

Groton Daily Independent

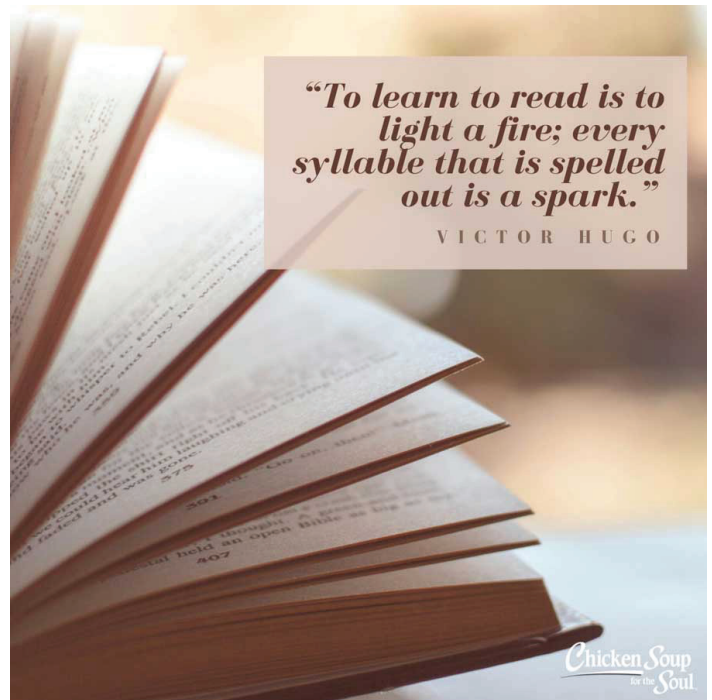
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Thursday, March 7

School Breakfast: Surfboard pop tarts.
School Lunch: Taco salads.
State GBB Tournament at Brookings
Senior Menu: Meatloaf, baked potato with sour cream, creamed peas, frosted brownies, fruit, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

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



Friday, March 8

End of Third Quarter
School. Breakfast: Ito eats egg wraps.
School Lunch: Mac and cheese, California blend vegetables.
State GBB Tournament at Brookings
Senior Menu: Potato soup, ham salad croissant, tomato spoon salad, Mandarin oranges.

Saturday, March 9

State GBB Tournament at Brookings
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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President Joe Biden will deliver his third State of the Union address tonight, a speech that comes against the backdrop of the ongoing influx of migrants at the US-Mexico border, the US role in the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Hamas wars, delays in the passage of a federal budget, and more.

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley suspended her bid for the GOP presidential nomination yesterday, a day after ceding 14 of 15 state primary contests to former President Donald Trump during Super Tuesday. Haley, the last major Republican challenger to Trump's reelection bid (and his former ambassador to the United Nations), declined to endorse Trump during her announcement. Democrat long shot Rep. Dean Phillips (MN-3) also ended his campaign yesterday, endorsing President Joe Biden.

A Texas-based biotechnology startup, Colossal Biosciences, announced yesterday it had successfully transformed elephant cells into an embryo-like state—a key step in its effort to engineer a close approximation to extinct woolly mammoths.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

"Rust" armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed found guilty of involuntary manslaughter in 2021 shooting death of the film's cinematographer Halyna Hutchins.

Prosecutors drop charges against three memorabilia collectors who allegedly stole original lyrics from "Hotel California" and other Eagles hits.

Denzel Washington and Jake Gyllenhaal to star in Broadway production of "Othello" set to open in 2025.

Science & Technology

Digital Markets Act takes effect in EU member countries today; new law aims to prevent anticompetitive practices by internet "gatekeeper" companies like Amazon, Alphabet, Meta, and others.

Archaeologists discover 1.4-million-year-old stone tools in Western Ukraine, the oldest-known artifacts made by ancient humans found in Europe to date.

Bees and chimpanzees demonstrate ability to learn behaviors based on the experience of others; pair of studies marks the first time the behavior, known as cumulative culture, has been observed outside of humans.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.5%, Dow +0.2%, Nasdaq +0.6%) as Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell signals central bank is on track to cut interest rates this year. US Securities and Exchange Commission approves scaled-back climate-risks disclosure rule for some public companies.

New York Community Bancorp announces over \$1B in equity investment from firms, including Steve Mnuchin's Liberty Strategic Capital, to shore up potential losses; shares fell 42% intraday before closing up 7% following the news.

OpenAI senior leadership alleges Elon Musk wanted to merge Tesla with the AI company, citing emails in response to Musk's lawsuit accusing OpenAI of prioritizing profits over public good.

Politics & World Affairs

House approves six spending bills allocating roughly \$460B to partially fund the US government, sending legislation to Senate ahead of Friday's shutdown deadline; next partial shutdown deadline is March 22. Supreme Court to hear arguments in Trump's presidential immunity claim April 25.

At least two killed, six injured on Red Sea shipping vessel in first fatal attack by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels since start of Israel-Hamas war; Iran also says it is seizing oil cargo destined for Chevron Corp. Israel approves plan for 3,400 new homes in West Bank settlements.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) to deploy 1,000 state police and National Guard members to curb subway crime; comes after Mayor Eric Adams (D) ordered a separate 1,000 officers last month following 45% yearly rise in crime in January.

Themes for the State A Basketball Tournament are

Thursday: Hawaiian/I hate winter

Friday: USA

Saturday: State Shirts/Extreme Black and Gold

158 +/- ACRE LAND AUCTION

WEST HANSON TWP., BROWN CO., SD

We will offer at Public Auction the following land located from Groton SD, (Intersection of Hwy 12 & Hwy 37) 8 miles south on Hwy 37 & 3 miles west on 141st St. Watch for auction signs on:

THURSDAY, MARCH 14th, 2024 SALE TIME: 11:00 A.M.

Auctioneer's Note: This auction presents the opportunity to purchase 158 +/- acres of productive tillable land located in West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD. The farm is free for possession for the 2024 crop year. This auction will be held live on-site w/online bidding available.

This 158 +/- acres of land, according to FSA information, has 156.85 +/- cropland acres and is made up of predominately Class II soils with a Surety AgriData soil productivity index of 76.8. Per FSA information, this farm has a soybean base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 25 bu., and a wheat base of 78.6 acres and a PLC yield of 35 bu. There is approximately 40 +/- acres that are planted to winter wheat and this crop will go to the new buyer(s).

Legal Description: SE ¼ of Sec. 28, T-122-N, R-61-W, West Hanson Twp., Brown Co., SD

For additional information, terms, drone video, aerial, soil & plat maps and FSA-156EZ, please visit www.burlagepeterson.com, or contact Auctioneers.

MAKE PLANS TO ATTEND THIS AUCTION AND COME PREPARED TO BUY!

TERMS: Visit burlagepeterson.com for full sale terms. Possession for 2024.

Gary and Sharon Van Riper Charitable Remainder Annuity Trust – Owners
First Bank & Trust – Trustee

BURLAGE PETERSON AUCTIONEERS & REALTORS, LLC
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As I was sitting the office working on the paper, I suddenly noticed something bright out the window. It was really a bright orange/red at sunset last night. It was pretty neat. (Photo

by Paul Kosel)

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Discussing Groton economic development

Members of the area met last month to discuss economic development in the Groton SD Community. Another core team session will be held March 13th at 7pm at City Hall. From this core team, 6 members will be chosen to serve on the Groton Development Corporation. Individuals are encouraged to reach out to City Hall at 605-397-8422 if they would like to join this process. (Courtesy photo)

Governor Noem Signs Historic Bill to Combat Antisemitism into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed HB 1076, which requires the consideration of the definition of antisemitism when investigating unfair or discriminatory practices, into law.

“Ever since the horrific terrorist attacks on the State of Israel on October 7th, 2023, we have seen a shocking spike in antisemitic acts of hatred around the world, including some isolated incidents right here in South Dakota,” said Governor Noem. “I am very proud to sign this historic bill to keep our Jewish people secure. I hope more states will follow our leadership.”

This bill defines antisemitism and makes it easier to prove when discriminatory conduct is motivated by antisemitism. This important and impactful legislation will ensure the safety of Jewish people and strengthen South Dakota’s anti-discrimination laws.

Governor Noem was joined by Elan Carr, the CEO of the Israeli-American Council for Action, nationally renowned Jewish leader Dan Rosen, Rabbi Dr. Mark Goldfeder, the Director of the National Jewish Advocacy Center, Rabbi Mendel Alperowitz of the Chabad Jewish Center of South Dakota, Renie Schreiber, on behalf of Yinam Cohen, Consul General of Israel to the Midwest, Jordan Cope from Stand With Us, the prime sponsors of the bill Representative Fred Deutsch and Senator Jim Mehlhaff, and many other prominent Jewish leaders.

“This is an important moment at an urgent time,” said Elan S. Carr, CEO of the Israeli-American Council and former U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism. “By adopting into law and implementing the global standard for defining antisemitism, South Dakota is making a powerful statement that the evil of Jew-hatred has no place in our state or our country. We are deeply grateful to Gov. Noem and to the state legislature, especially to Rep. Deutsch and Sen. Mehlhaff, for showing principled leadership and for embodying the best of American values. Given the horrors of 10/7 and the appalling rise of anti-Jewish violence and discrimination since, this could not have come at a more important time.”

“Since October 7th, antisemitism has skyrocketed across this country by roughly 400%. And part of the problem is you cannot fight something you cannot define,” said Mark Goldfeder, Director of the National Jewish Advocacy Center. “By adopting this bill and the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, South Dakota has sent a clear message that there is no place for hate in this state.”

“If a Jewish child in South Dakota is going to be more safe and more protected, it’s going to be because we did here today,” said Rabbi Mendel.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Legislature passes attempted balance between landowners and carbon pipeline project

Supporters say bills protect farmers; opponents say they protect company

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - MARCH 6, 2024 6:36 PM

Years of debate about a proposed carbon dioxide pipeline came to a head Wednesday at the state Capitol as lawmakers passed three bills intended to strengthen landowner protections while maintaining a regulatory path forward for the project.

The bills passed the state House of Representatives and Senate and now head to the governor's desk for final consideration.

Governor Kristi Noem issued a statement saying she plans to sign the bills to "provide new protections for landowners and allow for economic growth to move forward through a transparent process."

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, who voted against all three bills, said lawmakers should do more to protect landowners. He pointed to Democratic-dominated Minnesota, where he said carbon sequestration pipelines can't use eminent domain to access land.

Eminent domain is a legal power the pipeline company could use to cross land if landowners don't grant voluntary easements. Legislative efforts to block the use of eminent domain failed each of the last two sessions.

"We should be ashamed by that," Hansen said.

He alleged the bills' proponents are "paving the golden road" for the project.

House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, was the prime sponsor of the bills with Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree, R-Madison. Mortenson said lawmakers opposing the legislation were offering a "do nothing solution."

"They'd rather give speeches and go get likes on Facebook than roll up your sleeves, get everyone around the table and put the policies in place that help our farmers," Mortenson said.

The bills are related to an \$8 billion pipeline proposed by Summit Carbon Solutions, which is headquartered in Iowa. It would collect carbon dioxide from 57 ethanol plants in South Dakota and neighboring states and pipe it to North Dakota for underground storage.

The project would take advantage of up to \$18 billion in federal tax credits that incentivize the removal of heat-trapping carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. Some ethanol backers have said the project is needed to reduce carbon emissions from ethanol production and keep the corn-based fuel viable in a future where governments and consumers are demanding lower climate impacts.

