense operations specialist with the 531st Intelligence Support Squadron at Joint Base San Antonio. He had served on active duty since May 2020.

Col. Celina Noyes, commander the 70th Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Wing, said: "When a tragedy like this occurs, every member of the Air Force feels it. We extend our deepest sympathies to the family and friends of Senior Airman Bushnell."

Demonstrators held a vigil for Bushnell outside the Israeli embassy Monday night.

The incident happened as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is seeking the cabinet approval for a military operation in the southern Gazan city of Rafah while a temporary cease-fire deal is being negotiated. Israel's military offensive in Gaza, however, has drawn criticisms, including genocide claims against the Palestinians.

Israel has adamantly denied the genocide allegations and says it is carrying out operations in accordance with international law in the Israel-Hamas war.

In December, a person self-immolated outside the Israeli consulate in Atlanta and used gasoline as an accelerant, according to Atlanta's fire authorities. A Palestinian flag was found at the scene, and the act was believed to be one of "extreme political protest."

## **Barrage of gunfire as officers stop shooter at Joel Osteen's megachurch, newly released video shows**

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — The gunfire that shattered the calm at pastor Joel Osteen's megachurch in Houston only lasted about four minutes.

But surveillance video and police body camera footage released Monday, more than two weeks after the Feb. 11 shooting at Lakewood Church, showed the terror of the brief attack: Parishioners scattering, searching for safety in rooms and hallways. Officers drawing guns and taking cover behind walls. And the shooter's 7-year-old son covering his ears during the chaos, and moments later laying on the floor after being shot and wounded.

"Put the weapon down, now," an officer can be heard shouting before firing his weapon. Another officer cautions: "She may have a bomb."

Houston police released the roughly 26 minutes of video, which includes the sounds of dozens of bursts of gunfire, as questions remain over the attack that left the shooter, Genesse Moreno, 36, dead and two others injured. Authorities have still not released a motive for the shooting or confirmed who shot Moreno's young son in the head. He remains in critical condition.

Authorities say the woman entered the church between Sunday services and began firing an AR-style rifle. Moreno did not reach the main sanctuary and was killed after exchanging gunfire with two off-duty officers. In addition to Moreno's son, another man was wounded.

The video shows what looked like, from all appearances, a typical Sunday at one of the nation's largest megachurches as people stood around and talked in the hallways outside the nearly 16,000-seat venue.

Minutes earlier, according to security footage from Lakewood Church, Moreno had arrived at the church in a white SUV. She is seen taking her son, Samuel, out of the back seat and walking toward the building. Moreno is wearing a black shirt, striped pants, boots, and a loose-fitting tan-colored trench coat.

Footage from one body camera showed people chatting before suddenly jolting at the sound of the first gunshot. Confused, some began running and then rapid gunfire ensued. Bystanders could be seen taking cover in rooms and hallways.

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Off-duty police officers, crouching with handguns out, could be seen as they ran toward the sound of shots being fired.

As one officer moved toward the gunshots with another officer, she said, "We need to approach. Father God, just be with us. Forgive us our sins."

In the video footage, gunshots could be heard ringing throughout the church building as officers closed in on the source of the shooting.

Additional security video from the church, which didn't have sound, showed the boy, who appeared to be in a recessed doorway, covering his ears after his mother walked off screen. She then came near him and he reached his arms out to her. When she walks off screen again, the boy appears to follow her.

In the footage, Moreno could be heard saying, "you killed my son." She later said, "Stand down, I have a bomb. I have a (expletive) bomb." Gunfire could be heard as she talked.

Images of the child, seen wearing orange pants and a yellow shirt, were blurred after he was wounded in the shooting. Paramedics were summoned by multiple officers, who requested help after seeing the boy laying face-up on the carpeted hallway.

"We have a kid that's down, about three bullets to his head," one officer reported over his radio. Another officer knelt and prayed as she approached the boy, saying, "Father God, please bring him close to you." Houston police have not said who fired the shots that wounded the boy.

In another part of the church, Moreno walked down a hallway, pointing her AR-style rifle. Within two minutes, she was shot multiple times before she collapsed to the ground and was approached by officers, the security security footage shows.

Later, an officer reported over the radio, "Shooter is down. Looks like she's got something strapped to her chest." Another officer requested the bomb squad. Authorities later said no explosives were found.

From the time the shooting first began, to when officers said that Moreno had been fatally shot, about four minutes had passed, according to the released footage.

Houston Police Chief Troy Finner said in a statement on X, formerly known as Twitter, that the footage "may be unsettling to members of the community."

"While we know there are unanswered questions, this is still an active investigation," Finner said. "We will continue to work with our local, state and federal law enforcement partners to thoroughly examine all aspects of this incident."

Police have told reporters that investigators were still trying to determine Moreno's motive and learn more about how she obtained the AR-style rifle she used.

In posts on Facebook from last week, Walli Carranza, the boy's grandmother, said that her grandson, Samuel, was breathing well on his own after doctors had removed a breathing tube. Carranza said Samuel has had six surgeries.

"Will he be able to have any semblance of a normal life? I have no idea," Carranza wrote in a post on Saturday.

On Sunday, Carranza said Samuel had looked up at her and smiled.

## What would a new Palestinian government in the West Bank mean for the war in Gaza?

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

The Palestinian Authority's prime minister announced his government's resignation on Monday, seen as the first step in a reform process urged by the United States as part of its latest ambitious plans to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But it will do little to address the authority's longstanding lack of legitimacy among its own people or its strained relations with Israel. Both pose major obstacles to U.S. plans calling for the PA, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to govern postwar Gaza ahead of eventual statehood.

That's assuming that the war in Gaza ends with the defeat of the Hamas militant group — an Israeli and U.S. goal that seems elusive nearly five months into the grueling war that has killed almost 30,000



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Palestinians and pushed the territory to the brink of famine.

Here's a look at the government shakeup and what it means for the Israel-Hamas war.

## WHAT IS THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY?

The PA was created in the early 1990s through interim peace agreements signed between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, then led by Yasser Arafat.

It was granted limited autonomy in parts of the West Bank and Gaza ahead of what the Palestinians hoped would be full statehood in both territories as well as east Jerusalem, lands that Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

But the sides were unable to reach a final agreement through several rounds of peace talks. Mahmoud Abbas was elected president of the PA in 2005, months after Arafat's death. Hamas won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections the following year, triggering an international boycott of the PA.

A power struggle between Abbas' secular Fatah party and Hamas boiled over in the summer of 2007, with Hamas seizing power in Gaza after a week of street battles. That effectively confined Abbas' authority to parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Abbas recognizes Israel, is opposed to armed struggle and is committed to a two-state solution. His security forces have cooperated with the Israeli military to crack down on Hamas and other armed groups, and his government has worked with Israel to facilitate work permits, medical travel and other civilian affairs.

## WHAT DOES THE RESIGNATION MEAN?

In announcing his resignation, Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said new arrangements were needed to address "the new reality in the Gaza Strip."

Abbas accepted Shtayyeh's resignation and is expected to replace him with Mohammad Mustafa, a U.S.-educated economist who has held senior positions at the World Bank and currently leads the Palestine Investment Fund. He was deputy prime minister and economy minister from 2013-2015.

As a political independent and not a Fatah loyalist like Shtayyeh, Mustafa's appointment would likely be welcomed by the U.S., Israel and other countries.

Mustafa has no political base of his own, and the 88-year-old Abbas will still have the final say on any major policies. Still, the appointment would convey the image of a reformed, professional PA that can run Gaza, which is important for the U.S.

State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said it was up to the Palestinians to choose their leaders, but that the U.S. welcomes any steps to "reform and revitalize" the PA.

"We think those steps are positive. We think that they're an important step to achieving a reunited Gaza and West Bank under the Palestinian Authority."

## HOW DO PALESTINIANS VIEW THE AUTHORITY?

Abbas' popularity has plummeted in recent years, with polls consistently finding that a large majority of Palestinians want him to resign. The PA's security coordination with Israel is extremely unpopular, causing many Palestinians to view it as a subcontractor of the occupation.

Both the PA and Hamas have cracked down on dissent in the territories they control, violently suppressing protests and jailing and torturing critics. Abbas' mandate expired in 2009 but he has refused to hold elections, citing Israeli restrictions.

Hamas, whose popularity has soared during this and previous rounds of violence, would likely do well in any free election.

But the most popular Palestinian leader by far is Marwan Barghouti, a Fatah leader who is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison after a 2004 terrorism conviction.

Hamas is demanding his release in exchange for some of the hostages it captured in the Oct. 7 attack that ignited the war, but Israel has refused.

Hamas has called for all the Palestinian factions to establish an interim government to prepare the way for elections. But Israel, the U.S. and other Western countries are likely to boycott any Palestinian body that includes the militant group, which they view as a terrorist organization.

## DOES ISRAEL SUPPORT THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY?

Israel prefers the PA to Hamas. But even though they cooperate on security matters, Israel accuses the

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PA of inciting terrorism, and the PA accuses Israel of apartheid and genocide.

Israel's criticism largely focuses on the PA's provision of financial aid to the families of Palestinian prisoners and Palestinians killed by Israeli forces — including militants who killed Israelis. Israel says the payments incentivize terrorism. The PA portrays them as social welfare for victims of the occupation.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said the PA should have no role in postwar Gaza. He says Israel will maintain open-ended security control over the territory while local Palestinian leaders administer civilian affairs. Netanyahu's government is opposed to Palestinian statehood.

The U.S. has outlined a path to a broader postwar settlement in which Saudi Arabia would recognize Israel and join other Arab states and a revitalized PA in helping to rebuild and govern Gaza — all in exchange for a credible path to an independent Palestinian state.

The reform of the PA represents a small part of that package, which has yet to win over the Israeli government.

## Wild weather hits Northwest with snow even as Midwest gets a taste of summer

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — February's end is bringing wild weather to much of the United States, with record heat allowing for golf in Wisconsin and outdoor food trucks in Minnesota, along with an increased fire risk across much of the Great Plains. But blinding snow in the Northwest is blowing eastward, and places like Chicago should see temperatures swinging dramatically from balmy to bitter cold again.

"Definitely not the weather we would expect in February. It's usually super snowy, freezing, you know, ice everywhere. And so we are just trying to take advantage of a very nice week this week," said Tania Sepulveda, a 30-year-old Chicago therapist who was "working from home" Monday, using her laptop in a grassy spot along the Lake Michigan shoreline.

The sunny weather won't last that long. A powerful storm started dumping snow that could reach several feet in higher elevations of the West promises a return of winter conditions to the central U.S., where it's been unseasonably warm. High winds are already blowing, raising the risk of wildfires across the Great Plains.

The National Weather Service warned that travel could be dangerous later Monday across parts of the Oregon Cascades and Northern Rockies, predicting near-blizzard conditions with one to two inches of snow an hour and winds reaching upwards of 65 mph (104 kph).

The storm will move into the Great Basin and Central Rockies Tuesday, carrying much colder temperatures and strong winds across the inner mountain West, said Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland. "We'll be very wintry like for the next two days," he added.

The West is just one place with unusual, and in some cases, dangerous weather conditions. Here is what to expect elsewhere.

### IT'S WARM IN THE HEARTLAND

This time of year should be the coldest in places like Chicago. But the city and many others across the central U.S. are getting an early taste of summer with temperatures in the 60s and 70s.

The warm conditions have continued since a balmy weekend brought temperatures reaching into the 60s in Denver, Chicago and Des Moines, Iowa. Kansas City, Missouri, enjoyed temperatures in the mid-70s.

In Chicago, temperatures reached 72 degrees (22 Celsius) by Monday afternoon, breaking Chicago's old record of 64 degrees (18 Celsius). Winds were expected to ramp up to 25 mph (40 kph).