Summit plans to apply again for a permit in South Dakota after its initial application was denied by the Public Utilities Commission, in part due to conflicts with county ordinances that require minimum distances known as "setbacks" between pipelines and other features. The commission of three elected officials is responsible for pipeline permitting in the state.

The project has faced opposition from landowners concerned about property rights and safety, including health risks associated with potential leaks.

The three bills that passed Wednesday address issues including surveying, easement agreements, and compensation for landowners.

What the bills say

What the bills' backers have dubbed a "Landowner Bill of Rights" was recently added to the bottom of one of the bills. It lays out the new landowner benefits and protections offered by the three pieces of legislation.

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Carbon capture pipeline operators will have to pay \$500 for access to survey land. Counties through which the pipelines run could collect a surcharge of up to \$1 per linear foot, with at least half of the surcharge allocated for property tax relief for affected landowners. The remaining funds could be used at the county's discretion.

The bills ensure the pipeline companies, rather than landowners, are liable for damages caused by the projects. Companies also must submit an impact mitigation plan and bury pipelines at least 4 feet deep. One of the bills mandates public disclosure of modeling to gauge the impact of a pipeline rupture.

The bills restrict easement durations, terminating them if a pipeline does not secure a Public Utilities Commission permit within five years or if the easement goes unused for the same period. Additionally, easements cannot extend beyond 99 years and must be documented in writing and recorded in a county register of deeds office.

Landowners are entitled to land survey notices and results, examination findings, and contact information for the inspection supervisor. Landowners are given the right to contest and try to stop surveys by going to court within 30 days of receiving written notice of the planned survey.

In response to controversy about out-of-state contractors working for the pipeline company, one of the bills says a land agent acting on behalf of a carbon pipeline project must be a pipeline facility employee, a resident of the state, or a real estate agent licensed in the state.

Current law says the Public Utilities Commission may overrule counties' pipeline setbacks (although the commission has so far declined to do so). Earlier versions of one bill would have altered that power, first giving setback authority solely to the state, and then in a later version leaving it with counties but saying the commission would have to overrule any overly burdensome setbacks.

The final, approved version of the legislation says the commission's permitting process overrules local setbacks and other local rules regarding pipelines, unless the commission requires compliance with any of those local regulations.

Reaction

Sen. Al Novstrup, R-Aberdeen, said the Summit project alone will not lower the planet's temperature one degree; therefore, "the reason for CO2 capture fails." He said diverting would-be federal tax revenue to incentivize the project will only worsen the national debt, and he encouraged fellow lawmakers to "say no to a Washington, D.C., boondoggle."

The tax credits for the project have been around since at least 2008 and were expanded under former President Donald Trump. Congress and President Joe Biden upped the credits to \$85 per metric ton of carbon sequestered annually.

Some opponents outside the Legislature are also unhappy.

South Dakota Farmers Union President Doug Sombke said the legislation does not put landowners in a better position. He said the state is dominated by large special interest groups, to the detriment of family farmers whose land could be crossed by the pipeline.

"Unless this state can elect 15 or more Democrats to balance the political powers in Pierre, we will never stop this abuse of our legislative system," he said. There are 11 Democrats in the 105-member Legislature.

Meanwhile, the South Dakota Ethanol Producers Association applauded the bills and said they will "provide the nation's first Landowner Bill of Rights along with needed regulatory certainty for CO2 pipelines."

"We applaud the South Dakota legislators who supported farmers, landowners and ethanol with this compromise," said Walt Wendland, the association's board president. "This legislation is pro-landowner, pro-business, pro-farmer and pro-ethanol. It's a win-win for all South Dakotans."

Lawmakers approve \$10 million for airport grants as session winds down

Legislature wraps up action on several bills ahead of final day

BY: SETH TUPPER AND JOHN HULT - MARCH 6, 2024 4:20 PM

Airports across the state may soon be able to apply for a share of \$10 million in state-funded grants to improve, expand and support the future capacity demands of their terminals, thanks to a bill headed to the governor's desk.

The grants would be issued by the state Aeronautics Commission. Lawmakers said the grants would allow airports access to federal matching funds, thereby extending the value of the state's investment.

"Some of those could see up to a 90% match for 10% of state investment," said Sen. Jack Kolbeck, R-Sioux Falls.

The House and Senate both approved a conference committee's negotiated version of the bill Wednesday as lawmakers wrapped up action on several pieces of legislation. The final day of the 2024 legislative session is Thursday, except for a day later in the month to consider any vetoes from the governor.

Help for LifeScape

The House concurred in Senate amendments to a bill that would provide \$6 million to the state Department of Social Services to help LifeScape construct a facility with a specialty rehabilitation pediatric hospital, a specialty school for children under 21, an intermediate health care facility for children under 21, and outpatient rehabilitation pediatric services.

LifeScape is a Sioux Falls-based provider of services for children and adults who have disabilities and medical rehabilitation needs.

Noem signs antisemitism bill

Gov. Kristi Noem held a bill-signing ceremony for legislation requiring the state Division of Human Rights to consider a definition of antisemitism when reviewing, investigating or deciding whether an alleged violation of human rights is antisemitic.

The bill establishes that the term "antisemitism" has the same meaning as the working definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Porn age verification

A bill that started its legislative journey as an attempt to establish internet age verification to access pornography morphed into a proposed summer study on the topic, then finally died Wednesday after a conference committee couldn't come up with a compromise on the two versions of the bill.

Several senators expressed a desire to keep working on the issue next year and to possibly appoint a summer study committee. The Legislature's Executive Board could still select the topic for a summer study.

Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said a study is preferable to legislation as the courts work to determine the First Amendment implications of verification laws passed by other states.

He said a measured approach could help the state avoid legal entanglements with organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota, which has successfully challenged state laws and policies on First Amendment grounds on several occasions.

"We ought to do it in a way that we don't keep writing checks to the ACLU," Schoenbeck said.

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Federal judge nominees for South Dakota appear before committee in Washington, D.C.

Sioux Falls circuit judge, private attorney tapped to fill current and pending vacancies

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 6, 2024 4:01 PM

Two nominees for federal judgeships in South Dakota told the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday that they'd apply the law fairly and equally, with an eye to court precedence and balance.

It was the first appearance in Washington, D.C., for Eric Schulte and Camela Theeler, both of Sioux Falls, since their official nominations to replace retiring U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier in Sioux Falls and retired U.S. District Judge Jeffrey Viken in Rapid City, respectively.

Viken retired at the end of October after nearly two years on senior status, which means a lower caseload. Schreier announced her intention to retire or take senior status in January, pending the confirmation of her replacement.

The nominees have been shepherded through the nomination process recently by South Dakota Republican Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds. Their involvement is unique, in that Democratic presidents typically rely on either Democratic elected federal officials or a state Democratic party to field nominees for federal judicial vacancies.

The initial candidates presented to the Biden administration did not make it through to a formal nomination. Thune and Rounds threw their support behind Theeler and Schulte last fall, with an eye to filling judgeships as cases in the court's federal docket began to back up.

On Wednesday, Committee Chairman Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, thanked Rounds and Thune for their willingness to work with the Biden administration "on a bipartisan basis" to address the federal judicial openings in South Dakota.

Both Rounds and Thune remarked on the candidates' status as lifelong South Dakotans, respected jurists and leaders in the state's legal community.

Theeler is a state circuit judge in the second circuit; Schulte is an attorney in private practice with Dav-
enport, Evans, Hurwitz, and Smith in Sioux Falls.

"I believe both will exercise judicial restraint and apply the laws as written," Rounds told the committee.

In his introductory remarks, Thune said he thinks both nominees "have the character and impartiality to serve lifetime appointments on the federal bench."

Schulte and Theeler were two of four nominees presented to the committee on Wednesday.

The others, nominees for positions in New York and California, each faced critical questioning from GOP committee members on topics like their previous legal work, their membership in nonprofit organizations that support diversity, their work on pardons and on specific opinions they'd written.

Schulte and Theeler did not receive such scrutiny. The only question directed at one of them specifically, rather than at all four nominees, came from Democratic Senator Mazie Hirono of Hawaii.

She asked Schulte about his poetry. Schulte's work has been featured in South Dakota's "Pasque Petals" poetry journal.

"I continuously encourage my staff, and it applies to myself, to be creative, and to refer to the arts as a way to maintain a certain equilibrium," said Hirono, who said she had copies of some of Schulte's work. "Is that what poetry does for you?"

"Indeed it does, Senator," said Schulte, who called himself "an amateur poet" and told the committee that his lifelong love of poetry relaxes him and stimulates his mind.

All four nominees, in response to a question from Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, each said they see social media as a potentially deleterious influence on America's youth.

Fifteen years ago, Theeler said, she gave talks on social media's influence in her practice of employment law.

"Certainly it has evolved well beyond where it was when I was making those speeches," Theeler said. "I certainly recognize the issue, and I'd agree with my fellow nominees, that it is an important policy issue. And I'm glad that Congress is looking at it."

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Schulte told Graham that social media has changed the work of civil litigators, and that “things are more public now than I could have ever imagined when I started practicing law.”

“With respect to policy decisions, I would, of course, defer to this committee,” Schulte said.

The South Dakota nominees also addressed the importance of court-appointed attorneys, interpreters in courtrooms and the primacy of the First Amendment, among other topics.

The committee did not cast any votes on the nominees Wednesday. A spokesperson for the committee said the vote on the nominees who appeared Wednesday will likely occur in April. If Schulte and Theeler are approved by the committee, their nominations would head to the full Senate for confirmation.

SD nominees for lifetime judgeships

Camila Theeler

City: Sioux Falls

Position: state court circuit judge

Education: University of South Dakota Law School, class of 2000

Selected awards, community involvement: South Dakota Young Lawyer of the Year, 2009; Leadership Sioux Falls, 2004; Junior Achievement instructor, Sioux Falls, 2015-present; Lutheran Social Services, School-Based Mentor Advisory Program Committee member, 2005-2013

Eric Schulte

City: Sioux Falls

Position: Partner, Davenport, Evans, Hurwitz, and Smith

Education: USD Law School, class of 1999

Selected awards, community involvement: Toast of the Trial Lawyers Award from the South Dakota Trial Lawyers Association, 2007, 2013, 2018; Lawyer of the Year – Second Judicial Circuit Bar Association 2017; USD Law School Volunteer Service Award, 2011; member or board member of Academy of American Poets, Promising Futures, The Banquet (through 2020); Saint Katharine Drexel Parish’s Social Ministries Committee; Audubon Society

Johnson votes yes as U.S. House passes \$468 billion spending package that would stave off shutdown

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 6, 2024 4:37 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. House lawmakers cast a broadly bipartisan vote Wednesday to approve a six-billion government funding package, marking one of the few consequential votes on major legislation that chamber has taken since Republicans took the majority more than a year ago.

The \$468 billion package includes half of the annual spending bills for the fiscal year that began back on Oct. 1, with lawmakers hoping to wrap up agreement on the other six before a March 22 deadline so as to avert a partial shutdown.

The 1,050-page package, which was approved 339-85, including a yes vote from South Dakota Republican Dusty Johnson, now goes to the Senate, where lawmakers are expected to vote on it before the end of the week. President Joe Biden is then expected to sign it into law.

‘Most conservative bills in history’

House Appropriations Chairwoman Kay Granger, a Texas Republican, encouraged lawmakers to support the measure, saying it “increased defense funding and made targeted cuts” to other programs.

“With the odds stacked against us, House Republicans made progress in how we fund the government,” Granger said. “We drafted the most conservative bills in history.”

House Appropriations Committee ranking member Rosa DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat, said she was “pleased” that Democrats and Republicans in both chambers of Congress were able to negotiate a

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final agreement on the six bills.

"This legislation does not have everything either side may have wanted, but I am pleased that many of the extreme cuts and policies proposed by House Republicans were excluded," DeLauro said.

Texas Republican Rep. Chip Roy spoke against the package, saying it spends too much money and doesn't include enough changes to policy that conservatives pressed for in the House's original spending bills.

"All of this is a shell game," Roy said.

Money for agencies, earmarks

The spending package includes funding for the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Justice, Transportation and Veterans Affairs.

It also provides funding for numerous agencies, like the Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency, Food and Drug Administration, National Aeronautics and Space Administration or NASA, National Science Foundation and military construction projects.

The package includes \$12.655 billion for more than 6,600 projects that members requested through the earmarking process that's often called community project funding or congressionally directed spending, according to two people familiar with the totals.

The six bills include discretionary spending, which Congress approves annually and can fluctuate, as well as some mandatory spending, which is required by laws that Congress has approved.

Discretionary accounts, which make up about one-third of federal spending each year, are subject to the spending caps agreement that House Speaker Mike Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, and Biden agreed to in January.

That compromise set defense discretionary funding at \$886.3 billion and domestic discretionary spending at \$772.7 billion.

WIC gets a \$1 billion boost

The Agriculture-FDA spending bill would provide \$211 billion in total spending, with \$26.2 billion of that classified as discretionary.

The legislation would boost spending on the Special Supplemental Nutrition program for Women, Infants and Children, known as WIC, by \$1 billion, bringing the total mandatory spending on that program to more than \$7 billion. That increase was needed to avoid states having to establish waitlists for the program.

The bill would add the U.S. secretary of Agriculture to the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States and provide \$2 million in funding to ensure the secretary can notify the CFIUS when agricultural land is sold to entities that "may pose a risk to national security."

The bill specifically mentioned purchases by China, Iran, North Korea and Russia.

Georgia Democratic Rep. Sanford Bishop, ranking member on the Agriculture-FDA spending panel, said during floor debate the elements in the bill will affect "the lives of every single American" whether they live in a rural, suburban or urban area.

"The bill is free from almost all of the extreme policy riders in the previous versions and it rejects interference with Americans' health care, reproductive freedom, as well as attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion training," Bishop said.

"While the bill is not the best," Bishop said, "it brings us closer than the earlier version to meeting the needs of the American people."

Reversing 'Second Amendment overreach'

The Commerce-Justice-Science appropriations bill totals \$68.5 billion in discretionary spending, with \$37.5 billion going to the DOJ, \$24.9 billion for NASA, \$10.8 billion for the Commerce Department and \$9.1 billion for the National Science Foundation.

Those spending levels are all decreases from current funding levels. The Federal Bureau of Investigation would need to account for a \$32 million cut to its \$10.6 billion salaries and expenses budget, while the

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Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms will need to address a \$47 million cut to its \$1.6 billion budget for salaries and expenses.

House Republicans said in their summary of the bill the spending cuts would reverse the ATF's "Second Amendment overreach" and hold the FBI "accountable for targeting everyday Americans."

Lawmakers urged the FBI to "allocate the maximum amount of available resources" toward arresting people selling fentanyl and opioids, according to an explanatory statement that accompanied the bill.

Members of Congress received millions in earmarks in the Commerce-Justice-Science bill to address fentanyl in their home states. That directed funding included a \$3 million request by Louisiana Republican Rep. Garret Graves for the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Office task force on fentanyl and violent crime.

Washington state Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell secured slightly more than \$1 million for the drug and fentanyl task force of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation. And Alabama Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville received \$200,000 for the city of Fairhope to address fentanyl.

'Tough but fair' talks

Kentucky Republican Rep. Hal Rogers, chairman of the CJS subcommittee, said during floor debate that "tough but fair bipartisan negotiations" led to a "strong bill."

"The fiscal situation facing the nation requires Congress to make significant spending reductions while maintaining strong commitments to the safety, security and wellbeing of the American people," Rogers said.

The Energy-Water funding bill would get \$52 billion, with that funding divvied up between the Energy Department, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Energy Department would get \$50.2 billion with nearly \$33 billion going to its defense programs, much of which are devoted to nuclear weapons, and \$17.3 billion going to its non-defense programs, such as nuclear energy.

The Interior-Environment spending bill would provide \$41.2 billion in funding, a cut of \$1.5 billion compared to current levels, according to a summary of the bill from House Democrats.

The legislation would reduce funding for the National Park Service by \$150 million to a total funding level of \$3.3 billion.

Funding for the Bureau of Land Management would be cut by \$81 million to \$1.38 billion.

Spending on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would drop by \$51 million to \$1.7 billion.

And appropriations for non-fire activities at the U.S. Forest Service would total \$3.8 billion, a reduction of \$157 million.

Wildland fire management would receive \$6.1 billion in spending for this fiscal year.

Idaho project blocked

Idaho Republican Sen. Mike Simpson, chairman of the Interior-Environment spending panel, said during debate that "cutting funding is never easy but with a national debt in excess of \$34 trillion we made tough choices in this bill to rein in spending."

Simpson touted that the legislation would block the Lava Ridge Wind Project in his home state from advancing until the secretary of the Interior, in consultation with local officials and stakeholders, looks at "alternative plans to reduce the harmful impacts of this project."

The Military Construction-VA appropriations bill includes nearly \$330 billion in total funding, with \$172.5 billion going to mandatory accounts and \$135.25 billion in discretionary spending.

Military construction would receive \$18.7 billion in spending for more than 160 major projects. That money would be divided up between numerous accounts, with \$2 billion for housing, \$336 million for child development centers and \$293 million for the NATO Security Investment Program, among several other line items.

The VA would receive \$134.8 billion in discretionary funding for everything from \$3.1 billion for veterans' homelessness prevention to \$16.2 billion for mental health to \$343 million for rural health.

Women's health would receive \$990 million, efforts to address opioid misuse would get \$715 million and

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prosthetic research would receive \$943 million.

Florida Democratic Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the ranking member on the Military Construction-VA spending panel, said she was "so pleased" to work with others on the committee to "end harmful VA research on dogs, cats and non-human primates within two years."

Background checks and veterans

The package would bar the VA from reporting any veterans who receive assistance managing their finances to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Instant Criminal Background Check System without the approval of a judge or magistrate that the veteran "is a danger to himself or herself or others." The NICS system is supposed to be used to run background checks ahead of gun purchases.

That provision was added to the Senate's original Military Construction-VA spending bill after Louisiana Republican Sen. John Kennedy and Kansas Republican Sen. Jerry Moran introduced it and senators voted 53-45 in October to adopt it during floor debate.

Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, chairman of the Veterans Affairs Committee and a member of the Military Construction-VA appropriations subcommittee, said at the time he supported the Kennedy-Moran amendment.

"It is not right that a D.C. bureaucrat at the VA could take away veterans' legal rights to their firearms simply because they need assistance in managing their finances," Tester said during floor debate in October.

Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Jacky Rosen of Nevada voted for the amendment, as did independent Sens. Angus King of Maine and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona.

The House voted 228-206 in July to adopt a similar amendment, sponsored by House Veterans Committee Chairman Michael Bost, an Illinois Republican, during floor debate on its original version of the bill. That proposal didn't have the possibility of a judge approving the information to go to NICS.

Democratic Reps. Henry Cuellar of Texas, Jared Golden of Maine, Vicente Gonzalez of Texas, Mary Peltola of Alaska, Marie Perez of Washington state and Gabe Vasquez of New Mexico voted to adopt the amendment.

California Democratic Rep. Mark Takano, ranking member on the Veterans Affairs Committee, said during floor debate Wednesday that when a "veteran applies for benefits they've earned, they are screened to make sure that they are competent to use those benefits" to avoid veterans being taken advantage of.

"If a veteran is determined to be mentally incompetent, they are appointed a fiduciary and by law they are reported to the ... NICS," Takano said, adding that those determinations are due to severe mental illnesses like dementia or schizophrenia.

Takano said he could not and would not support the legislation changing that reporting requirement, since 68% of veterans' suicides involve a firearm and "there are very serious reasons why a person with those conditions should not be able to purchase a firearm."

"Veterans' lives are on the line and I will not agree to legislation that will cause more people's lives to be lost to gun violence," Takano said.

Added air traffic controllers

The Transportation-HUD funding bill would get about \$97.5 billion in discretionary funding with nearly \$27 billion for transportation and \$70.1 billion for HUD.

Within those funding levels, the Federal Aviation Administration would receive \$19.9 billion, which would allow for an "additional 1,800 new air traffic controllers and continues to support modernizing the legacy systems in our National Airspace," according to a summary of the bill from Senate Republicans.

HUD's funding would go toward several programs, including \$32.4 billion for tenant-based rental assistance, \$16 billion for project-based rental assistance, \$4.1 billion for homeless assistance grants and \$3.3 billion for Community Development Block Grants.

Oklahoma Republican Rep. Tom Cole, chairman of the Transportation-HUD spending panel, said during debate that lawmakers "worked really hard on safety first" for people flying, traveling by rail, or driving.

The bill, Cole said, also maintains the safety net for people using public housing and includes "historic gains for Indian housing programs and Indian road programs."

"We all know what has happened with the cost of rent and housing," Cole said. "And frankly we didn't want to put anybody out of their home and we avoided doing that."

Legislature passes bill aiming to increase teacher salaries, compensation

Opponents worry legislation is too restrictive, will have unintended consequences

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 6, 2024 3:04 PM

PIERRE — School districts may soon be required to raise average teacher compensation each year by a rate nearly equal to the increase in state education funding.

The Senate and House of Representatives sent a bill to the governor Wednesday that would require school districts raise average teacher compensation – which includes salary and benefits – by 97% of the increase approved by the Legislature and governor each year. That requirement would begin July 1, the beginning of fiscal year 2025.

The three-point reduction from the previously proposed 100% is intended to allow flexibility for school districts to spend that money on needs outside teacher pay, such as programming, transportation or other staff salary increases.

"Right now we are 49th in the nation for average teacher salaries. This is unacceptable," Sen. Sydney Davis, R-Burbank, said on the Senate floor. "We need real accountability. It's time to keep our promise to teachers.

A group of legislators met with state officials, lobbyists, superintendents and other stakeholders throughout the 99th legislative session, which ends Thursday, to work toward the final version of the bill.

The legislation would also set a statewide minimum teacher salary of \$45,000, beginning July 1, 2026. That minimum standard would increase each year by a percentage equal to the annual increase in state education funding approved by the Legislature and governor. The bill does not include any additional money for schools beyond the regular, annual increases in state funding.

School districts that fail to meet the bill's requirements could risk an accreditation review or suffer a \$500-per-teacher deduction in state education funding. But they could also request a waiver and work with the state School Finance Accountability Board to come into compliance.

The bill passed 64-5 in the House and 25-9 in the Senate.

Opponents are skeptical it'll provide enough flexibility for school districts and say it will have unintended consequences due to declining enrollment in public schools across the state, especially rural areas.