Highs on Monday were expected to reach the mid-60s across southern Wisconsin and extend as far north as Rhinelander, a city of 8,000 just below Michigan's Upper Peninsula. It reached 64 degrees (18 Celsius) in La Crosse, eclipsing the record for the date of 61 degrees (16 Celsius).

"We're blowing away the records in northern Illinois into south central and southwestern Wisconsin," said Mark Gehring, a weather service meteorologist in Sullivan, Wisconsin.

Monday's warm temperatures will "just about guarantee" that the typically chilly Minneapolis area will

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have its warmest winter on record, the local weather service office said. While Monday's forecast high of 63 (17 Celsius) at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport would be one degree below the record set in 1896, St. Cloud in central Minnesota was expected to reach 59 (15 Celsius), breaking the old record of 55 (13 Celsius) set in 1958.

But it isn't quite time for scarves and gloves to be stored until next winter.

Places like Chicago will see a dramatic drop in temperatures by Wednesday, with highs just below freezing and winds gusting as hard as 30 mph (48 kph). In Minnesota, colder weather Tuesday and Wednesday could bring an inch or two of slushy snow that could freeze and make for a dangerous Wednesday morning commute, the weather service said.

## GOLF, IN WISCONSIN, IN FEBRUARY?

Weeks of unusually warm weather drove Jessica Blaska-Grady, general manager of the Oaks golf course in the town of Sun Prairie just east of Madison, to reopen for the season on Feb. 9. She said she can remember only one other winter — 2017 — when the course was open in February.

"It's definitely kind of crazy," she said. "This is incredibly unusual but I'm not going to lie and say it's unwelcome. It's a nice little boost. You've got to make hay when the sun shines."

Lori Cervantes, 53, doesn't remember a winter like this during the 20 years she lived in Iowa. She moved back eight months ago after living in Portland, Oregon, and said "this weather is such a nice treat."

She took her dog, Gus, on their daily walk in the "unprecedented" weather and meditated in the sunshine outside the gold-domed Iowa Capitol in Des Moines.

"It's a little scary, actually," she said, noting that flower bulbs are already emerging from the ground and wondering how it might affect farmers and fields this growing season. "It's way too early to be this warm — and dry."

Gehring attributed the unseasonable warmth to an El Niño pattern, the term for warming in the equatorial region of the Pacific Ocean that pushes the jet stream further north. These bands of strong wind form a boundary between cold northern air and warm southern air. Gehring also noted that climate change has been playing a role in warming temperatures for decades.

The warmer conditions in many parts of the country have led to the cancellation of winter events like ski races and pond hockey tournaments. The latest cancellation was the longest sled dog race in the eastern United States.

## FIRE RISK IN THE PLAINS

But the warmer temperatures have brought increased risk of fires across the Great Plains.

The National Weather Service said dry, gusty winds were creating what it called critical fire weather conditions, and issued red flag warnings and fire weather watches in parts of New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, up to Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, and east to Iowa, Illinois and Missouri.

Nearby states, including parts of Arkansas, Minnesota and Wisconsin, were under hazardous weather outlooks because of an increased fire danger, according to weather service maps. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources issued an advisory Monday morning discouraging burning anything outdoors, noting that 15 wildfires sprang up over the weekend, consuming more than 30 acres.

## Don Henley tells court he never gave away drafts of 'Hotel California' lyrics

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Don Henley never gave away handwritten pages of draft lyrics to "Hotel California" and other Eagles hits, he said Monday, calling them "very personal" in testimony that also delved into an unrelated piece of his past: his 1980 arrest.

Henley, the Grammy-winning co-founder of one of the most successful bands in rock history, is prosecutors' star witness in an unusual criminal trial surrounding about 100 legal-pad pages from the birth of a blockbuster 1976 album.

Henley says the documents were stolen from his barn in Malibu, California. He testified Monday that he

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was appalled when the material began turning up at auctions in 2012.

"It just wasn't something that was for public viewing. It was our process. It was something very personal, very private," he said. "I still wouldn't show that to anybody."

At issue are about 100 sheets of paper inscribed with lyrics-in-the-making for multiple songs on the "Hotel California" album, including "Life in the Fast Lane," "New Kid in Town" and the title track that turned into one of the most durable hits in rock. Famed for its lengthy guitar solo and puzzlingly poetic lyrics, the song still gets streamed hundreds of millions of times a year. The album is the third-biggest seller in U.S. history.

On trial are rare-book dealer Glenn Horowitz and rock memorabilia specialists Craig Inciardi and Edward Kosinski. They bought the pages through writer Ed Sanders, who worked with the Eagles on a never-published band biography and isn't charged in the case.

The defendants have pleaded not guilty to charges including conspiracy to criminally possess stolen property. The men's lawyers maintain that Henley willingly gave the pages to the scribe and that nothing criminal happened at any point.

Defense attorney Jonathan Bach played tapes Monday of 1980 phone calls between Sanders and Henley, including one in which Henley said he'd "try to dig through" his legal pads full of lyrics drafts. The attorney showed Henley a shipping label showing that his property caretaker, at some point, sent Sanders a box. Its contents weren't listed.

Henley acknowledged that he didn't remember the entirety of his conversations with Sanders.

But the singer and artists' rights activist insisted he gave the writer only access to the lyrics pages, not possession of them. He said he told Sanders he could examine the documents, ideally in an attic apartment on the Malibu property, so the book could benefit from a firsthand view of "the time and effort that went into" writing Eagles songs.

Henley said he'd discussed sending music reviews and magazine clips to Sanders but didn't recall offering to send handwritten lyrics.

"You know what? It doesn't matter if I drove a U-Haul truck across country and dumped them at his front door," Henley said, his raspy drawl quickening. "He had no right to keep them or to sell them."

Sanders' 1979 book contract said any material furnished by the Eagles was deemed their property, Henley noted.

The defense had signaled that it planned to question Henley, 76, about how clearly he remembers an era when he was living in his own fast lane. In an apparent attempt to defuse some of those questions, a prosecutor brought up Henley's 1980 arrest.

Henley pleaded no contest in 1981 to a misdemeanor charge of contributing to the delinquency of a minor, after authorities found drugs and a naked 16-year-old girl suffering from an overdose at his Los Angeles home the prior November. He was sentenced to probation and a \$2,500 fine, and he requested a drug education program to get some possession charges dismissed.

Henley testified Monday that he'd been depressed about the Eagles 1980 breakup and had sought "an escape" by calling for a sex worker that night.

"I made a poor decision, which I regret to this day," he said.

As for his memory, he said, "I can't tell you what I had for breakfast last Friday morning, but I can tell you where we stayed when we played Wembley in 1975 and we opened for Elton John and the Beach Boys," referring to London's Wembley Stadium.

He also offered glimpses into the Eagles' creative methods, as specific as where he bought his legal pads — a stationery store on Ventura Boulevard in Los Angeles' Sherman Oaks neighborhood — and why he alternates between cursive script and block lettering. The first is for speed, the latter usually for ideas "I might actually use," he explained.

When writing albums, he and late Eagles co-founder Glenn Frey rented a house and spent their days brainstorming song titles and concepts, each man with a guitar and a legal pad, Henley recalled.

"We had long talks about various ideas, sometimes philosophical discussions," Henley said. He identified a bit of Frey's writing on at least one of the disputed pages.



Sanders sold the documents in 2005 to Horowitz' company, which sold them to Kosinski and Inciardi. Kosinski has a rock 'n' roll collectibles auction site; Inciardi was then a curator at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

In a 2005 email to Horowitz, Sanders said Henley's assistant had sent him the documents for the biography project, according to the indictment.

Henley reported them stolen after Inciardi and Kosinski began in 2012 to offer them at various auctions. Henley also bought four pages back for \$8,500 in 2012. He testified that he resented "buying my own property back" but saw it as "the most practical and expedient way" to get the auction listing taken down.

Kosinski's lawyers, however, have argued that the transaction implicitly recognized his ownership. Meanwhile, Horowitz and Inciardi started ginning up alternate stories of how Sanders got hold of the manuscripts, Manhattan prosecutors say. At various points, the suggested sources included a backstage find, a gift from Frey and other explanations, according to the indictment.

Sanders contributed to or signed onto some versions, according to the emails. He hasn't responded to messages seeking comment about the case.

Kosinski forwarded one of the various explanations to Henley's lawyer and told an auction house that the rocker had "no claim" to the documents, according to the indictment.

Henley has been a fierce advocate for artists' rights to their work. Since the late 1990s, he and a musician's rights group that he co-founded have spoken out in venues from the Supreme Court to Congress about copyright law, online file-sharing and more.

Henley also sued over unauthorized use of some of his solo songs in a political ad and over some unrelated T-shirts emblazoned with a pun involving his name and an Eagles song. Both cases ended in settlements and apologies from the defendants.

## **Manhattan DA wants gag order for Trump, seeks to play 'Access Hollywood' tape at hush-money trial**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Prosecutors in Donald Trump's New York hush-money criminal case asked a judge Monday to impose a gag order on the former president ahead of next month's trial, citing what they called his "long history of making public and inflammatory remarks" about people involved in his legal cases.

The Manhattan district attorney's office is asking for what it described as a "narrowly tailored" order that would bar Trump from making or directing others to make public statements about potential witnesses and jurors, as well as statements meant to interfere with or harass the court's staff, prosecution team or their families.

The district attorney's office is also seeking approval to show jurors the infamous "Access Hollywood" video, made public in the final weeks of Trump's 2016 White House campaign, in which he bragged about grabbing women's genitals without asking for permission.

Prosecutors contend the release of the 2005 footage, followed by a flurry of women coming forward to accuse Trump of sexual assault, hastened his efforts to keep negative stories out of the press, leading to one of the hush-money arrangements at the heart of the case.

Trump's lawyers wrote in court papers Monday that the "Access Hollywood" video "contains inflammatory and unduly prejudicial evidence that has no place at this trial about documents and accounting practices."

The judge, Juan Manuel Merchan, didn't rule immediately on the requests. Jury selection is scheduled to start March 25. Barring a last-minute delay, it will be the first of Trump's four criminal cases to go to trial.

Imposing a gag order on Trump would add to restrictions put in place after his arraignment last April that prohibit him from using evidence in the case to attack witnesses. Prosecutors are also proposing that the names of jurors be kept from the public to "minimize obstacles to jury selection, and protect juror safety."

Without limits, prosecutors said, Trump's rhetoric would "create a significant and imminent threat to the trial by distracting personnel, diverting government resources, and delaying the administration of justice."

A spokesperson for Trump's presidential campaign called the gag order request "election interference

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pure and simple" and called the hush-money case a "sham orchestrated by partisan Democrats desperately attempting to prevent" Trump from returning to the White House.

Trump lawyer Susan Necheles said the defense will respond in court papers later this week.

The Manhattan case centers on allegations that Trump falsified internal records kept by his company to hide the true nature of payments made to his former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen. The lawyer paid porn actor Stormy Daniels \$130,000 as part of an effort during Trump's 2016 presidential campaign to bury claims he'd had extramarital sexual encounters.

Trump is charged with 34 counts of falsifying business records, a felony punishable by up to four years in prison, though there is no guarantee that a conviction would result in jail time.

Trump, the Republican presidential front-runner, has lashed out about the case repeatedly on social media, warning of "potential death & destruction" before his indictment last year, posting a photo on social media of himself holding a baseball bat next to a picture of District Attorney Alvin Bragg and complaining that the Judge Merchan is "a Trump-hating judge" with a family full of "Trump haters."