"As time moves on, it's going to become a little more restrictive," Sen. Kyle Schoenfish, R-Scotland, told South Dakota Searchlight after the bill was amended and passed out of a conference committee Tuesday. Schoenfish voted against the bill on the Senate floor on Wednesday.

Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said the Legislature will continue working on the mechanics of raising teacher pay in future sessions. Schoenbeck is not running for reelection.

"I don't know if this is the right answer or the perfect answer. It is an answer," Schoenbeck said during the Republican leadership conference Wednesday morning. "The Legislature is going to be back here every year. If this misses and it takes too many waivers or it's too hard for rural schools, we're going to have to look at it because we have to be accountable for all the schools, from the rural ones to the large ones."

Davis said the state Department of Education plans to work with districts to navigate challenges or access waivers.

Lawmakers plan to increase state funding to public education by 4% this session. House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, said the Legislature will work to "give as many dollars as we can to education" in future sessions.

"We're not trying to create an undue burden," he said. "We are trying to create a real expectation."
The bill now heads to Gov. Kristi Noem's desk. Noem has spoken repeatedly in the last few months about her desire for action on teacher pay.

Democrats back a former Republican for South Dakota's US House seat

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MARCH 6, 2024 1:57 PM

SIOUX FALLS — Democrats, who do not hold any statewide elected offices in South Dakota, say they've found a good candidate for the U.S. House: a former Republican.

The state party announced during a press conference Wednesday that Sheryl Johnson, a Sioux Falls retiree, volunteer and mother of four, is running for the party's nomination for U.S. House. The state's only House seat is currently held by Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson.

The South Dakota Democratic Party said in a news release that Sheryl Johnson "was a Republican for decades, but got tired of a party that used to be about freedom and now wants to control everything including who people can marry, how and when they can have kids, which books schools can use and give tax breaks to the wealthy instead of helping our kids."

The party said Sheryl Johnson became a Democrat about 10 years ago "after realizing the party aligned much closer to her values of caring about people."

Sheryl Johnson said she's running because she believes federal lawmakers only complain about what's happening at the U.S.-Mexico border instead of fixing the immigration system. She also wants to stop the "attacks on women's health," saying reproductive health is a discussion that should stay between mothers and their doctors without government interference.

She alleged that Rep. Dusty Johnson "no longer listens to his constituents in South Dakota and only does what the Republican Party tells him to do."

"We need a working mom in D.C., who knows how to get things done and work together on what's best for our country and South Dakota," she said.

Rep. Dusty Johnson responded with a statement to South Dakota Searchlight: "Voters deserve a choice. I'm confident South Dakota voters will again embrace my conservative record of getting things done."

Sheryl Johnson grew up in Iowa. Her grandparents ran a dairy farm and her dad was an ag loan officer at a bank and a part-time farmer. She spent 12 years as an education assistant at Roosevelt High School and four years as a military wife while her husband was deployed during Operation Desert Storm. For three years, she lived at Camp Lejeune, a Marine Corps base in North Carolina. She also worked in retail management for several years.

Trump, Biden close in on clinching nominations after broad Super Tuesday victories

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY AND JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 6, 2024 11:31 AM

WASHINGTON — Despite facing 91 felony counts, hefty civil penalties and a packed 2024 legal calendar, Donald Trump emerged on Super Tuesday as the Republican Party's presumptive choice as its presidential candidate in November.

The former president has secured 995 of the necessary 1,215 GOP delegates needed to clinch the GOP nomination, and likely will meet that number in primaries later this month.

Super Tuesday's contests did the same for President Joe Biden, delivering to him 1,497 of the 1,968 Democratic delegates needed for his party's nomination at the Democratic National Convention in August.

Trump's lone challenger dropped from the Republican U.S. presidential nomination race Wednesday after the former president's overwhelming victories in more than a dozen Super Tuesday states.

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Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley suspended her bid without endorsing the party front-runner, saying "It is now up to Donald Trump to earn the votes of those in our party and beyond it who did not support him, and I hope he does that."

"At its best, politics is about bringing people into your cause, not turning them away," Haley continued in a speech from Charleston, South Carolina. "And our conservative cause badly needs more people. This is now his time for choosing."

On top of that, Trump at last earned the endorsement of Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, according to news reports.

Despite the overwhelming performances, neither front-runner produced a clean sweep Tuesday, as Haley holdouts in Vermont and a tiny ripple of Biden opposition in American Samoa as well as an "uncommitted" vote in Minnesota revealed vulnerabilities.

Haley's exit from her long-shot campaign all but cements what voters have expected: A November rematch between Biden and Trump, whose loss in 2020 sparked a violent attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Trump faces four federal criminal charges for attempts to subvert the 2020 presidential election results, a case stalled by his legal appeals for complete immunity from criminal prosecution — a matter that will be decided in the coming months by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The high court ruled Monday in another legal tangle involving Trump. The justices unanimously decided Trump could remain on Colorado's Republican primary ballot after that state's Supreme Court removed him based on a Civil War-era constitutional clause barring insurrectionists from holding future office.

Trump targets Biden

In a dark victory speech Tuesday night from his Mar-a-Lago residence in Palm Beach, Florida, Trump focused on Biden, whom he called "the worst president in the history of our country." Trump blamed inflation and an immigration surge on Biden.

Trump maintained that he was the victim of election fraud — a claim that has been widely debunked — and unfair targeting by the Justice Department under Biden.

"In some ways, we're a third-world country," he said Tuesday. "We're a third-world country at our borders and we're a third-world country at our elections. And we need to stop that."

Trump has consistently claimed his efforts that led to the Jan. 6 attack were meant to counter fraudulent election results, but has shown no evidence of determinative voter fraud. Courts dismissed dozens of claims he brought following his reelection loss in 2020.

'Uncommitted' votes

On the Democratic side, as predicted, Biden also finished Super Tuesday as the clear Democratic choice in more than a dozen states.

However, neither Biden nor Trump cleanly swept their parties' primaries and caucuses throughout 16 states and one U.S. territory.

The contests were held in Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont and Virginia. Biden also won Iowa's Democratic mail-in vote Tuesday.

While both men picked up hundreds of party delegates during the single largest day of nominating contests on the 2024 race calendar, Haley squeezed out a win in Vermont, picking up nine delegates, according to The Associated Press delegate tracker.

On the Democratic side, Biden lost a handful of delegates in Minnesota to voters who chose "uncommitted," apparently as a protest of the administration's stance on Israel's continuing bombardment of the Gaza Strip. As of Wednesday morning, nearly 19% of voters in the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party primary, the state's Democratic Party, had chosen "uncommitted."

Biden split delegates with politically unknown entrepreneur Jason Palmer who defeated the incumbent in a small contest on the U.S. territory of American Samoa.

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McConnell endorses Trump; Haley holds out

After Tuesday's results made clear Trump would be the Republican nominee, Kentucky's McConnell, the most high-profile GOP official to withhold support from Trump, issued an endorsement.

"It is abundantly clear that former President Trump has earned the requisite support of Republican voters to be our nominee for President of the United States. It should come as no surprise that as nominee, he will have my support," McConnell said in a statement first reported by Politico.

Haley did not immediately endorse Trump after a primary race that became increasingly bitter as the field winnowed.

Trump did not mention Haley's name in a Tuesday night victory speech and it was Biden who made the first appeal to her voters in a campaign statement Wednesday.

"Donald Trump made it clear he doesn't want Nikki Haley's supporters," Biden said in the statement. "I want to be clear: There is a place for them in my campaign."

Biden said Haley supporters may not agree with him on many issues but could find common ground on "preserving American democracy, on standing up for the rule of law, on treating each other with decency and dignity and respect, on preserving NATO and standing up to America's adversaries."

Delegate count mounting

Biden and Trump have not yet mathematically clinched party nominations, but the symbolic victories are expected by month's end.

At the time that Haley called off her campaign Wednesday morning, she had garnered 89 delegates, according to the latest AP count.

Looking ahead, nine Republican delegates are up for grabs in American Samoa on Thursday, and GOP nominating contests on March 12 in Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi and Washington carry a total combined award of 161 delegates.

Democrats in Hawaii go to the polls Thursday, where Biden could gain a possible 22 delegates.

On March 12 Biden's party offers up another 235 delegates in contests in Georgia, Mississippi and Washington.

The next two largest delegate hauls for both Biden and Trump come on March 19 when a total 350 Republican delegates are available in Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Kansas and Ohio, and 379 Democratic Party delegates are up for grabs in those same states, except Florida which will not hold a Democratic nominating contest this year.

Down ballot results

The struggle for control of Congress also gained more clarity in primary results.

In a marquee U.S. Senate race, Democratic U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff and Republican former professional baseball player Steve Garvey advanced to the general election for a California U.S. Senate seat.

Garvey edged out two other Democratic House members, Katie Porter and Barbara Lee, to clear the state's "jungle primary," where candidates of all parties run in a single race and the top two members face off in a general election.

Sen. Laphonza Butler, a Democrat, has held the seat since longtime Sen. Dianne Feinstein's death last year. Butler did not seek reelection.

In Texas, Sen. Ted Cruz easily secured renomination on the Republican side, while nearly 60% of Democratic voters chose U.S. Rep. Colin Allred to face Cruz in the fall.

Neither race is expected to change the makeup of the Senate, with Schiff considered a near-lock to win in November and Cruz only slightly less favored in his race, according to analysis from Inside Elections.

In a closely watched race in Alabama's 2nd Congressional District, former U.S. Department of Justice official Shomari Figures and state House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels advanced to a runoff for the Democratic nomination.

The Republican runoff will be between former state Sen. Dick Brewbaker of Pike Road and attorney Caroleene Dobson.

The district, which federal courts redrew after state lawmakers ignored a court order to create a second majority-Black district, is expected to favor Democrats in November, possibly affecting the balance of power in the House.

Nikki Haley to withdraw from the GOP contest after winning just 1 Super Tuesday state

BY: ABRAHAM KENMORE AND SEANNA ADCOX - MARCH 6, 2024 8:45 AM

Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley plans to withdraw from the Republican presidential contest Wednesday, ending her increasingly long-shot bid of toppling former President Donald Trump, according to multiple media sources.

Haley will give a speech at 10 a.m. Wednesday in Charleston, where she launched her campaign, The Wall Street Journal first reported.

While she fell far short of being the GOP nominee, the South Carolina-born daughter of Indian immigrants made history as the first woman to win a GOP presidential primary.

She kept her pledge to stay in until Super Tuesday, when voters in 15 states went to the polls to choose between the two. She won only the smallest state — Vermont — bringing her tally to two.

When it was obvious the day had added little to her count, U.S. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina — who left the race in November — again called on Haley to step aside too and endorse Trump.

"Thank you for running. You've been courageous and strong and tenacious," Scott, who was first appointed to the Senate by Haley, said Tuesday night on Fox News, adding it's time for her to get behind Trump and concentrate on ousting President Joe Biden.

"This is no longer about any other candidate than Donald Trump," Scott continued. "Voters have spoken. They've spoken clearly."

Haley made no public appearance Tuesday as she watched the results from home, signaling an end was near.

She's not expected to endorse Trump. For weeks, she's been pointing to her voters as proof he will have problems in November, which her campaign continued to do late Tuesday in a statement that took another swipe at her former boss.

"Unity is not achieved by simply claiming 'we're united,'" Haley spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas said in an email. "Today, in state after state, there remains a large block of Republican primary voters who are expressing deep concerns about Donald Trump. That is not the unity our party needs for success. Addressing those voters' concerns will make the Republican Party and America better."

But as perhaps a sign Trump knew she was done, he never mentioned Haley's name in his Super Tuesday victory speech.

Haley managed to outlast 12 other Republican "fellas," as she liked to say after becoming the lone candidate standing in Trump's way of the nomination.

However, despite getting the one-on-one she wanted early in the voting calendar, her path to a win looked increasingly improbable, even as she insisted otherwise.

The Trump-versus-Haley race grew fiery once Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis bowed out ahead of the New Hampshire primary. After she lost by 11 percentage points in the Granite State — which turned out to be her closest losing margin — the calls for her to withdraw intensified.

She refused, spinning defeats as win.

She noted rising from just 2% in the polls to 43% of New Hampshire GOP primary voters choosing her. She told South Carolina voters that Trump should feel threatened by her rise. The claim clearly irked him.

Trump responded by threatening to permanently bar from "MAGA camp" anyone who continued to donate to her campaign. Haley was undeterred, pitching herself as the choice of reason and normalcy instead of

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two old men with questionable mental fitness. The 52-year-old former governor called on both 81-year-old Biden and 77-year-old Trump to take competency tests.

She said chaos follows Trump. His first United Nations ambassador accused him of being unhinged and dangerous on the world stage. He called her birdbrain. She called him a chicken for not debating her.

And her donations kept coming — for a while.

In January alone, her campaign raised over \$11.5 million, according to her disclosures.

The cash allowed her to back up her pledge to keep giving voters a choice through Super Tuesday, when 854 delegates were up for grabs. Ahead of Tuesday's voting, Haley had 43 delegates to Trump's 273.

"Dropping out would be the easy route. I've never taken the easy route," Haley said in Greenville ahead of the Feb. 24 contest in South Carolina. "I've always been David taking on Goliath."

She leaned into her perpetual underdog status, recalling her first win to the South Carolina House in 2004, when she defeated the chamber's then-longest-serving legislator for a seat in Lexington County. And she recounted her come-from-behind win in 2010, when she defeated a congressman, the attorney general and lieutenant governor to become South Carolina's first female and first minority governor.

But even in her home state, her popularity among Republicans waned as she stepped up attacks against the GOP frontrunner, according to Winthrop Poll results in February versus November.

Trump attracted thousands to rallies in South Carolina. Haley attracted hundreds — sometimes just dozens — as she traveled the state by bus.

She ultimately lost her home state by 20 percentage points. And that dried up some of her key financial support.

Americans for Prosperity Action, an organization founded by prominent conservative billionaire brothers Charles and David Koch, had never endorsed a presidential candidate prior to Haley. Following her South Carolina loss, the group announced it would no longer spend money to promote her.

Her losing margins grew wider, though she picked up her first win in Washington, D.C., last weekend, which accounted for 19 of her delegates.

And she continued to campaign hard, holding 15 rallies across nine states following the South Carolina primary.

She picked up endorsements from GOP Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine, two of the 15 Super Tuesday states, and released new ads. They didn't help.

On Tuesday, she won only the smallest of the states, Vermont, and it's not yet unclear how many of its 17 delegates will go to her tally. Under Vermont rules, she needs to cross 50% to take all 17. As of Wednesday morning, she was at 49.9%, according to The Associated Press.

Around midnight, her campaign continued to spin the positive.

"We're honored to have received the support of millions of Americans across the country today, including in Vermont where Nikki became the first Republican woman to win two presidential primary contests," Perez-Cubas said in a statement, referring to Vermont and Washington, D.C.

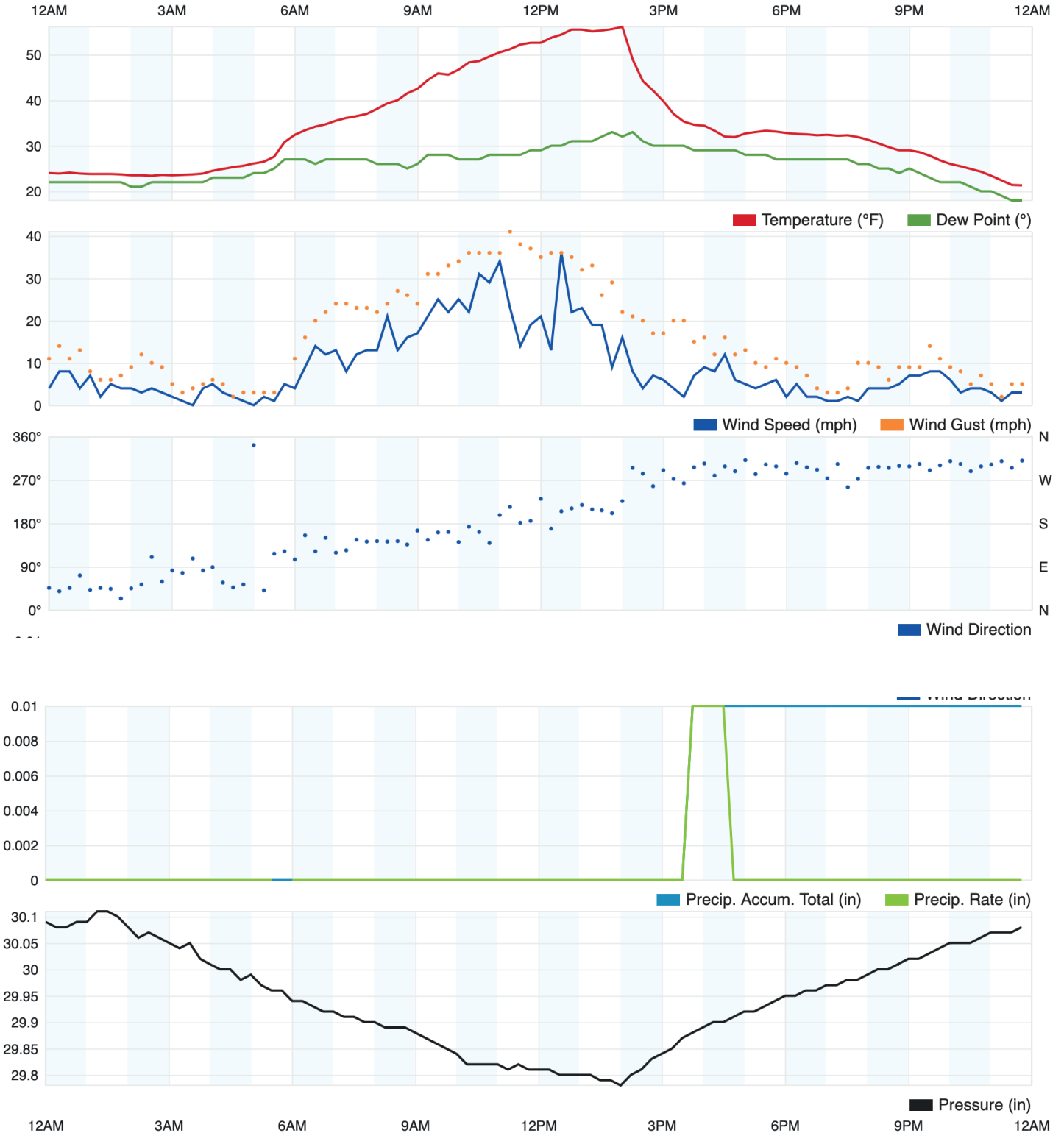
What the future holds for Haley is unclear after her insistence to stay in and step up attacks riled the MAGA faithful. Trump has made clear she's not on his list as a running mate.

On Sunday, Haley walked back a promise to endorse Trump if he wins the nomination.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Friday

**Friday
Night**

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 35 °F



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 15 °F



Sunny

High: 40 °F



Clear

Low: 17 °F



Sunny

High: 46 °F

Today Mostly sunny, with a high near 35. Northwest wind 7 to 10 mph.

Tonight Mostly cloudy, with a low around 15. North wind around 11 mph.

Friday Sunny, with a high near 40. North northwest wind 9 to 11 mph.

Friday Night Clear, with a low around 17. Northwest wind 5 to 8 mph.

Saturday Sunny, with a high near 46. Calm wind becoming southwest around 6 mph in the afternoon.

Saturday Night Clear, with a low around 24. South southeast wind 6 to 10 mph.

Sunday Sunny, with a high near 56. South southeast wind 9 to 11 mph becoming west southwest in the afternoon.

Sunday Night Partly cloudy, with a low around 28. West wind around 8 mph becoming south southeast after midnight.

Monday Mostly sunny, with a high near 63. South wind 8 to 15 mph.

Monday Night Mostly cloudy, with a low around 35.

Tuesday Mostly sunny, with a high near 60.

Tuesday Night Partly cloudy, with a low around 31.

Wednesday Partly sunny, with a high near 55.

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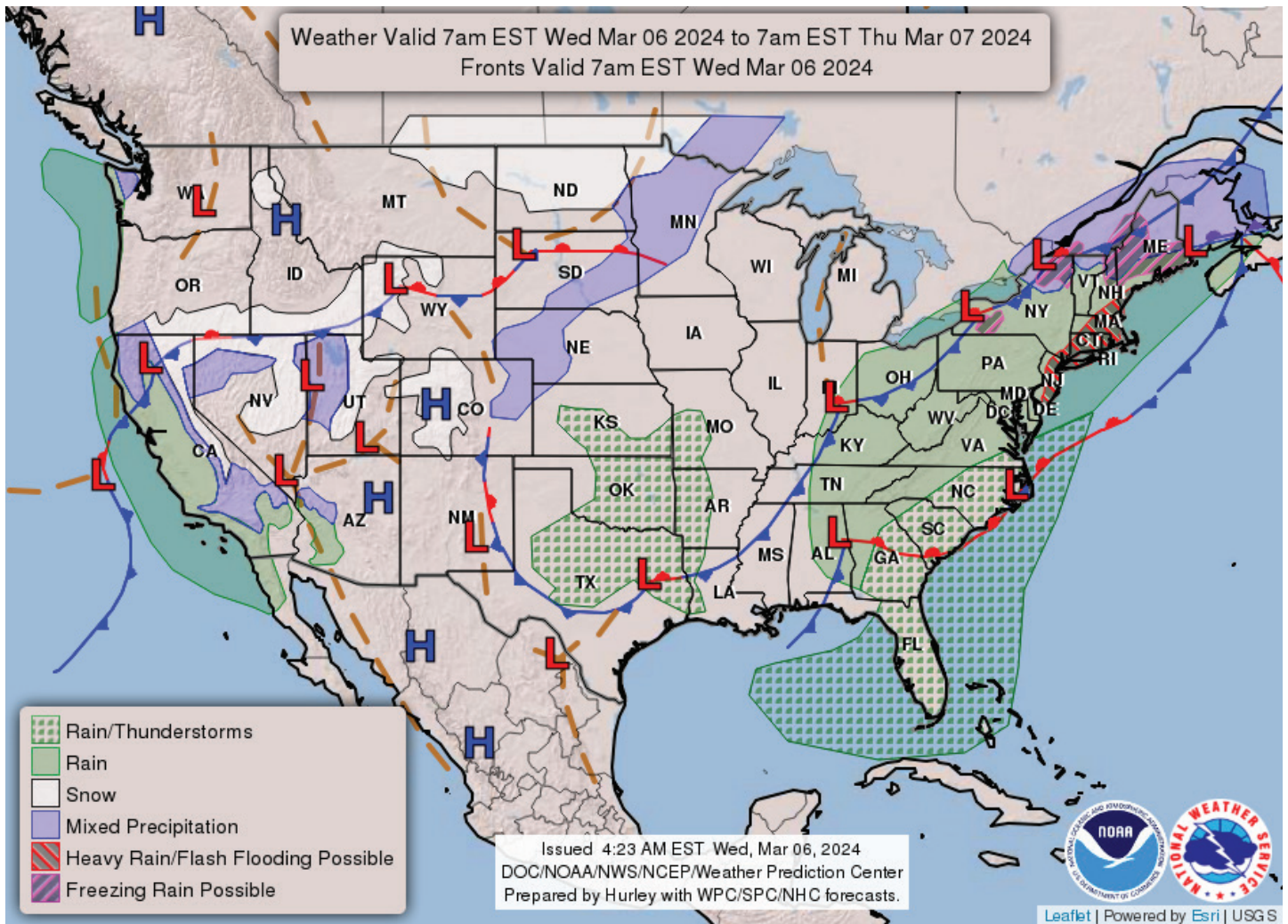
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 56 °F at 2:03 PM
Low Temp: 21 °F at 11:29 PM
Wind: 41 mph at 10:35 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 32 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 70 in 2016
Record Low: -24 in 1995
Average High: 37
Average Low: 15
Average Precip in March.: 0.17
Precip to date in March: 0.01
Average Precip to date: 1.34
Precip Year to Date: 0.08
Sunset Tonight: 6:29:41 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:54:53 am