Trump is already under a similar gag order in his Washington, D.C., election interference criminal case and was fined \$15,000 for twice violating a gag order imposed in his New York civil fraud trial after he made a disparaging social media post about the judge's chief law clerk. In January, a Manhattan federal judge threatened Trump with expulsion from court in a civil trial on writer E. Jean Carroll's defamation claims against him after he was heard saying "it is a witch hunt" and "it really is a con job."

"Self-regulation is not a viable alternative, as defendant's recent history makes plain," prosecutors wrote in court papers. Trump, they said, "has a longstanding and perhaps singular history" of using social media, campaign speeches and other public statements to "attack judges, jurors, lawyers, witnesses and other individuals involved in legal proceedings against him."

In a statement, Trump campaign spokesperson Steven Cheung said: "Today, the 2-tiered system of justice implemented against President Trump is on full display, with the request by another Deranged Democrat prosecutor seeking a restrictive gag order, which if granted, would impose an unconstitutional infringement on President Trump's First Amendment rights, including his ability to defend himself, and the rights of all Americans to hear from President Trump."

The requested gag order would not bar Trump from commenting about Bragg, an elected Democrat.

Still, prosecutors contend that Trump's enmity for Bragg — including Truth Social posts calling Manhattan's first Black D.A. a "degenerate psychopath" who "hates the USA" — has led to a spike in threats against the prosecutor and the district attorney's office.

Last year, prosecutors said, police recorded 89 threats to Bragg, his family or staff, up from just a single threat in 2022, his first year in office. The wave of threats started March 18, according to an affidavit by the head of Bragg's police detail, the day Trump falsely posted online that he was about to be arrested and encouraged supporters to protest and "take our nation back!"

A few days later, prosecutors noted, Bragg's office received a letter containing a small amount of white powder and a note stating, "Alvin: I'm going to kill you."

Trump has referred to a key witness in the case, his former lawyer Cohen, as a "convicted felon, disbarred lawyer, with zero credibility" and has made posts mocking Daniels.

The gag order request Monday mirrored portions of an order imposed on Trump in October in his separate Washington federal case, where he is charged with scheming to overturn the results of his 2020 election loss to Democratic rival Joe Biden.

A federal appeals court panel in December largely upheld Judge Tanya Chutkan's gag order but narrowed it in an important way by freeing Trump to criticize special counsel Jack Smith, who brought the case. Manhattan prosecutors echoed that ruling by excluding Bragg from their proposed gag order.

Last May, Merchan issued what's known as a protective order, warning Trump and his lawyers they risked being held in contempt if they disseminated evidence from the hush-money case to third parties, used it to attack witnesses or posted sensitive material to social media.

Merchan, noting Trump's "special" status as a former president and current candidate, tried to make clear at the time that the protective order shouldn't be construed as a gag order, saying, "It's certainly not my intention to in any way impede Mr. Trump's ability to campaign for the presidency of the United States."

## Why so much of the US is unseasonably hot

By ISABELLA O'MALLEY Associated Press

A powerful winter storm was dumping deep snow in parts of the West on Monday and much of the central U.S. was unseasonably warm: People played golf in Wisconsin and comfortably walked their dogs in Iowa, where some bulbs were starting to flower. And high winds hiked fire risks in several states.

Why was it happening?

Three things explained the weird weather in much of the U.S.

### THE JET STREAM

This band of strong winds keeps warm air, which blows up from the south, trapped below cold air that comes down from the north. The jet stream constantly shifts. Recently, it's been sitting far north enough to mean that warm air has been blasting the normally frigid Upper Midwest.

"The orientation of it right now is not very winter-like," said Andrew Orrison, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in College Park, Maryland.

### GLOBAL WARMING

In all weather science, it's virtually impossible to directly attribute any individual phenomenon to a specific cause. How global warming affects the position of the jet stream is a case in point.

But climate change, caused by human activities that release plant-warming gasses like carbon dioxide, is causing global temperatures to be warmer than normal. In fact, January 2024 broke the record for the warmest first month of the year, which was previously set in 2020, according to the Copernicus Climate Change Service of the European Space Agency. January was 2.74 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than pre-industrial levels.

### EL NIÑO

Also at play is a weather pattern called El Niño, which can cause the jet stream to sit more northward than usual.

The East Coast will see warmer weather arrive by mid-week, with cities like Washington and New York expecting temperatures well above normal.

Southern regions are also experiencing unusually warm weather, and could see temperatures in the '80s and '90s. Dallas-Fort Worth is likely to be at least in the low '90s, which would break a daily record.

## Biden and Trump both plan trips to the Mexico border Thursday, dueling for advantage on immigration

By SEUNG MIN KIM, COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump will make dueling trips to the U.S.-Mexico border on Thursday, as both candidates try to turn the nation's broken immigration system to their political advantage in an expected campaign rematch this year.

Biden will travel to Brownsville, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, an area that often sees large numbers of border crossings, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Monday. He will meet border agents and discuss the need for bipartisan legislation. It would be his second visit to the border as president. He traveled to El Paso in January last year.

"He wants to make sure he puts his message out there to the American people," Jean-Pierre said.

Trump, for his part, will head to Eagle Pass, Texas, about 325 miles or 520 kilometers away from Brownsville, another hotspot in the state-federal clash over border security, according to three people who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the plans.

Biden, speaking in New York on Monday, said he had planned to head to the border on Thursday and didn't know "my good friend apparently is going," too. The White House announcement of the trip came after Trump's plan to visit the border had been reported. The president declined to say whether he would meet with migrants on the trip.

The trips underscore immigration's central importance in the 2024 presidential race, for Republicans

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and increasingly for Democrats, particularly after congressional talks on a deal to rein in illegal migration collapsed.

Biden has excoriated Republicans for abandoning the bipartisan border deal after Trump came out in opposition to the plan to tighten asylum restrictions and create daily limits on border crossings. Trump, meanwhile, has dialed up his anti-immigrant rhetoric, suggesting migrants are poisoning the blood of Americans.

The number of people who are illegally crossing the U.S. border has been rising for years because of complicated reasons that include climate change, war and unrest in other nations, the economy, and cartels that see migration as a cash cow.

The administration has been pairing crackdowns at the border with increasing legal pathways for migrants designed to steer people into arriving by plane with sponsors, not illegally on foot to the border. But U.S. policy right now allows for migrants to claim asylum regardless of how they arrive. And the numbers of migrants flowing to the U.S.-Mexico border have far outpaced the capacity of an immigration system that has not been substantially updated in decades. Arrests for illegal crossings fell by half in January, but there were record highs in December.

Trump's campaign says Biden's plan to visit the border is a sign that the president is on the defensive over immigration and the issue is a problem for his reelection effort. Trump's campaign press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, said Biden was chasing Trump and is responsible for the "worst immigration crisis in history."

Biden's camp says it's House Republicans who are on the defensive, after Trump flatly said he told GOP legislators to tank the bill that would have funded border agents and other Homeland Security authorities. The New York Times first reported the travel.

While he continues to criticize Republicans for legislative inaction, Biden is considering executive actions to help discourage migrants from coming to the U.S. Among the actions under consideration by Biden is invoking authorities outlined in Section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which give a president broad leeway to block entry of certain immigrants into the United States if it would be "detrimental" to the national interest.

But without changes to law, any executive action taken by the administration that cracks down on border crossings is likely to be challenged in court. The White House has informed some lawmakers on Capitol Hill that Biden will not announce an executive order on immigration during his border trip on Thursday, according to a person familiar with the conversations.

"There is no executive action that would have done what the Senate bipartisan proposal would have done," Jean-Pierre said. "Politics got in the way."

According to an AP-NORC poll in January, concerns about immigration climbed to 35% from 27% last year. Most Republicans, 55%, say the government needs to focus on immigration in 2024, while 22% of Democrats listed immigration as a priority. That's up from 45% and 14%, respectively, compared with December 2022.

Trump is again making immigration the centerpiece of his campaign, seizing on images of migrants sleeping in police stations and in hangars as proof that Biden's policies have failed. He's made frequent trips to the border as a candidate and president.

During his 2016 campaign, he traveled to Laredo, Texas in July 2015 for a visit that highlighted how his views on immigration helped him win media attention and support from the GOP base. Since leaving office he's been to the border at least twice, including to pick up the endorsement of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott.

Biden, meanwhile, visited the border only once, and he did not come into contact with any migrants. Rather, he inspected Customs and Border Protection facilities and walked a stretch of border wall. During negotiations on the border bill, he suggested he'd shut down asylum if given the power, a remarkable shift to the right for Democrats who are increasingly concerned by the same scenes of migrants encampments, and are asking the administration to speed up work authorizations so families who have arrived can at least seek employment.

The failure of the border bill this month has caused the Homeland Security Department, which controls



the border, to assess its priorities and shift money between its agencies to plug holes. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is considering slashing detention beds to 22,000 from 38,000 and reducing deportation flights. That would mean more migrants released into the U.S. who arrive at the border.

## **Ex-FBI informant charged with lying about Bidens to remain jailed while he awaits trial, judge rules**

By AMY TAXIN and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A former FBI informant charged with fabricating a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme involving President Joe Biden's family must remain behind bars while he awaits trial, a judge ruled Monday, reversing an earlier order releasing the man.

U.S. District Judge Otis Wright II in Los Angeles ordered Alexander Smirnov's detention days after he was freed by another judge, then re-arrested while meeting with his lawyers at their offices in Las Vegas. Wright said he did not believe there were release conditions he could set that would guarantee that the man who has claimed to have ties to Russian intelligence would not flee the country.

"There is nothing garden variety about this case," Wright said. "I have not changed my mind. This man will be remanded pending trial."

Smirnov, 43, pleaded not guilty to the charges accusing him of falsely telling his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid President Biden and Hunter Biden \$5 million each around 2015. The claim became central to the Republican impeachment inquiry of President Biden in Congress.

A different judge had released him from jail on electronic GPS monitoring after his Feb. 14 arrest, but Wright ordered him to be taken back into custody last week after prosecutors asked to reconsider Smirnov's detention. Wright said in a written order unsealed Friday that Smirnov's lawyers' efforts to free him were "likely to facilitate his absconding from the United States."

In urging the judge to keep him in jail, prosecutors revealed Smirnov has reported to the FBI having extensive contact with officials associated with Russian intelligence, and claimed that such officials were involved in passing a story to him about Hunter Biden. Prosecutors said Smirnov had been planning to travel to multiple countries days after his Feb. 14 arrest to meet with foreign intelligence contacts.

Prosecutor Leo Wise told the judge Monday that Smirnov could not be trusted to tell the truth to those monitoring his whereabouts if released from jail, noting that he was pushing a new false story about Hunter Biden during a meeting with investigators as recently as September. Prosecutors have accused Smirnov in court papers of "actively peddling new lies that could impact U.S. elections."

Wise said the reason Smirnov was re-arrested at his lawyers' offices in Las Vegas was that he had nine firearms at his home.

Smirnov, who holds dual Israeli-U.S. citizenship, is charged by the same Justice Department special counsel — Delaware U.S. Attorney David Weiss — who has separately filed gun and tax charges against Hunter Biden.

Smirnov was escorted into the courtroom Monday wearing an off-white jail jumpsuit and black rimmed eyeglasses and was seated at the table with his lawyers. Defense attorney David Chesnoff told reporters outside the courthouse after the hearing that he plans to go to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to continue to push for his release.

Defense attorneys said Smirnov has no criminal history and has strong ties to the United States, including a longtime significant other who lives in Las Vegas. Chesnoff told the judge that Smirnov was being held largely in isolation with access to a phone only once or twice a week, and that he was needed to assist in his own defense.

"He intends to vigorously defend these allegations, having never been in trouble his entire life," Chesnoff said.

In his ruling last week releasing Smirnov on GPS monitoring, U.S. Magistrate Judge Daniel Albregts in Las Vegas said he was concerned about the defendant's access to what prosecutors estimate is \$6 mil-

lion in funds, but noted that federal guidelines required him to fashion "the least restrictive conditions" ahead of trial.

In an emergency petition with the 9th Circuit appeals court, Smirnov's lawyers said Wright did not have the authority to order Smirnov to be taken back into custody. The defense also criticized what it described as "biased and prejudicial statements" from Wright insinuating that Smirnov's lawyers were acting improperly by advocating for his release.

The appeals court on Sunday evening denied Smirnov's emergency petition, refusing to block Monday's hearing or assign the case to a different judge.

Smirnov had been an informant for more than a decade when he made the explosive allegations about the Bidens in June 2020, after "expressing bias" about Joe Biden as a presidential candidate, prosecutors said. Smirnov had only routine business dealings with Burisma starting in 2017, according to court documents. No evidence has emerged that Joe Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

While his identity wasn't publicly known before the indictment, Smirnov's claims have played a major part in the Republican effort in Congress to investigate the president and his family, and helped spark what is now a House impeachment inquiry into Biden. Republicans pursuing investigations of the Bidens demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the unverified allegations, though they acknowledged they couldn't confirm if they were true.

## **Hungary's parliament ratifies Sweden's NATO bid, clearing the final obstacle to membership**

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Hungary's parliament voted Monday to ratify Sweden's bid to join NATO, ending more than 18 months of delays that frustrated the alliance as it sought to expand in response to Russia's war in Ukraine.

The vote, which passed with 188 votes for and six against, was the culmination of months of wrangling by Hungary's allies to convince its nationalist government to lift its block on Sweden's membership. The government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán submitted the protocols for approving Sweden's entry into NATO in July 2022, but the matter stalled in parliament over opposition by governing party lawmakers.

Hungary's decision paved the way for the second expansion of NATO's ranks in a year after both Sweden and Finland applied to join the alliance in May 2022 following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine — an assault that was purportedly intended to prevent further NATO expansion.

Unanimous support among NATO members is required to admit new countries, and Hungary was the last of the alliance's 31 members to give its backing since Turkey ratified the request last month.

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said his country was "now leaving 200 years of neutrality and nonalignment behind us."

"It is a big step, we must take that seriously. But it is also a very natural step that we are taking. NATO membership means that we've found a new home within a large number of democracies which work together for peace and freedom," he told a news conference in Stockholm.

Orbán, a right-wing populist who has forged close ties with Russia, has said that criticism of Hungary's democracy by Swedish politicians soured relations between the two countries and led to reluctance among lawmakers in his Fidesz party.

But addressing lawmakers before the vote, Orbán said: "Sweden and Hungary's military cooperation and Sweden's NATO accession strengthen Hungary's security."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told The Associated Press that the vote "makes NATO stronger, Sweden safer and all of us more secure."

Stoltenberg said Sweden brings with it capable armed forces and a first-class defense industry, and it is spending at least 2% of national gross domestic product on defense, which is NATO's target level.

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The vote "also demonstrates that NATO's door is open" and that Russian President Vladimir Putin "did not succeed in his attempt to close NATO's door," he said.

On Monday, Orbán criticized Hungary's European Union and NATO allies for pressuring his government in recent months to move forward on Sweden's request to be part of the alliance.

"Hungary is a sovereign country. It does not tolerate being dictated by others, whether it be the content of its decisions or their timing," he said.

Last weekend, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators visited Hungary and announced it would submit a joint resolution to Congress condemning Hungary's alleged democratic backsliding and urging Orbán's government to allow Sweden into NATO.

A presidential signature, which is needed to formally endorse the approval of Sweden's NATO bid, was expected within a few days.

In the U.S., White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre urged the Hungarian government to quickly complete the process of bringing Sweden into the alliance.

"Having Sweden as a NATO ally will make the United States even safer," she said, speaking aboard Air Force One as President Joe Biden flew to New York for an appearance.

Kristersson, Sweden's prime minister, met last week with Orbán in Hungary's capital, where they appeared to reach a decisive reconciliation after months of diplomatic tensions.

Following their meeting, the leaders announced the conclusion of a defense industry agreement that will include Hungary's purchase of four Swedish-made JAS 39 Gripen jets and the extension of a service contract for its existing Gripen fleet.

Orbán said the additional fighter jets "will significantly increase our military capabilities and further strengthen our role abroad" and will improve Hungary's ability to participate in joint NATO operations.

"To be a member of NATO together with another country means we are ready to die for each other," Orbán said. "A deal on defense and military capacities helps to reconstruct the trust between the two countries."

Robert Dalsjö, a senior analyst with the Swedish Defense Research Agency, told the AP on Friday that Hungary's decision to finally lift its opposition came only after Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, voted in January to ratify Stockholm's bid.

After becoming the last NATO holdout with the Turkish vote, Orbán had to show some results for his government's delays, Dalsjö said.

"In hiding behind Erdogan's back, Orban could play, do some pirouettes," he said. "Then when Erdogan shifted, Orban wasn't really prepared for adjusting his position, and he needed something to show that could legitimize his turnaround. And that turned out to be the Gripen deal."

Monday's vote was just one matter on a busy agenda for lawmakers in the Hungarian parliament. A vote was also held on accepting the resignation of President Katalin Novák, who stepped down earlier this month in a scandal over her decision to pardon to a man convicted of covering up a string of child sexual abuses.

After accepting Novák's resignation, lawmakers confirmed Tamás Sulyok, the president of Hungary's Constitutional Court, as the country's new president. He is set to formally take office on March 5.

## Primary apathy in Michigan: Democrats, GOP struggle as supporters mull whether to even vote

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Rev. Steve Bland Jr. remembers the massive get-out-the-vote effort he helped mobilize four years ago, when pastors and community leaders spread out across Detroit neighborhoods, made phone calls and worked around the clock to encourage people to vote.

He's not seeing that kind of enthusiasm this time around.

Madeleine Byrne, a 25-year-old from Bloomfield Hills in Oakland County, a wealthy suburban enclave that proved pivotal in Michigan's swing back toward Democrats in recent years, said she likes how former President Donald Trump has "put America first" but has misgivings about supporting him in 2024.

"I think he causes fights where they aren't necessary," she said.

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In Michigan, a state that both major parties say they must have to win the White House in 2024, a cloud of apathy has settled over the electorate. Even with crucial races for the U.S. Senate and Congress also on the ballot, genuine enthusiasm is hard to find. The state's voters are poised to cast ballots in their respective primaries on Tuesday, but the prospect looms that they will be left with the same choices for president in November that they considered four years ago.

That means the biggest task for candidates may be inspiring Michigan voters to care.

"A good quarter of the people I talk to aren't sure if they'll vote at all," said Lori Goldman, who founded a group called "Fems for Dems" to help drive up voter turnout for Biden in Oakland County four years ago. "A lot of people are just like, 'I'm not voting. I'm not doing it.'"

Michigan Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson said Monday that over 1 million people had already cast their primary ballots, taking advantage of new voting laws that allow for nine days of early, in-person voting. A total of 2.3 million people — or 30% of registered voters — participated in the 2020 primary.

The early vote totals may include a number of "uncommitted" ballots from Democrats unhappy with Biden's support for Israel in its response to the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas. Democratic Rep. Rashida Tlaib has urged voters to mark their ballots that way on Tuesday to send a message to Biden and other Democrats.

Among Republicans, Trump's rallies draw enthusiastic crowds, and he has racked up decisive wins so far in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Carolina and the U.S. Virgin Islands. But it remains unclear whether his support extends beyond the core of true believers who have helped him maintain his grip on the GOP. Surveys by AP VoteCast have shown that some Republicans, especially college-educated and moderate voters, have misgivings about the former president.

For voters such as Byrne, in politically competitive areas like Oakland County, the unease sometimes takes the form of Trump fatigue. Asked how she feels about the choice that's looming in this year's presidential contest, Byrne wrinkles her face.

"Honestly, I've been thinking about whether I want to vote at all."

"We as Americans have this great privilege and, as a woman, I'm aware we've had it for only 100 years," she said. "But given our circumstances, with the choices that we do have, I think it's difficult to actually make a choice. And so, I wonder if I will."

In 2020, voter turnout surged by 14% compared to the previous election, eclipsing the record set in 2008 for the highest number of votes cast in Michigan. The trend continued in 2022 when the state registered its highest midterm election turnout ever.

Young Michigan voters have stepped up in recent years. In 2022, Michigan saw the highest youth voter turnout rate nationwide at 36.5%, surpassing the estimated national youth turnout of 23% by over 13 percentage points, according to CIRCLE, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts University.

But the excitement that led to hours-long lines on college campuses across Michigan appears to have died down.

"You're hearing people say that maybe they're going to stay out of the election or they don't know who you're going to vote for," said Vrunda Patel, a junior at the University of Michigan.

Patel and fellow University of Michigan Democrats met with California Rep. Sara Jacobs, part of a wave of recent Biden surrogates sent in to drum up enthusiasm, at an Ann Arbor coffee shop to strategize for the upcoming election. The discussion mainly revolved around motivating college students to vote, with one student saying bluntly: "No one I talk to is excited to vote for Joe Biden this election."

Jacobs offered reassurance.

"It's a long way away from the election," she said. "With the 2012 Obama campaign, this far out, Obama's poll numbers were bad. People were not that excited. This is a normal progression in a reelection."

Several students mentioned the idea of "uncommitted" votes in the Tuesday primary. Double-digit numbers could spell trouble for Biden in the general election.

"I'd rather the president be hearing how people feel now rather than in October," said Democratic Rep. Debbie Dingell, who has spoken with the president about his difficulties in Michigan.

Biden's campaign is acutely aware of its enthusiasm problem. Several top surrogates, including Vice



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President Kamala Harris and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, have trekked to Michigan this month. Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a co-chair of his reelection campaign, is already holding get-out-the-vote events.

Whitmer, who won reelection by almost 11% in 2022, has publicly and privately pushed the president to lean into his effort to defend abortion rights. Her own campaign benefited directly from a voter-led ballot proposal enshrining abortion rights in the state constitution.

Trump appears to have the luxury of looking to November. His supporters lined up for nearly a mile to hear him speak at an Oakland County event this month, and the rules of the GOP primary are tilted heavily in his favor.

"If we win Michigan, we win the election," Trump told the enthusiastic crowd.

But Trump's loyal core has not translated into wins in recent years. After winning the state by only 11,000 votes in 2016, he lost it by nearly 154,000 votes just four years later. In the 2022 midterms, all three of the statewide Republican candidates he endorsed were crushed by Democratic incumbents.

Michigan's Republican Party may not be in position to help much in the fall. Dueling pro-Trump factions are now claiming to run the state party ahead of a March 2 presidential nominating convention during which 39 of the state's 55 delegates will be awarded.

Trump, meanwhile, is trying to broaden his appeal to voters disillusioned with Biden and the Democrats. His campaign points to Biden's faltering poll numbers with Black adults and what he characterizes as advantages on issues like immigration and the economy. He traveled to Michigan last year to court autoworkers, although the United Auto Workers union recently gave its endorsement to Biden.

Recent AP polling has shown that more U.S. adults are feeling slightly better about the economy, but so far those numbers have not translated into higher approval ratings for the president. If that disconnect persists, it could pose a challenge in places like Michigan.

Nearly 78% of Detroit's population is Black, and the city has long been a Democratic stronghold. That isn't likely to change, and yet frustration is running high among Black voters there. Few people expect to see the long lines of people who waited patiently in 2008 and 2012 to cast their ballots for Barack Obama, or even four years ago for Biden, his former vice president.