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Today in Weather History

March 7, 1998: A winter storm tracked across South Dakota, resulting in heavy snow of 6 to 8 inches across most of central South Dakota from the evening of the 6th into the afternoon of the 7th. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Fort Pierre and near Stephan, 7 inches at Blunt, Pierre, and Murdo, and 8 inches across southern Jones and Lyman counties. As a result, many activities were canceled, and travel was significantly disrupted, especially on Interstate 90.

1717 - The Great Snow, a composite of four winter storms to hit the eastern U.S. in nine days, finally came to an end. Snow depths averaged 60 inches following the storm. Up to four feet of snow fell around Boston MA, and snow drifts 25 feet high were reported around Dorchester MA. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1932 - A severe coastal storm set barometric pressure records from Virginia to New England. Block Island RI reported a barometric pressure reading of 28.20 inches. (David Ludlum)

1947: On March 7, 1947, not long after the end of World War II and years before Sputnik ushered in the space age, a group of soldiers and scientists in the New Mexico desert saw something new and wonderful in this grainy black-and-white-photos - the first pictures of Earth as seen from an altitude greater than 100 miles in space.

1970: Last near-total eclipse of the sun in Washington, DC, in this century. Sun was 95% eclipsed. A total eclipse passed over NASA's Wallops Station (now Wallops Flight Facility) on the coast of Virginia.

1987 - Forty-five cities in the north central and northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Huron SD hit 80 degrees, and Pickstown SD reached 81 degrees. Rochester MN and Rockford IL smashed their previous record for the date by sixteen degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - High winds along a sharp cold front ushered snow and arctic cold into the Central Rocky Mountain Region and the Northern Plains. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to sixteen inches at Brighton. Winds gusted to 66 mph at Rapid City SD. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Blustery northwest winds ushered arctic cold into eastern U.S. Burlington VT reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero. Snow and ice over the Carolinas replaced the 80 degree weather of the previous day. High winds and heavy surf caused five million dollars damage along the North Carolina coast. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A major ice storm left much of Iowa under a thick coat of ice. It was the worst ice storm in at least twenty-five years for Iowa, perhaps the worst of the century. Up to two inches of ice coated much of western and central Iowa, with three inches reported in Crawford County and Carroll County. As much as five inches of ice was reported on some electrical lines. The ice downed 78 towers in a 17-mile stretch of a high voltage feeder near Boone costing three electric utilities fifteen million dollars. Damage to trees was incredible, and clean-up costs alone ran into the millions. Total damage from the storm was more than fifty million dollars. (Storm Data)

1997: The worst was finally over for states hit hard by the flooding Ohio River. The river crested on the 6th at Louisville, Kentucky, 15 feet above flood stage, after topping out at nearly 13 feet at Cincinnati, Ohio, and more than 7 feet at Huntington, West Virginia.

2018: A teacher was struck by lightning outside an Ocean County, New Jersey middle school during a rare weather phenomenon known as thundersnow.

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

THE LIMITS OF PRAYER

Young Eddie was saying grace before the family had dinner in a local restaurant. Heads bowed and hands united around the table when he said, "Lord, thank You for the food that is coming. And, Lord, I'll really thank You a lot more if Mom would get us some ice cream!"

A woman sitting at the next table said, "Shame on that child. Kids just don't know how to pray anymore. Asking God for ice cream is a disgrace."

Someone sitting in a booth overheard the woman and said, "Asking God for ice cream is a great prayer. Ice cream is good for the soul."

When the ice cream was served, young Eddie took his bowl to the woman and said, "Here, ma'am. This is for you. Sometimes ice cream is good for the soul."

Paul said, "Pray about everything!" Nothing is beyond everything - not even ice cream. As believers, we need not worry about anything because we have a loving Heavenly Father Who knows about and cares for our every need and want. Each of them individually!

Here's a great reminder from Peter: "Give all your worries and wants to God, for He cares for you." If only we would accept the reality of God's power and His unlimited concern for us, our prayers would be vastly different and even include "ice cream" sometimes.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to look to You as a Father Who cares for everything about us. May we take You at Your word and pray and trust You completely. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. 1 Peter 5:7



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:
03.05.24

2 49 50 61 70 14

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$687,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 10
DRAW: Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

20 21 24 40 42 4

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,050,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 25
DRAW: Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

13 24 28 36 38 1

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 40 Mins 9
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

3 9 11 21 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 40
DRAW: Mins 8 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

30 31 36 52 58 16

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 9
DRAW: Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

6 19 28 44 60 10

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$521,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 9
DRAW: Mins 9 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. March 4, 2024.

Editorial: School Safety And Gun Legislation

A bill introduced in the South Dakota Legislature this session regarding school safety and gun violence misses the mark in more ways than one.

Last week, the House Judiciary Committee gave its approval to Senate Bill 203, which would allow anyone age 21 or older with an enhanced permit to conceal-carry a firearm to bring a concealed pistol on school grounds. The bill was approved by the full Senate a week earlier on a 31-3 vote.

According to South Dakota Searchlight, possessing an enhanced permit involves undergoing an FBI background check and the successful completion of an approved gun safety course.

The House committee vote was 11-1, with District 18 Rep. Mike Stevens casting the lone no vote.

As he explained to his fellow lawmakers — and as he reiterated at Saturday's Cracker Barrel in Yankton — the legislation implies that school districts are not up to the task of protecting their students.

"The inference 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," said Stevens, a former Yankton School Board member, in Pierre last week.

During the Cracker Barrel, he referred to the notion that schools aren't capable of protecting their students as insulting.

As Stevens pointed out Saturday, the safety of children is the top priority of a school board.

Indeed, many security measures have been instituted over the years, particularly since the 1999 Columbine shootings and the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre. Schools are theoretically safer now, but they are still vulnerable. No amount of defense or good intentions can be perfect when dealing with individuals armed both with a weapon and the element of surprise.

While SB 203 clearly has many proponents, it also has its share of critics. Education groups opposed the measure based on certain language. This included assigning principals as the school official who grants permission for people to carry such weapons. Some critics said it should be up to the school boards or superintendents to avoid confusion in districts with more than one principal. Another concern was whether a visitor could come to a basketball game, for example, and demand to be allowed entry with a concealed weapon.

SB 203 is the third attempt by Sen. Brent Hoffman of Hartford to pass school safety legislation this winter. An earlier bill would have required schools to have a resource officer or a sentinel, and a second measure would have mandated certain safety standards and the posting of a school safety tip line. Both were defeated.

As reported by South Dakota Searchlight, "Hoffman said he wants to add proactive protections for students before South Dakota suffers a mass school shooting."

However, there is another, underlying issue here: While lawmakers are seeking ways to boost school security — which is, frankly, never a bad idea — little is being done to address a particular root cause of the issue: the proliferation of firearms, particularly semi-automatic-style weapons.

Based on a quick review of the log of legislative bills filed for this session, measures have been introduced in both the House and Senate to "prohibit a homeowners' association from placing restrictions on firearms or firearm ammunition." Another Senate bill sought to "void covenants that prohibit or restrict the possession or use of firearms and ammunition." Another House bill would have required "that an application for a medical marijuana registry identification card include a notice of federal law regarding firearms and the unlawful use of a controlled substance."

But there has apparently been nothing filed regarding the state's gun laws, which are among the least

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restrictive in the nation — nothing about waiting periods for purchasing handguns; nothing on more thorough background checks; nothing about banning at least some so-called “assault weapons,” large-capacity magazines or “ghost guns.”

All those things are a given and, it appears, untouchable.

But they’re also problematic.

Until such things are addressed, we’ll probably continue to see legislation that mostly accommodates a larger issue that no one has the desire or political will to confront. It’s an issue we seem willing to live with, even while so many innocent people continue to die from it.

END

Biden wins Democratic caucuses in Hawaii as he moves closer to seizing the nomination again

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — President Joe Biden won the Democratic caucuses in Hawaii on Wednesday, propelling him closer to winning his party’s nomination again after romping through the Super Tuesday contests earlier this week.

The president defeated long-shot candidates including U.S. Rep. Dean Phillips and author Marianne Williamson.

Biden went into the vote with the advantage of incumbency and name recognition. He’s expected to formally clinch the Democratic nomination later this month and will almost certainly face Donald Trump in the general election after his last major Republican rival, Nikki Haley, exited the race.

Biden won with 66% of the vote in a contest in which only 1,563 votes were cast, according to the Hawaii Democratic Party. Twenty-nine percent of voters chose “Uncommitted.”

John Bickel, a high school social studies teacher, voted for Bernie Sanders four years ago but showed up to this year’s caucus in a blue Biden-Harris T-shirt. He liked how Biden shepherded an expansion of the child tax credit, which cut the U.S. child poverty rate in half, and how he stood on the picket line with striking auto workers. He said no other president has done what Biden has done to “be there personally for labor.”

“Those kinds of things really impressed me about Joe Biden,” he said.

Bill Milks, an 80-year-old retiree, voted uncommitted because he doesn’t think Biden, who is 81, is capable of effectively debating or campaigning for president.

“He just is not healthy enough to exhibit a lot of enthusiasm and inspire people to believe that he can hang in there and do a good job for four more years,” Milks said.

Democrats in Hawaii cast their ballots at school cafeterias, community centers and union halls across the state. Only registered voters who were party members were allowed to participate but the party made same-day party enrollment and voter registration possible at each poll site.

Hawaii is a Democratic Party stronghold. Democrats control both chambers of the state legislature and the governor’s office. All four members of the state’s congressional delegation are Democrats.

Republicans in Hawaii will hold their presidential caucuses on March 12.

Biden is hoping to use his State of the Union address to show a wary electorate he’s up to the job

By ZEKE MILLER and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is set to use his State of the Union address Thursday to promote his vision for a second term to a dispirited electorate who questions whether he’s up to the job and to warn that GOP front-runner Donald Trump would be a dangerous alternative.

Biden’s third such address from the House rostrum will be something of an on-the-job interview, as the nation’s oldest president tries to quell voter concerns about his age and job performance while sharpening

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the contrast with his all-but-certain 2024 rival.