The current lack of enthusiasm won't stop the Rev. Bland from once again working with pastors across Detroit to encourage voting. Bland got attention in 2020 with his statement that the Black community had gone from "from picking cotton to picking presidents," and he remains steadfast in his determination to replicate that success.

"Apathy always is high when information is low," he said. "So if we have informed people and we spend time talking, informing them about what's at stake, then I think that's what will bring the energy."

## **Donald Trump appeals \$454 million judgment in New York civil fraud case**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump has appealed his \$454 million New York civil fraud judgment, challenging a judge's finding that he lied about his wealth as he grew the real estate empire that launched him to stardom and the presidency.

The former president's lawyers filed notices of appeal Monday asking the state's mid-level appeals court to overturn Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 verdict in Attorney General Letitia James' lawsuit and reverse staggering penalties that threaten to wipe out Trump's cash reserves.

Trump's lawyers wrote in court papers that they're asking the appeals court to decide whether Engoron "committed errors of law and/or fact" and whether he abused his discretion or "acted in excess" of his jurisdiction. A notice of appeal starts the appeals process in New York. Trump's lawyers will have an opportunity to expand on their grievances in subsequent court filings.

Trump wasn't required to pay his penalty or post a bond in order to appeal, and appealing won't automatically halt enforcement of the judgment.

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The Republican presidential front-runner has until March 25 to secure a stay, a legal mechanism pausing collection while he appeals. Trump would receive an automatic stay if he puts up money, assets or an appeal bond covering what he owes. Trump's lawyers could also ask the appeals court to grant a stay without obtaining a bond or with a bond for a lower amount.

There was no indication on the court docket Monday that Trump had already posted an appeal bond or asked for a stay. His lawyers did not immediately respond to a reporter's questions Monday asking if he had posted a bond or if he was in the process of securing one.

In a statement issued through a spokesperson, Trump lawyer Alina Habba addressed only the appeal itself, saying: "We trust that the Appellate Division will overturn this egregious fine and take the necessary steps to restore the public faith in New York's legal system."

Messages seeking comment were left with the New York attorney general's office and a spokesperson for the state's court system.

Engoron found that Trump, his company and top executives, including his sons Eric and Donald Trump Jr., schemed for years to deceive banks and insurers by inflating his wealth on financial statements used to secure loans and make deals. Among other penalties, the judge put strict limitations on the ability of Trump's company, the Trump Organization, to do business.

The appeal ensures that the legal fight over Trump's business practices will persist into the thick of the presidential primary season, and likely beyond, as he tries to clinch the Republican presidential nomination in his quest to retake the White House.

If upheld, Engoron's ruling will force Trump to give up a sizable chunk of his fortune. Engoron ordered Trump to pay \$355 million in penalties, but with interest the total has grown to nearly \$454 million. That total will increase by nearly \$112,000 per day until he pays.

Trump maintains that he is worth several billion dollars and testified last year that he had about \$400 million in cash, in addition to properties and other investments. James, a Democrat, told ABC News that if Trump is unable to pay, she will seek to seize some of his assets.

Trump had vowed to appeal and his lawyers had been laying groundwork for months by objecting frequently to Engoron's handling of the trial.

Trump said Engoron's decision, the costliest consequence of his recent legal troubles, was "election interference" and "weaponization against a political opponent." Trump complained he was being punished for "having built a perfect company, great cash, great buildings, great everything."

Trump's lawyer Christopher Kise said after the verdict that the former president was confident the appeals court "will ultimately correct the innumerable and catastrophic errors made by a trial court untethered to the law or to reality."

If the decision stands, Habba said, "it will serve as a signal to every single American that New York is no longer open for business."

Trump wasn't able to appeal the decision immediately because the clerk's office at Engoron's courthouse had to file paperwork known as a judgment to make it official. That was done on Friday, starting a 30-day window for Trump to pay up or file an appeal and seek a stay.

If Trump were to pay the penalty at this stage instead of obtaining a stay, the money would be held in a court escrow account while the appeal plays out. If the court overturns the verdict, the money would be returned to Trump.

During the trial, Trump's lawyers accused Engoron of "tangible and overwhelming" bias. They've also objected to the legal mechanics of James' lawsuit. Trump contends the law she sued him under is a consumer-protection statute that's normally used to rein in businesses that rip off customers.

Trump's lawyers have already gone to the Appellate Division at least 10 times to challenge Engoron's prior rulings, including during the trial in an unsuccessful bid to reverse a gag order and \$15,000 in fines for violations after Trump made a disparaging and false social media post about a key court staffer.

Trump's lawyers have long argued that some of the allegations against him are barred by the statute of limitations, contending that Engoron failed to comply with an Appellate Division ruling last year that he narrow the scope of the trial to weed out outdated accusations.

The Appellate Division could either uphold Engoron's verdict, reduce or modify the penalty or overturn the decision entirely. If Trump is unsuccessful at the Appellate Division, he can ask the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals, to consider taking his case.

The appeal is one of Trump's many legal challenges. He has been indicted on criminal charges four times in the last year. He is accused in Georgia and Washington, D.C., of plotting to overturn his 2020 election loss to Democrat Joe Biden. In Florida, he is charged with hoarding classified documents.

He is scheduled to go on trial March 25 in Manhattan accused of falsifying business records related to hush money paid to porn actor Stormy Daniels on his behalf.

In January, a jury ordered Trump to pay \$83.3 million to writer E. Jean Carroll for defaming her after she accused him in 2019 of sexually assaulting her in a Manhattan department store in the 1990s. That's on top of the \$5 million a jury awarded Carroll in a related trial last year.

## RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel will leave post on March 8 as Trump moves to install new loyalists

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Republican National Committee Chair Ronna McDaniel will leave her post on March 8, having been forced out of the GOP's national leadership as Donald Trump moves toward another presidential nomination and asserts control over the party.

McDaniel announced her decision in a statement on Monday morning.

"I have decided to step aside at our Spring Training on March 8 in Houston to allow our nominee to select a Chair of their choosing," McDaniel said in the statement. "The RNC has historically undergone change once we have a nominee and it has always been my intention to honor that tradition."

The move was not a surprise. Trump earlier in the month announced his preference for North Carolina GOP Chair Michael Whatley, a little-known veteran operative focused in recent years on the prospect of voter fraud, to replace McDaniel. Trump also picked his daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, to serve as committee co-chair.

The 50-year-old McDaniel was a strong advocate for the former president and helped reshape the GOP in his image. But Trump's MAGA movement increasingly blamed McDaniel for the former president's 2020 loss and the party's failures to meet expectations in races the last two years.

In addition to McDaniel, RNC co-chair Drew McKissick said he would also leave.

The leadership shakeup comes as the GOP shifts from the primary phase to the general election of the 2024 presidential contest. While former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley has remained in the race, Trump has won every state in the primary calendar and could clinch the Republican nomination by mid-March.

Haley told reporters in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on Monday that the RNC was turning into "Donald Trump's playpen."

"The idea that they would be choosing a chair and a director before a primary is a massive control move by Donald Trump," she said.

Trump cannot make leadership changes without the formal backing of the RNC's 168-member governing body, but McDaniel had little choice but to acquiesce to Trump's wishes given his status as the party's likely presidential nominee and his popularity with party activists. RNC members from across the country are expected to approve Trump's decision in March.

McDaniel was the the committee's longest-serving leader since the Civil War. The niece of Utah Sen. Mitt Romney and a former chair of the Michigan GOP, she was Trump's hand-picked choice to lead the RNC chair shortly after the 2016 election. Her profile as a suburban mother was also considered especially helpful as the party struggled to appeal to suburban women in the Trump era.

McDaniel easily beat back criticism from opponents within the "Make America Great Again" movement to win reelection as party chair a year ago. But her opponents' voices are carrying more weight. The party is also struggling to raise money. The RNC reported \$8.7 million in the bank at the beginning of February compared to the Democratic National Committee's \$24 million.

While the new leadership structure, effectively a Trump campaign takeover of the RNC, is widely expected to be embraced by members, Henry Barbour, a national committeeman from Mississippi, has been circulating a pair of draft resolutions — one pushing to keep the committee neutral until Trump is officially the presidential nominee and another that would bar the committee from paying his legal bills.

Lara Trump has suggested that GOP voters would likely want the RNC to cover her father-in-law's legal bills given that they see the 91 felony counts against him as an example of political persecution. It's unclear whether the RNC's 168 members will eventually agree.

Chris LaCivita, Trump's senior campaign adviser who will run day-to-day operations at the RNC, has said the organization won't use party funds to pay Trump's legal bills.

Trump, meanwhile, also wants allies who echo his false theories of voter fraud. That's a key reason why Trump is believed to have tapped Whatley, currently the North Carolina GOP chair and general counsel to the RNC.

Trump won North Carolina in 2020 by just over 1 percentage point and the state is expected to be highly competitive again this year.

Whatley has taken credit for hiring an army of lawyers ahead of the 2020 election, which he has said stymied Democratic efforts to commit voter fraud that year. There was no evidence of any intentional efforts to commit widespread voter fraud in multiple investigations and court cases.

Whatley also has strong connections to the political establishment. His resume includes experience as an oil and gas lobbyist and links to establishment figures like George W. Bush and former Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C.

## **Actor Gérard Depardieu faces another sexual assault complaint as #MeToo echoes through French cinema**

By JOHN LEICESTER and BARBARA SURK Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French actor Gérard Depardieu faces another complaint of sexual assault, this time from a movie decorator who alleges he groped her during filming in 2021.

In the complaint to the Paris prosecutor's office, the 53-year-old decorator alleges that Depardieu grabbed her and kneaded her waist, stomach and breasts during filming for "Les Volets verts," or "The Green Shutters," lawyer Carine Durrieu Diebolt said Monday. Other people intervened to stop him, the lawyer added.

Two lawyers for the 75-year-old Depardieu did not immediately respond to emailed requests for comment, and their offices said they weren't available to talk by phone.

The latest accusations came after French actor Judith Godrèche called on France's film industry to "face the truth" on sexual violence and physical abuse during a live broadcast Friday of the Cesar Awards ceremony, France's version of the Oscars.

Godrèche, who recently accused two film directors of rape and sexual abuse when she was a teenager, condemned French cinema for its silence over abuses in the industry.

"We can decide that men accused of rape no longer rule the (French) cinema," Godrèche said to a hushed audience. "Let's not embody heroines on screen only to find ourselves hiding in the woods in real life."

Depardieu has also been accused by more than a dozen other women of harassing, groping or sexually assaulting them. He was handed preliminary rape and sexual assault charges in 2020 following allegations from actor Charlotte Arnould.

Depardieu denies wrongdoing. In an open letter in October, he said: "I have never, ever abused a woman."

Durrieu Diebolt said that the statement was traumatic for her client and led her to file suit against him.

Depardieu was long seen as a national icon in France. He has been a global ambassador for French film and enjoyed international fame with several roles in Hollywood.

Despite the allegations against him, his fame has won Depardieu words of praise from the highest echelons of the French government.

"He makes France proud," President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview with TV channel France 5 that was broadcast Dec. 20, days after a documentary aired on French television in which 16 women ac-



cused Depardieu of harassing, groping or sexually assaulting them.

In January, Macron tried to walk back his remarks in Depardieu's defense, saying that he should have mentioned his unequivocal support for victims of abuse.

"I haven't said enough how important it is for women who are victims of abuse to speak out, and how crucial this fight is to me," Macron said, while standing by his defense of Depardieu's presumed innocence.

French cultural minister Rachida Dati on Friday criticized the country's cinema for "collectively turning a blind eye for decades" to sexual violence.

"This should be the beginning of profound soul-searching for French cinema," Dati said in an interview with an online magazine, The French Film. "There is no impunity in the name of art."

## Majority of countries argue Israel violated international law in last historic hearing at UN court

By MOLLY QUELL Associated Press

THE HAGUE (AP) — The United Nations' highest court on Monday wrapped up historic proceedings into the legality of Israel's 57-year occupation of lands sought by Palestinians for a future state, with most voices at the hearing arguing against the Israeli government.

Over six days, the International Court of Justice heard from an unprecedented number of countries and the majority argued Israel was violating international law and called for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

"The real obstacle to peace is obvious — the deepening occupation by Israel of the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and failure to implement the two-state vision, Israel and Palestine living side by side," Turkey's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Yildiz said.

The hearings addressed a request by the U.N. General Assembly for a non-binding opinion on the legality of Israel's policies. The court says it will issue its opinion in "due course." On average, advisory opinions are released six months after oral proceedings.

Fiji was one of a handful of countries to argue that the court should refuse the request and directly mentioned the Hamas attacks that set off the war in Gaza and left about 1,200 people dead while Hamas militants also took nearly 250 others hostage.

"The events of 7 October 2023 have shown us what could happen if there were a complete and unconditional withdrawal without the necessary arrangements in place to guarantee the security of Israel," Filipino Tarakinikini said on behalf of the South Pacific Island nation.

The United States also cautioned the court against issuing an opinion, calling for an immediate withdrawal from the territories. Acting State Department legal adviser Richard Visek said last week the judges should not seek to resolve the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict "through an advisory opinion addressed to questions focusing on the acts of only one party."

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki had previously urged the 15-judge panel to uphold the Palestinian right to self-determination and to declare "that the Israeli occupation is illegal and must end immediately, totally and unconditionally."

Though the hearings were held against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war, which has killed more than 29,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, it pre-dated this round of conflict and focused instead on Israel's open-ended occupation of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem.

Late last month, the court ordered Israel to do all it can to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in its military offensive in Gaza. South Africa also filed a separate case accusing Israel of genocide because of its actions in the Strip, a charge that Israel denied.

Israel rejects accusations that its treatment of Palestinians amounts to apartheid and has accused U.N. bodies and international tribunals of bias.

It did not participate in the oral proceedings but, in a five-page written submission, Israel said the questions put to the court are prejudiced and "fail to recognize Israel's right and duty to protect its citizens."

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. The Pal-

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estonians seek all three areas for an independent state. Israel considers the West Bank to be a disputed territory, whose future should be decided in negotiations.

The peace process has repeatedly stalled because of Palestinian attacks, Israel's expansion of settlements in occupied territory and the inability of the two sides to agree on issues like final borders, the status of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees.

In 2004, the court said that a separation barrier Israel built through east Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank was "contrary to international law." It also called on Israel to immediately halt construction. Israel has ignored the ruling.

## **Sideways moon landing cuts mission short, private US lunar lander will stop working Tuesday**

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A private U.S. lunar lander is expected to stop working Tuesday, its mission cut short after landing sideways near the south pole of the moon.

Intuitive Machines, the Houston company that built and flew the spacecraft, said Monday it will continue to collect data until sunlight no longer shines on the solar panels. Based on the position of Earth and the moon, officials expect that to happen Tuesday morning. That's two to three days short of the week or so that NASA and other customers had been counting on.

The lander, named Odysseus, is the first U.S. spacecraft to land on the moon in more than 50 years, carrying experiments for NASA, the main sponsor. But it came in too fast last Thursday and the foot of one of its six legs caught on the surface, causing it to tumble over, according to company officials.

Based on photos from NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter flying overhead, Odysseus landed within a mile or so (1.5 kilometers) of its intended target near the Malapert A crater, just 185 miles or so (300 kilometers) from the moon's south pole.

The LRO photos from 56 miles (90 kilometers) up are the only ones showing the lander on the surface, but as little more than a spot in the grainy images. A camera-ejecting experiment by Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, to capture images of the lander as they both descended, was called off shortly before touchdown because of a last-minute navigation issue.

According to NASA, the lander ended up in a small, degraded crater with a 12-degree slope. That's the closest a spacecraft has ever come to the south pole, an area of interest because of suspected frozen water in the permanently shadowed craters there.

NASA, which plans to land astronauts in this region in the next few years, paid Intuitive Machines \$118 million to deliver six experiments to the surface. Other customers also had items on board.

Instead of landing upright, the 14-foot (4.3-meter) Odysseus came down on its side, hampering communication with Earth. Some antennas were covered up by the toppled lander, and the ones still exposed ended up near the ground, resulting in spotty communications. The solar panels also ended up much closer to the surface than anticipated, less than ideal in the hilly terrain. Even under the best of circumstances, Odysseus only had a week to operate on the surface before the long lunar night set in.

Since the 1960s, only the U.S., Russia, China, India and Japan have successfully pulled off moon landings, and only the U.S. with crews. Japan's lander ended up on the wrong side, too, just last month.

Despite its slanted landing, Intuitive Machines became the first private business to join the elite group. Another U.S. company, Astrobotic Technology, gave it a try last month, but didn't make it to the moon because of a fuel leak.

Intuitive Machines almost failed, too. Ground teams did not turn on the switch for the lander's navigating lasers before the Feb. 15 liftoff from Florida. The oversight was not discovered until Odysseus was circling the moon, forcing flight controllers to rely on a NASA laser-navigating device that was on board merely as an experiment.

As it turned out, NASA's test lasers guided Odysseus to a close to bull's-eye landing, resulting in the first moon landing by a U.S. spacecraft since the Apollo program.

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Twelve Apollo astronauts walked on the moon from 1969 through 1972. While NASA went on to put an occasional satellite around the moon, the U.S. did not launch another moon-landing mission until last month. Astrobotic's failed flight was the first under NASA's program to promote commercial deliveries to the moon.

Both Intuitive Machines and Astrobotic hold NASA contracts for more moon landings.

## Trump is winning big with his base, but there's no sign that he's broadening support

By AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX, LINLEY SANDERS and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump appears close to invincible in the Republican primaries and caucuses, but despite his commanding victories, the front-runner's strength among general election voters remains unclear.

AP VoteCast shows that Trump, the former president, has galvanized the core of the GOP electorate in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. His voters so far are overwhelmingly white, mostly older than 50 and generally without a college degree. This, however, is very different than the electorate he could face in November, when he'd have to appeal to a far more diverse group and possibly win over supporters of former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley. Her pull has been limited in the GOP primaries — but her candidacy may foreshadow problems for Trump.

AP VoteCast reveals that a large portion of Trump's opposition within the Republican primaries is comprised of voters who abandoned him before this year.

It also highlights a Republican party that has made an about-face on central policy issues, favoring some big government programs and retreating from commitments abroad.

AP VoteCast is a series of surveys conducted among 1,597 Republican caucus voters in Iowa, 1,989 New Hampshire voters who took part in the Republican primary and 2,466 Republican primary voters in South Carolina. The surveys were conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Haley's Coalition: Anti-Trump Republicans and 2020 Biden Voters

Haley was Trump's lone major challenger by South Carolina, but the gauntlet of the early states highlighted the limitations of her campaign pitch.

Some of Haley's supporters in New Hampshire and South Carolina were voters who told AP VoteCast they identified as Democrats or independents. More importantly, these voters tended to have backed Biden in 2020. In South Carolina and Iowa, about 4 in 10 Haley voters supported Biden nearly four years ago. Roughly half of her New Hampshire voters voted for Biden.

The challenge for Haley is that this group is a minority within the GOP. They constituted anywhere between 11% and 24% of GOP voters in each of the three contests, putting a low ceiling on her support. Many of Haley's remaining supporters in each state said they voted third party or didn't vote in the 2020 general election, also a distinct minority of voters in GOP nominating contests.

The Republican electorate remains overwhelmingly white

So far, almost all of Trump's backing has come from white voters, who made up the vast majority of the electorate in the first few head-to-head Republican contests — even in diverse South Carolina. Those results give us few clues about whether Trump can cut into the margins that Democrats have traditionally enjoyed with Black and Hispanic voters.

Trump's performance shows his resilience among voting groups that were strongly behind him in previous elections. Nearly 6 in 10 of the votes he received in 2020 came from white people without a college degree, a margin he exceeded in the first head-to-head primaries and caucuses. More than 6 in 10 of his voters in the early states were also over 50. Trump also maintained high levels of support with evangelical Christians and people living in small towns and rural areas, groups that have significant weight within Republican primaries but comprise a smaller share of the general electorate.

The new Republican Party

It's official: The age of a small-government, hawkish Republican Party appears to have ended. Instead,

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Republican primary voters strongly support domestic policies that require significant government investment, like maintaining the current age of 67 for Social Security eligibility and building a border wall between the U.S. and Mexico. And they're showing less enthusiasm for intervention in conflicts with traditional U.S. rivals like Russia.

In the lead-up to the primaries, Republican candidates clashed over these issues, testing whether long-held GOP positions like shrinking the size of entitlement programs and taking a strong hand in foreign conflicts still resonate with the party's base. The result of the first head-to-head Republican contests shows how Trump has shaped today's Republican Party.

Trump's stances resonate strongly with his base: According to the three surveys, roughly 7 in 10 Trump voters support an end to continued aid to Ukraine, approximately 8 in 10 want to preserve Social Security as-is and about 9 in 10 want a wall along the U.S. southern border.

Trump's hardest tests are yet to come

Trump has enjoyed a favorable audience in the Republican contests, one he won't be able to count on in November if he wins the nomination.

Roughly 7 in 10 of the voters in the primaries and caucuses identified as conservative. But in 2020, conservatives were less than 40% of the general electorate; the rest were roughly split between liberals and moderates. Just 36% of moderates voted for Trump in 2020 and only 8% of liberals did.

And some potential weak spots for Trump are already showing. At least 2 in 10 of the voters in South Carolina's Republican primary and the Iowa caucuses said they won't back Trump in November, while approximately 3 in 10 in New Hampshire felt that way.

In each of the early states, Trump either lost or split voters with a college degree to Haley. Nor were the suburbs – where the plurality of general election voters live – particularly welcoming to him in this year's GOP contests. He split the suburban vote with his opponents in Iowa and New Hampshire and won the suburbs in South Carolina by a smaller margin than in the state as a whole.

But those are just some of the challenges Trump will confront in the coming months – in the early states, anywhere between one-quarter and nearly 4 in 10 Republican voters say that he broke the law in one or more of the criminal cases against him.

## What recession? Professional forecasters raise expectations for US economy in 2024

NEW YORK (AP) — This year looks to be a much better one for the U.S. economy than business economists were forecasting just a few months ago, according to a survey released Monday.

The economy looks set to grow 2.2% this year after adjusting for inflation, according to the National Association for Business Economics. That's up from the 1.3% that economists from universities, businesses and investment firms predicted in the association's prior survey, which was conducted in November.

It's the latest signal of strength for an economy that's blasted through predictions of a recession. High interest rates meant to get inflation under control were supposed to drag down the economy, the thinking went. High rates put the brakes on the economy, such as by making mortgages and credit card bills more expensive, in hopes of starving inflation of its fuel.

But even with rates very high, the job market and U.S. household spending have remained remarkably resilient. That in turn has raised expectations going forward. Ellen Zentner, chief U.S. economist at Morgan Stanley and president of the NABE, said a wide range of factors are behind the 2024 upgrade, including spending by both the government and households.

Economists also more than doubled their estimates for the number of jobs gained across the economy this year, though it would still likely be down from the previous one.