The president hopes to showcase his accomplishments on infrastructure and manufacturing, as well as push for action on aid to Ukraine, tougher migration rules, restoring access to abortion, and lowering drug prices, among other issues. But as he does so, the 81-year-old president will be closely watched not just for his message but for whether he can deliver it with vigor and command.

The president will also try to make this State of the Union, with all its accompanying pomp, a more intimate moment. White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden sees the speech as a "continuation of conversations" he has had with Americans as he travels the country.

"It's built on those conversations, that experience that he has," she said Wednesday.

Biden spent last weekend working on the speech in the seclusion of the Camp David presidential retreat with his closest aides and presidential historian Jon Meacham. He was expected to keep fine-tuning it right into speech day, Jean-Pierre said.

The president will be speaking before a historically ineffective Congress. In the GOP-led House, Speaker Mike Johnson took power five months ago after the chaotic ouster of former Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Legislators are still struggling to approve funding bills for the current year and have been deadlocked for months on foreign assistance bills to help Ukraine stave off Russia's invasion and support Israel's fight against Hamas.

The State of the Union address is a marquee night on the White House calendar, offering presidents a direct line to a captive audience of lawmakers and dignitaries in the House chamber and tens of millions of viewers at home. But even so, the night has lost some of its luster as viewership has declined.

"You always hear people say, 'Oh, the speech has completely lost its relevance. Just send a PDF of it. It should be a video.' That's just such nonsense," said Michael Waldman, a speechwriter in the Clinton White House. "... It may not be as big as Taylor Swift at the Super Bowl, but it's a big audience for a political speech."

Biden aides inside the White House and on his campaign are hoping for some fresh viral moments — like when he tussled last year with heckling Republicans and chided them for past efforts to cut Medicare and Social Security.

Johnson, eager to avoid a similar episode this year, in a private meeting on Wednesday urged Republicans to show "decorum" during the speech, according to a person familiar with his remarks to lawmakers.

Biden goes into the speech with work to do shoring up his standing. Just 38% of U.S. adults approve of how he is handling his job as president, while 61% disapprove, according to a recent survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The same survey found that more than 6 in 10 (63%) say they're not very or not at all confident in Biden's mental capability to serve effectively as president. A similar but slightly smaller share (57%) say that Trump lacks the memory and acuity for the job.

The already intense scrutiny of Biden's age was magnified when special counsel Robert Hur raised questions about the president's mental acuity in his report last month on Biden's handling of classified information.

Jim Messina, former President Barack Obama's 2012 campaign manager, said Thursday's speech offers Biden an important opportunity to address voter concerns.

"The more people see him doing his job, the better," Messina said. "And the more people see him out there being the president of the United States, the better off we are."

With Hur set to testify on Tuesday before lawmakers about his investigation, Messina said, Biden's address could serve as a "prebuttal" to the special counsel's appearance.

Biden is expected to paint an optimistic future for the country as the massive pieces of legislation he signed into law during his first two years in office are implemented. But he also was set to warn that the progress he sees at home and abroad is fragile — and particularly vulnerable if Trump returns to the White House.

Republicans, in contrast, are describing the current state of the union with dark, menacing terms — like

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“crisis” and “catastrophe” — that echo the dismal tones Trump sounds on the campaign trail.

“America is in decline, nothing he says tomorrow night is going to change that,” Johnson said Wednesday.

This year, Biden could also face protests and heightened emotions — particularly among his base supporters — over his staunch backing for Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza. The White House had initially hoped a short-term ceasefire would be in place by the speech. It blames Hamas for not yet accepting a deal brokered by the U.S. and its allies.

The president will also issue an emphatic call for lawmakers to pass sorely needed defense assistance for Ukraine. Acute ammunition shortages have allowed Russia to retake the offensive in the 2-year-old war.

The GOP-controlled House has refused to act on a Senate-passed version of the aid legislation, insisting on new stiffer measures to limit migration at the U.S.-Mexico border, after Trump used his influence to help sink a bipartisan compromise that would have done just that.

Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat, said he was expecting that Biden “knocks Republicans in the teeth” for rejecting the border security deal.

“Voters want a candidate who cares about the border, but they want a candidate who’s going to do something about it, not just complain about it,” he said.

Access to abortion and fertility treatments also is expected to be a key component of Biden’s speech, especially in light of a controversial ruling from Alabama’s Supreme Court that has upended access to in vitro fertilization treatment in the state.

One of first lady Jill Biden’s guests for the speech will be Kate Cox, who sued Texas, and ultimately left her home state, to obtain an emergency abortion after a severe fetal anomaly was detected.

The White House also invited union leaders, a gun control advocate, and others that Jill Biden and her husband have met as they traveled the country promoting his agenda. The Prime Minister of Sweden, Ulf Kristersson, will also attend to mark his country’s accession to NATO in the wake of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Going into the State of the Union, Biden also has raised the problems of “shrinkflation” — companies putting fewer pretzels in the jar and less yogurt in sealed cups — and so-called “junk fees” on services. Neither is a prime driver of inflation, but the White House hopes to show consumers that Biden is fighting for them.

Biden was also going to unveil an expanded plan to raise corporate taxes and use the proceeds to trim budget deficits and cut taxes for the middle class.

Following the speech, Biden was set for a weekend of campaign travel, holding events in Pennsylvania on Friday and Georgia on Saturday. Trump, too, will be campaigning in Georgia that day. The president’s Cabinet also will fan out across the country to amplify his message.

The Biden campaign said it would host more than 200 watch parties around the country, including in cities, suburbs and rural towns in battleground states. Campaign officials will use the events to recruit volunteers and encourage others to get involved in Biden’s reelection effort.

The Latest | Gaza cease-fire talks are at an impasse, Egyptian officials say

By The Associated Press undefined

Egyptian officials said Thursday that negotiations over a cease-fire in Gaza are at an impasse as Hamas insists on a process to end to the war.

After nearly five months of war, much of Gaza is in ruins, and international pressure is growing for Israel and Hamas to reach a deal that would halt the fighting and release the remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

The U.S., Egypt and Qatar have been trying to broker an agreement that would stop the fighting for six weeks, and include the release of 40 hostages held in Gaza in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

The Egyptian officials said that Hamas has accepted the proposal as a first stage, but wants commitments that it will eventually lead to a more permanent cease-fire. Israel has publicly ruled out that demand, saying it intends to resume the offensive after any cease-fire with the goal of destroying Hamas.

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The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the negotiations with media.

Israel's near-total blockade of Gaza and the ongoing fighting have made it nearly impossible to deliver supplies in most of Gaza, aid groups say. Many of the estimated 300,000 people still living in northern Gaza have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive.

Israel launched its offensive after Hamas-led militants stormed across the border on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250. Over 100 hostages were released in November in exchange for 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

The number of Palestinians killed has climbed above 30,700, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. It does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures, but says women and children make up around two-thirds of the total casualties. It says over 72,000 people have been wounded.

Currently:

- Houthi missile attack kills two crew members in Yemen rebels' first fatal assault on shipping.
- The hostage crisis poses a dilemma for Israel and offers a path to victory for Hamas.
- Few Americans want U.S. more involved in current wars in Ukraine and Gaza, AP-NORC poll finds.
- A Mideast Starbucks franchisee is firing 2,000 workers after being targeted in an Israel-Hamas war boycott.

— Indiana lawmakers in standoff on antisemitism bill as critics of Israel seek changes.

— Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>.

Here's the latest:

EGYPTIANS OFFICIALS SAY CEASE-FIRE TALKS ARE STUCK

CAIRO — Egyptian officials say negotiations over a cease-fire in Gaza have reached an impasse over Hamas' demand for a phased process culminating in an end to the war.

The U.S., Egypt and Qatar have been trying for weeks to broker an agreement on a six-week cease-fire and the release of 40 hostages held in Gaza in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned in Israel.

The officials said Thursday that Hamas has agreed on the main terms of such an agreement as a first stage, but wants commitments that it will lead to an eventual, more permanent cease-fire.

Hamas has said it will not release all of the remaining hostages without a full Israeli withdrawal from the territory. Palestinian militants are believed to be holding around 100 hostages, and the remains of 30 others, captured during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel that triggered the war.

Hamas is also demanding the release of a large number of prisoners, including top militants serving life sentences, in exchange for the remaining hostages.

Israel has publicly ruled out those demands, saying it intends to resume the offensive after any cease-fire with the goal of destroying Hamas.

The Egyptian officials say Israel wants to confine the negotiations to the more limited agreement. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the negotiations with media.

Both officials said mediators are still pressing the two parties to soften their positions.

The mediators had hoped to reach a deal before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is expected to begin Sunday. The month of dawn-to-dusk fasting often sees Israeli-Palestinian tensions rise over access to a major holy site in Jerusalem.

By Associated Press writer Samy Magdy

NORWAY WARNS AGAINST BUSINESS WITH ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Norway's government on Thursday urged Norwegian companies to avoid trade and business activities that contribute to maintaining illegal Israeli settlements. Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said that "for years, Norway has been clear that the settlement policy in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, is in violation of international law, including humanitarian law and human rights."

"Norwegian businesses should be aware that, through economic or financial activity in the Israeli settlements in violation of international law, they risk contributing to violations of international humanitarian law

or human rights," Barth Eide said.

He said that last year "was also the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since the UN began recording. I repeat that the injustice to which the Palestinians are subjected must stop," he said.

CHINA CALLS FOR PALESTINIAN STATE TO JOIN U.N.

BEIJING — China's foreign minister is demanding that other members of the U.N. Security Council stop blocking Palestine from becoming a member of the United Nations.

Wang Yi reiterated China's call for a major international conference to draw up a roadmap and timetable for a two-state solution.

"We support Palestine becoming a full member of the United Nations and call on individual members of the Security Council not to set obstacles for this any more," he said Thursday at a news conference during the annual meeting of China's legislature.

Zhang Jun, China's U.N. ambassador, said in January that his country supports U.N. membership for Palestine as a first step toward the creation of a Palestinian state. The Security Council needs to send a clear and unequivocal signal, reaffirming the urgency of the two-state solution as the sole feasible way out, he was quoted as saying by China's official state media.

China, one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, backed Palestine becoming a U.N. member in a joint statement issued last June during a state visit to China by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

AT LEAST 15 KILLED BY THREE ISRAELI AIRSTRIKES IN CENTRAL GAZA

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — At least 15 people were killed by three Israeli airstrikes that hit buildings in central Gaza.

The bodies were taken to Al Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir al-Balah, where an Associated Press journalist counted the bodies as they arrived. People were reported to be still trapped under the rubble.

Two strikes hit buildings in Deir al-Balah and a third in the Nuseirat refugee camp.

Analysis: First fatal attack on shipping by Yemen's Houthi rebels escalates risk for reeling Mideast

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The first fatal attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels on shipping threatens to further sever a crucial maritime artery for global trade and carries with it risks beyond those just at sea.

Already, the White House is warning that there will be a response to Wednesday's attack on the Barbados-flagged, Liberian-owned bulk carrier True Confidence in the Gulf of Aden. What that will look like remains unclear, but the U.S. already has launched round after round of airstrikes targeting the Houthis, a rebel group that has held Yemen's capital since 2014, and more are likely on the way.

However, there's already a wider economic, humanitarian and political impact looming from the attack. It also further highlights Yemen's yearslong war, now overshadowed by Israel's grinding war on Hamas on the Gaza Strip that may reach into the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, raising the danger of worsening regional anger.