Offering another boost is the fact that inflation has been cooling since its peak two summers ago. While prices are higher than consumers would like, inflation has slowed enough that most of the surveyed forecasters expect interest rate cuts to begin by mid-June.



Public frustration with inflation has become a central issue in President Joe Biden's re-election bid. Though measures of inflation have plummeted from their heights and are nearing the Federal Reserve's target level, many Americans remain unhappy that average prices are still about 19% higher than they were when Biden took office.

The Fed, which is in charge of setting short-term rates, has said it will likely cut them several times this year. That would relax the pressure on the economy, while goosing prices for stocks and other investments.

Of course, rate changes take a notoriously long time to snake through the economy and take full effect. That means past hikes, which began two years ago, could still ultimately tip the economy into a recession.

In its survey, the NABE said 41% of respondents cited high rates as the most significant risk to the economy. That was more than double any other response, including fears of a possible credit crunch or a broadening of the wars in Ukraine or the Middle East.

While the outlook for the U.S. economy remains bright, expectations for the international economy are less sanguine. On Monday, the head of the World Trade Organization warned that war, uncertainty and instability were weighing down the global economy and urged the bloc to embrace reforms.

Higher prices for food, energy and other essentials are stinging people's pockets and "fueling political frustration," said Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the WTO's director-general.

## Senate leaders likely to seek quick dismissal of Mayorkas impeachment case

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the third time in five years, senators will be sworn in as jurors for an impeachment trial. But the chamber is expected to spend far less time on the charges against Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas than the ones brought against former President Donald Trump — or maybe no time at all.

The Republican-controlled House impeached Mayorkas by a single vote margin on Feb. 13, recommending that Mayorkas be removed from office over his handling of the U.S.-Mexico border. With two articles of impeachment, the House charge that Mayorkas has "willfully and systematically" refused to enforce existing immigration laws and breached the public trust by lying to Congress and saying the border was secure.

Democrats say the charges amount to a policy dispute, not the "high crimes and misdemeanors" laid out as a bar for impeachment in the Constitution.

The 214-213 vote, a narrowly successful second try after the House had rejected the effort a week earlier, was the first time in nearly 150 years a Cabinet secretary had been impeached. And while the Senate is now obligated to consider the charges, Senate leaders have shown little interest in spending much time on the matter. Two-thirds of the Senate would be needed to convict Mayorkas, and not a single Democrat has signaled support for the impeachment push.

Still, there is a process that senators have to follow under the rules for impeachment, and all Democrats would likely have to stick together to dismiss the charges completely.

A look at next steps and the Senate's options once the Mayorkas impeachment moves across the Capitol:  
CONVENING AN IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

Under impeachment rules, a group of House managers — members who act as prosecutors and are appointed by the speaker — will deliver the impeachment charges by reading the articles on the Senate floor, usually after making a ceremonial walk across the Capitol with the articles in hand.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has not yet said when that will happen, but it could be as soon as this week, when the Senate returns to session after a two-week recess.

Senators will later be sworn in as jurors, likely the next day. The Senate must then issue a summons to the official who is being tried to inform them of the charges and ask for a written answer. But Mayorkas would not have to appear in the Senate at any point.

After that, the rules generally allow the Senate to decide how to proceed. Senate Majority Leader Chuck

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Schumer, D-N.Y., hasn't yet said what he will do, but he is expected to try and dismiss the trial in some manner, if he has the votes. Democrats control the Senate, 51-49.

## VOTING TO DISMISS THE CHARGES

If Schumer can muster a simple majority, Democrats could dismiss the trial outright or move to table the two articles, ending the House's effort and allowing the Senate to move on to other business.

Getting to 51 votes would require every single Democrat and the chamber's three Independents to vote to dismiss, or potentially fewer if any Republicans join them.

While several GOP senators have questioned the need for a trial, it's unclear whether any of them would go as far as to vote to dismiss the charges right at the start.

Some Republicans are vocally opposed to that approach. In a letter last week, Utah Sen. Mike Lee said in a letter to Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell that Democrats should not be able to "shirk their Constitutional duty."

But McConnell has little control over the process. If Democrats stick together and vote, they can dismiss the trial — only a simple majority is required.

In Trump's second impeachment shortly after the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., raised an objection that the trial was unconstitutional because Trump had already left office, effectively a move to dismiss it. Most Republicans voted in support of Paul's objection.

## REFERRING TO COMMITTEE

If Democrats are not able to dismiss the trial or table the articles, there is a second option: They could follow the precedent of several impeachment trials for federal judges over the last century and hold a vote to create a trial committee that would investigate the charges.

While there are no hard rules on how to form a trial committee, the Senate has in the past passed a resolution authorizing the party leaders to each recommend six senators and a chairperson to run it. Those committees had the ability to call witnesses and issue final reports to the Senate ahead of eventual trials.

While there is sufficient precedent for this approach, Democrats are likely to try and avoid a trial if they can halt the process completely, especially in a presidential election year where immigration and border security are top issues.

Echoing Trump's defense during his impeachments, Schumer has called the House effort a "sham."

"House Republicans failed to produce any evidence that Secretary Mayorkas has committed any crime," Schumer said. "House Republicans failed to show he has violated the Constitution. House Republicans failed to present any evidence of anything resembling an impeachable offense."

## MOVING TO A TRIAL

If the Senate were to proceed to a trial, senators would be forced to sit in their seats for the duration, maybe weeks, while the House impeachment managers and lawyers representing Mayorkas make their cases. The Senate is allowed to call witnesses, as well, if it so decides. Senators also have an opportunity to question the two sides before a final vote on whether to convict.

While the right flank of the Senate's GOP conference is lobbying for that scenario, senators in both parties have said they don't think it's the best use of the chamber's time. And some Republicans have suggested the process was not serious enough in the House.

North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis said earlier this month that he thinks Mayorkas has fallen short but that "there's a lot of time that goes into a thoughtful impeachment process, and a couple of hearings in a month, or month and a half doesn't seem like it fits that bill."

## Meet Grace Beyer, the small-school scoring phenom Iowa star Caitlin Clark might never catch

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Basketball Writer

On the same night Caitlin Clark was adding to her NCAA women's basketball scoring record before a packed house in Indiana, and a national audience on television, the Iowa sensation was losing ground to

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the most prolific active scorer in her sport.

In a gymnasium smaller than those of many high schools, where hundreds of fans scattered across sets of retractable bleachers, Grace Beyer was pouring in 40 points for the University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy in a close loss to Cottey College.

That pushed the career total for the fifth-year senior to 3,842 points, 249 ahead of Clark, who had scored 24 in the Hawkeyes' loss to the Hoosiers last Thursday night. Beyer added another 32 points on Saturday in a win over Hannibal-LaGrange, breaking Miriam Walker-Samuels' record for an NAIA school and moving her into fifth place in college basketball history.

Men or women, NCAA or NAIA, regardless of division.

"What she's doing," said Beyer's coach, Jillian Lipman-Segura, "is just remarkable. She makes everything look so easy."

The contrast is stark in the way Clark and Beyer have been chasing history in the twilight of their careers.

Ever since helping the Hawkeyes reach the national championship game last season, and famously feuding with LSU standout Angel Reese, Clark has become perhaps the most bankable star in the history of the women's college game.

Fans have lined up for hours all season, often in freezing cold, to watch her make those 30-foot 3-pointers. Tickets went for more than a \$1,000 on the secondary market as Clark approached Kelsey Plum's NCAA women's scoring record. And in the era of Name, Image and Likeness legislation that has allowed Clark to monetize her fame, she has popped up in advertisements for everything from State Farm Insurance to Hy-Vee, a supermarket chain headquartered not far from her childhood home in Des Moines.

As she passed Plum and set her sights on Lynette Woodard's major college record of 3,649 points, set before the days of NCAA women's hoops, Clark's games have become appointment viewing when they are televised on FS1 or streamed on Peacock.

"It's amazing," Beyer said with a smile, "to be mentioned in the same breath as her."

Perhaps that is because her own story is playing out on such a wildly different stage.

Just like Clark, Beyer grew up with a basketball in her hands, putting up thousands of shots at the local YMCA before and after school. She learned about toughness from playing older brothers Brian and Daniel in the driveway of their Wisconsin home, and how to be a leader while taking Mukwonago High School to the state championship game as a freshman.

And just like Clark, the Division I coaches came calling. They saw in her all the same traits that Iowa coach Lisa Bluder saw in her future phenom, right down to the desire it takes to play basketball at the college level.

Yet that is where Clark and Beyer abruptly diverged.

Beyer's grandfather had lived with her family as she grew up, but as he grew older, he began having trouble managing his medications. Beyer stepped in to help, learning everything she could about the drugs and how they interacted. That piqued in her a desire to study pharmacy, a burdensome academic pathway that typically requires a four-year undergraduate degree in something such as biology or chemistry before at least two more years spent earning a doctorate.

Many coaches had been recruiting Beyer since the seventh grade, including several from Division I schools, yet they blanched when she told them about her academic goals. They thought there was no way Beyer could juggle that course load and still focus on basketball, so the phone calls and text messages and interest slowly dried up.

"I had a lot of conversations with my parents," Beyer said, "and they urged me to prepare for the 40 years of my life rather than the four years of college. It's kind of a big concept to grasp when you're in high school, but I just knew that I wanted to be happy and have a career in something I'm going to enjoy. And basketball? I'll enjoy that wherever I play."

That ended up being a small college in St. Louis whose nickname — Eutectics — is the process of two solids forming a liquid, and whose mascot, Mortarmer McPestle, wears a shock of yellow hair and a white lab coat.

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Odd, yet fitting, for a school that in 2020 renamed itself the University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy. "Our program is academically rigorous," Eutectics athletic director Jill Harter said, "and it really takes a special type of athlete to be successful here, because you have to be able to achieve in the classroom in order to be able to excel competitively, too.

"Grace," Harter added, "checks both of those boxes."

There are no chartered planes at the NAIA level, just mind-numbing bus rides that often last six or more hours. There are no tutors for the women's basketball program, only the academic assistance afforded to any student. And while the University of Health Sciences and Pharmacy facilities are pristine, they are nowhere near what a Division I college can offer.

"But honestly," Harter said, "if your passion is healthcare and you want to play a sport, why would you go anywhere else?"

That was the pitch that sold Beyer on a school whose team had gone 19-116 in the five seasons before her arrival.

With her leading the way, the Eutectics won at least 20 games each of the past two years. The few dozen fans that used to show up at games turned into a few hundred, and people actually began calling the school to ask when Beyer would play next.

As the wins mounted, so did her scoring total, often in chunks of 40 or more points at a time.

Beyer had a career-high 59 last year in a game against Columbia, and earlier this season, the 5-foot-8 guard scored 51 of the Eutectics' points in a 69-62 win over William Woods. In all, Beyer has been averaging more than 34 points over her final season of college basketball, while also leading her team in rebounds, steals and assists.

"There's sometimes we'll beat a team but they'll be like, 'Oh, Grace didn't score 30, so it's a win,'" she said, "but it's not a win. You lost. So it's kind of funny how some people's mindsets are different, not even caring about the outcome of the game."

At her current pace, Beyer needs six postseason games to chase down the women's all-college scoring record, set by Pearl Moore with 4,061 points — 3,884 for AIAW-member Francis Marion from 1975-79 and 177 points while at Anderson Junior College.

The Eutectics open the American Midwest Conference Tournament against Missouri Baptist on Friday night.

Meanwhile, Beyer continues to watch Clark chase her own milestones from afar. The reigning AP player of the year has 3,617 points after her triple-double in Iowa's win over Illinois on Sunday, and Clark needs 33 points heading into Wednesday's game at Minnesota to break Woodard's major college scoring record.

In rare moments, Beyer catches herself wondering what it would have been like to play under those bright lights herself. Could she have competed at that level, or had that much success? Would she have been as happy doing it?

"I definitely don't have any regrets coming here," she said, "but everyone has those what-if thoughts, you know? What it would have been like if I went to a bigger school. But those are all what-ifs. I'm never going to know how my career would have ended up at a different school. I can only know for sure what I have accomplished here, and what I've accomplished here is not something that anyone can take away from me. I can't have any regrets when I know what I've left behind."

## Facing backlash over IVF ruling, Alabama lawmakers look for a fix

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Lawmakers began scrambling for ways to protect Alabama in vitro fertilization services after multiple providers paused treatment in the wake of a state Supreme Court ruling that frozen embryos could be considered children under a state law.

Facing a wave of shock and anger from the decision, legislators prepared separate proposals in the House and Senate that would seek to prevent a fertilized egg from being recognized as a human life or an unborn child under state laws until it is implanted in a woman's uterus.

Justices ruled last week that three couples who had frozen embryos destroyed in a mishap at a storage



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facility could pursue wrongful death claims for their "extrauterine children." Justices cited sweeping language that the GOP-controlled Legislature and voters added to the Alabama Constitution in 2018 saying that the state recognizes the "rights of the unborn child."

Senate Minority Leader Bobby Singleton, a Democrat, said Republicans helped create the situation in their push to enact some of the most stringent anti-abortion laws in the country. The result, he said, was eliminating a path for people to become parents.

"At the end of the day, the Republican Party has to be responsible for what they have done," Singleton said.

Former President Donald Trump joined the calls for Alabama lawmakers to act Friday and said he would "strongly support the availability of IVF."

State Republican lawmakers said they were working on a solution.

"Alabamians strongly believe in protecting the rights of the unborn, but the result of the State Supreme Court ruling denies many couples the opportunity to conceive, which is a direct contradiction," House Speaker Nathaniel Ledbetter said.

Republican state Sen. Tim Melson, who is a doctor, said his proposal seeks to clarify that a fertilized egg is a "potential life" and not a human life until it is implanted in the uterus.

"I'm just trying to come up with a solution for the IVF industry and protect the doctors and still make it available for people who have fertility issues that need to be addressed because they want to have a family," Melson said.

House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels, a Democrat, introduced legislation to clarify that a "human egg or human embryo that exists in any form outside of the uterus shall not, under any circumstances, be considered an unborn child" under state law.

"This is just the first step in unwinding this predicament our state has placed itself in," Daniels said.

Melson said he was not surprised that the state is seeing unintended consequences from the constitutional language. Supporters said it was intended to block abortion if the states ever gained control of the issue. But opponents warned it was essentially a "personhood" measure that would establish "constitutional rights for fertilized eggs."

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey said the state wants to foster a culture of life and that includes "couples hoping and praying to be parents who utilize IVF."

Alabama Attorney General Marshall does not intend to prosecute IVF providers or families based on the state Supreme Court ruling, Chief Counsel Katherine Robertson said in a statement.

The court's ruling, treating the embryos the same as a child or gestating fetus under the wrongful death statute, raised questions about what legal liabilities clinics could face during IVF processes, including the freezing, testing and disposal of embryos. Three in vitro fertilization providers in Alabama paused their services in the aftermath of the ruling.

Gabby Goidel, who was days from an expected egg retrieval appointment, was told Thursday that her provider would not continue doing embryo transfers.

"I started crying," said Goidel, who swiftly traveled with her husband to Texas to try to continue the IVF cycle with a provider there. The Alabama ruling is "not pro-family in any way," Goidel said.

At the Fertility Institute of North Alabama, Dr. Brett Davenport said his clinic will continue providing IVF. But he also urged state policymakers to act and remove the uncertainty for providers.

"What we do could not be any more pro-life. We're trying to help couples who can't otherwise conceive a child," Davenport said.

The court ruled only that embryos are covered under Alabama's wrongful death statute, said Mary Ziegler, a legal historian at the University of California, Davis School of Law. The court did not say embryos had full constitutional rights, she said, or at least not yet.

"I think people in Alabama are rightly expecting that this is the tip of the iceberg though, and this ruling will lead to more down the road," Ziegler said. She also said anti-abortion groups and politicians have been pushing to get some sort of ruling through the federal courts "that a fetus is a constitutional rights holder."

"It's not just about in vitro and it's not just about Alabama. It's part of this nationwide movement too," she said.

## Vigils held nationwide for nonbinary Oklahoma teenager who died day after school bathroom fight

EDMOND, Okla. (AP) — Vigils took place across the nation for an Oklahoma teenager who died the day after a fight in a high school bathroom in which the nonbinary student said they were a target of bullying.

Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old who identified as nonbinary and used they/them pronouns, got into an altercation with three girls in an Owasso High School bathroom who were picking on Benedict and some friends. The girls attacked Benedict for pouring water on them, the teen told police in a video released Friday.

Benedict's mother called emergency responders to the family home the day after the fight, saying Benedict's breathing was shallow, their eyes were rolling back and their hands were curled, according to audio released by Owasso police.

While a two-week-old police warrant states that investigators were seeking evidence in a felony murder, the department has since said Benedict's death was not a result of injuries suffered in the fight, based on the preliminary results of the autopsy.

Vigils for Benedict were held in Oklahoma and locations across the country, including Boston, Minneapolis, New York and Southern California in the days following the student's death.

Dozens of people held candles and listened to passionate speeches at a gathering Sunday evening in El Paso, Texas.

"I've gone from heartbroken to angry," said a community organizer named Lorena, who urged religious leaders to speak out against discrimination.

"My call to you is to stand up and make it clear that is what is being done should not be done in your god's name," Lorena said. "Stand up and take back your religion from the conservative right."

In Huntington Beach, California, Kanan Durham, executive director of Pride at the Pier, said Friday that "this single moment cannot be the only way that we honor Nex."

"This is a lot for all of us," Durham said in a report by KABC-TV in Los Angeles. "This community has experienced grief like this so many times before."

Many of the gatherings were organized by LGBTQ+ groups to protest against the frequent bullying suffered by nonbinary teens. Benedict's family says Nex was bullied at school.

At a vigil Saturday in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the president of TahlEquality said Benedict's death was traumatic and the rights group arranged for licensed therapists to be available at the event.

"It's really hard being an LGBT community member in Oklahoma nowadays because suicide ideation and suicidal thoughts happen quite a bit," Sanj Cooper told KOKI-TV, adding that the LGBT+ community was moved to speak out after Benedict's passing.

"If anything we are impassioned, the fire in our belly has been lit up again to continue to fight," Cooper said. "If anything it doesn't oppress or keep us from our voice from being heard. If anything it makes it louder."

More than two dozen people gathered Friday at All Saints Episcopal Church in McAlester, Oklahoma, for a vigil organized by the McAlester Rainbow Connection.

Matt Blancett, who organized the event for the LGBTQ+ group, said it was important to hold a vigil in McAlester because of the murder of Dustin Parker, a transgender man, in 2020.

"It shows people that we have a community, we are here, we're not going anywhere," Blancett said.

All Saints Priest Janie Koch said it is important for people to reach out for support.

"It is very very important as the gamut of emotions are cycling to watch out for each other, to be mindful of one another," Koch said.

In audio of the call to police, Benedict's mother, Sue Benedict, said she wanted authorities to file charges. The officer who responded can be heard in the hospital video explaining that the teen started the altercation by throwing the water and the court would view it as a mutual fight.

According to a police search warrant, Sue Benedict indicated to police on Feb. 7 that she didn't want to file charges at that time. She instead asked police to speak to officials at Owasso High School about issues

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on campus among students.

The Feb. 9 search warrant, which was filed with the court on Feb. 21, also shows investigators took 137 photographs at the school, including inside the girl's bathroom where the fight occurred. They also collected two swabs of stains from the bathroom and retrieved records and documents of the students involved in the altercation.

The police department said it does not plan to comment further on the teen's cause of death until toxicology and other autopsy results are completed.

## Today in History: February 27

### American Indian Movement occupies Wounded Knee

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Feb. 27, the 58th day of 2024. There are 308 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 27, 1973, members of the American Indian Movement occupied the hamlet of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, the site of the 1890 massacre of Sioux men, women and children. (The occupation lasted until the following May.)

On this date:

In 1807, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine.

In 1922, the Supreme Court, in *Leser v. Garnett*, unanimously upheld the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed the right of women to vote.

In 1933, Germany's parliament building, the Reichstag, was gutted by fire; Chancellor Adolf Hitler, blaming the Communists, used the fire to justify suspending civil liberties.

In 1939, the Supreme Court, in *National Labor Relations Board v. Fansteel Metallurgical Corp.*, effectively outlawed sit-down strikes.

In 1942, the Battle of the Java Sea began during World War II; Imperial Japanese naval forces scored a decisive victory over the Allies.

In 1951, the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution, limiting a president to two terms of office, was ratified.

In 1991, Operation Desert Storm came to a conclusion as President George H.W. Bush declared that "Kuwait is liberated, Iraq's army is defeated," and announced that the allies would suspend combat operations at midnight, Eastern time.

In 1997, divorce became legal in Ireland.

In 1998, with the approval of Queen Elizabeth II, Britain's House of Lords agreed to end 1,000 years of male preference by giving a monarch's first-born daughter the same claim to the throne as any first-born son.

In 2006, former Newark Eagles co-owner Effa Manley became the first woman elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

In 2010, in Chile, an 8.8 magnitude earthquake and tsunami killed 524 people, caused \$30 billion in damage and left more than 200,000 homeless.

In 2013, Van Cliburn, the internationally celebrated pianist whose triumph at a 1958 Moscow competition launched a spectacular career that made him the rare classical musician to enjoy rock star status, died in Fort Worth, Texas, at age 78.

In 2020, President Donald Trump declared that a widespread U.S. outbreak of COVID-19 was not inevitable, even as top health authorities at his side warned that more infections were coming.

In 2021, the U.S. got a third vaccine to prevent COVID-19, as the Food and Drug Administration cleared a Johnson & Johnson shot that worked with just one dose instead of two.

In 2022, President Vladimir Putin dramatically escalated East-West tensions by ordering Russian nuclear forces put on high alert, while Ukraine's embattled leader agreed to talks with Moscow as Putin's troops and tanks drove deeper into the country.

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Today's birthdays: Actor Joanne Woodward is 95. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader is 91. Actor Barbara Babcock is 88. Actor Debra Monk is 76. Rock singer-musician Neal Schon (Journey) is 71. Rock musician Adrian Smith (Iron Maiden) is 68. Actor Timothy Spall is 68. Rock musician Paul Humphreys (Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark) is 65. Country singer Johnny Van Zant (Van Zant) is 65. Rock musician Leon Mobley (Ben Harper and the Innocent Criminals) is 64. Basketball Hall of Famer James Worthy is 64. Actor Adam Baldwin is 63. Actor Grant Show is 63. Actor Noah Emmerich is 60. Actor Donal Logue is 59. R&B singer Chilli (TLC) is 54. Rock musician Jeremy Dean (Nine Days) is 53. Country-rock musician Shonna Tucker is 47. Chelsea Clinton is 45. Actor Brandon Beemer is 45. Rock musician Cyrus Bolooki (New Found Glory) is 45. Rock musician Jake Clemons (Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band) is 45. R&B singer Bobby V is 45. Singer Josh Groban is 44. Banjoist Noam Pikelny is 44. Rock musician Jared Champion (Cage the Elephant) is 51. Actor Kate Mara is 42. TV personality JWoww (AKA Jenni Farley) is 39. Actor Lindsey Morgan is 35.