HIGH-SEAS CRISIS WIDENS

Since the onset of the Houthi attacks, the rebels have framed them as a way to pressure Israel to stop the war, which has killed over 30,700 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The war began Oct. 7 with a Hamas attack in Israel that killed about 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage.

But as shippers began avoiding the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, the rebels began attacking ships with tenuous — or no — ties to Israel or the war. Meanwhile, U.S. and coalition warships have shot down any Houthi fire that's come near them. That's left the rebels targeting commercial ships whose only protection has been armed guards, barbed-wire fencing and water cannons — good enough to deter pirates, but not an anti-ship ballistic missile.

Wednesday's attack underlines the danger to those not even involved in the war. The Houthi missile that hit the True Confidence killed two Filipinos and one Vietnamese national. The Iranian-backed Houthis have

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not acknowledged those deaths and sought to distance themselves from any consequence of their actions. "We hold America responsible for the repercussions of everything that happens," Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdulsalam wrote online Thursday.

Another ship sank this past weekend after being abandoned following a Houthi attack.

AID, ECONOMIES BECOME CASUALTIES

Already, the Houthis have attacked at least one ship carrying aid bound for territory they hold. The Greek-flagged, U.S.-owned bulk carrier Sea Champion had been full of grain from Argentina and was bound for Aden and then rebel-held Hodeida when it was hit in February. As hunger stalks the Gaza Strip during the Israel war, so too does it still grip Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country.

"The escalation of the crisis in the Red Sea is likely to worsen the food insecurity situation in Yemen in 2024, exacerbating an already dire humanitarian crisis," the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization has warned.

Then there are the conflicts gripping East Africa. The World Food Program issued a warning Tuesday regarding its operations in Somalia, saying the shipping crisis is hindering its ability to "maintain its regular flow of humanitarian aid." In war-torn Sudan, the International Rescue Committee says it has suspended its operations to Port Sudan over hiked costs and other concerns rising from the Houthi attacks.

Then there's the economic pressure. While Israel has described its economy as so far unaffected, the same can't be said for neighboring Egypt. Traffic in its Suez Canal linking the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea onward to Europe has dropped by nearly half, according to U.N. figures.

Those shipping fees provide crucial revenue for Egypt's government, which has allowed the Egyptian pound to rapidly devalue as it reached a deal with the International Monetary Fund to increase its bailout loan from \$3 billion to \$8 billion. Further economic turmoil could spark unrest in Egypt, less than 15 years on from the 2011 Arab Spring.

AIRSTRIKES MAY IMPERIL PEACE TALKS, EMPOWER HOUTHIS

Since beginning its campaign of airstrikes in January, the U.S. military has claimed it destroyed over 100 Houthi missiles, according to an Associated Press analysis of its statements. However, that hasn't halted the rebels' ability to launch attacks.

That's something a Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis learned after launching its own campaign against the rebels beginning in 2015 in support of the country's exiled government. The American strikes so far have been more precise, with only one reported civilian death so far over dozens of attacks.

But the American involvement has rubbed Saudi Arabia and its main partner, the United Arab Emirates, the wrong way — particularly after President Joe Biden in 2021 came into office and promptly declared that Yemen's war "has to end." Both countries have avoided actively taking part in the U.S.-led campaign now targeting the rebels. And Saudi Arabia reached a détente a year ago with Iran it hoped would lead to a peace deal, something that still hasn't happened.

For the Houthis, the fight against Israel and the U.S. may be everything they've wanted. Their Zaydi Shiite group ran a 1,000-year kingdom in Yemen until 1962. Their slogan has long been: "God is the greatest; death to America; death to Israel; curse the Jews; victory to Islam."

Fighting against two of their archenemies allows the rebels to shore up their own support with Yemen, as well as gain international recognition in an Arab world otherwise enraged by the killing of Palestinians in Israel's campaign in the Gaza Strip. If fighting there goes into Ramadan, a time in Islam for peace and reflection, it may inspire a further spread of militant violence. ____

EDITOR'S NOTE — Jon Gambrell, the news director for the Gulf and Iran for The Associated Press, has reported from each of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iran, Yemen and other locations across the Mideast and wider world since joining the AP in 2006.

Turkey struggles to stop violence against women. At least 71 have been killed this year

By AYSE WIETING and SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ISTANBUL (AP) — Muhterem Evcil was stabbed to death by her estranged husband at her workplace in Istanbul, where he had repeatedly harassed her in breach of a restraining order. The day before, authorities detained him for violating the order but let him go free after questioning.

More than a decade later, her sister believes Evcil would still be alive if authorities had enforced laws on protecting women and jailed him.

“As long as justice is not served and men are always put on the forefront, women in this country will always cry,” Cigdem Kuzey said.

Evcil’s murder in 2013 became a rallying call for greater protection for women in Turkey, but activists say the country has made little progress in keeping women from being killed. They say laws to safeguard women are not sufficiently enforced and abusers are not prosecuted.

At least 403 women were killed in Turkey last year, most of them by current or former spouses and other men close to them, according to the We Will Stop Femicides Platform, a group that tracks gender-related killings and provides support to victims of violence.

So far this year 71 women have been killed in Turkey, including seven on Feb. 27 — the highest known number of such killings there on a single day.

The WWSF secretary general, Fidan Ataselim, attributed the killings to deeply patriarchal traditions in the majority Muslim country and to a greater number of women wishing to leave troubled relationships. Others want to work outside the home.

“Women in Turkey want to live more freely and more equally. Women have changed and progressed a lot in a positive sense,” Ataselim said. “Men cannot accept this, and they are violently trying to suppress the progress of women.”

Turkey was the first country to sign and ratify a European treaty on preventing violence against women — known as the Istanbul Convention — in 2011. But President Recep Tayyip Erdogan withdrew Turkey from it 10 years later, sparking protests.

The president’s decision came after pressure from Islamic groups and some officials from Erdogan’s Islam-oriented party. They argued that the treaty was inconsistent with conservative values, eroded the traditional family unit and encouraged divorce.

Erdogan has said he believes that men and women were not biologically created as equals and that a woman’s priority should be her family and motherhood.

The president insists that Turkey does not need the Istanbul Convention, and has vowed to “constantly raise the bar” in preventing violence against women. Last year, his government strengthened legislation by making persistent stalking a crime punishable by up to two years in prison.

Mahinur Ozdemir Goktas, the minister for family affairs, says she has made protecting women a priority and personally follows trials.

“Even if the victims have given up on their complaints, we continue to follow them,” she said. “Every case is one too many for us.”

Ataselim said the Istanbul Convention was an additional layer of protection for women and is pressing for a return to the treaty. Her group is also calling for the establishment of a telephone hotline for women facing violence and for the opening of more women’s shelters, saying the current number is far from meeting demand.

Most of all, existing measures should be adequately enforced, Ataselim said.

Activists allege that courts are lenient toward male abusers who claim they were provoked, express remorse or show good behavior during trials. Activists say restraining orders are often too short and those who violate them are not detained, putting women at risk.

“We believe that each of the femicide cases were preventable deaths,” Ataselim said.

Each year, women’s activists in Turkey take to the streets on International Women’s Day on March 8 and

on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on Nov. 25, demanding greater protection for women and Turkey's return to the treaty.

Turkish authorities regularly ban such rallies on security and public order grounds.

Demonstrators often carry signs that read: "I don't want to die" -- the last words uttered by Emine Bulut, who died in a cafe in Kirikkale in central Turkey after her husband slit her throat in front of her 10-year-old daughter. Her death in 2019 shocked the nation.

Evcil, killed in a salon where she worked as a manicurist, suffered physical and mental abuse after eloping at 18 to marry her husband, who is currently serving a life sentence in prison, her sister Kuzey said. Evcil decided to leave him after 13 years of marriage.

Kuzey described her sister as a kind woman who "smiled even when she was crying inside."

Authorities have named a park in Istanbul in Evcil's memory.

"My hope is that our daughters don't experience what we have experienced and justice comes to this country," Kuzey said.

Frozen in time: Families of those on missing Flight 370 cannot shake off their grief without answers

By EILEEN NG Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Over the past decade, Grace Subathirai Nathan graduated from law school, got married, opened a law firm and had two babies. But part of her is frozen in time, still in denial over the loss of her mother on a missing Malaysia Airlines plane in 2014.

There has been no funeral service, and Grace, 35, still speaks of her mother in the present tense. When she got married in 2020, she walked down the aisle with a picture of her mother tucked in a bouquet of daisies — chosen because of her mother's name, Anne Catherine Daisy.

The Malaysian criminal lawyer has become one of the key faces of Voice 370, a next-of-kin support group, as she channeled her grief into keeping alive the quest for answers in the disappearance of MH370 that has ripped families apart.

"In terms of going on, I progressed in my career, in my family life ... but I am still trying to push for the search of MH370 to continue. I am trying to push for the plane to be found, so in that way I haven't moved on," Grace said in an interview. "Logically in my brain I know I am probably never going to see her again, but I haven't been able to accept that fully, and I think emotionally, there's a gap that hasn't been bridged due to the lack of closure."

The baffling disappearance of Flight 370 still captivates people. The Boeing 777 left Kuala Lumpur with 239 people on March 8, 2014, but dropped off radar screens shortly after and never made it to Beijing, its destination. Investigators say someone deliberately shut down the plane's communications system and took the plane off course.

The jet is believed to have plunged into a remote part of the southern Indian Ocean based on satellite data, but a massive search was fruitless. No wreckage or bodies have ever been found except for fragments that washed ashore on the African coast and Indian Ocean islands.

Families of those on board, many from China, have found different ways to cope with the grief, but one thing is constant — their mission for justice and answers. The pain still torments some families who are skeptical of theories of the plane's fate and hang on to hope that their loved ones may return.

Like Grace, Chinese farmer Li Eryou also has not held a funeral or memorial service for his only son.

He has a board at home on which he counts each passing day since MH370 disappeared. Li Yanlin, 27, had a promising career as an engineer with a telecommunications company that was cut short.

The pain comes easily, triggered by a sound, an object, even a flower, Li said.

"All these years I've been drifting along in life like a ghost," Li said in an interview in China's Handan city. "When I meet my friends and relatives, I have to put on a smile. At night, I can become true to myself. When all is quiet in the dead of night, I weep without people knowing."

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Li recently moved to stay with his daughter due to poor health. At his former residence, newspaper clippings of the missing aircraft that have yellowed with age still hang on the wall and his son's room is kept largely untouched.

"I believe my son is still on the flight, that he's still around. Or he is living on a remote island like Robinson Crusoe," Li said, in a reference to his son's favorite book.

Li and his wife seldom travel but have made multiple trips to Malaysia to seek answers and to Madagascar, where parts of the aircraft have washed up on beaches. The lack of answers merely deepens their agony.

They are among about 40 Chinese families that have rejected a small compassion payment from the airline. They have sued five entities including Malaysia Airlines, Boeing and aircraft engine maker Rolls-Royce, seeking larger compensation and answers to who should be held accountable. Court hearings started in Beijing in November and a verdict could take months.

On the 100th day after the flight vanished, Li penned his first poem expressing his longing for his son. Since then, he has written about 2,000 that have helped him cope with the grief.

"We shouted to the Earth: Malaysia Airlines 370. The Earth roars, it is silent and does not go away. It's not here, not here. Don't you see the heavy backpack on my son's shoulders? Drops of sweat from hard work shine on his forehead," says one verse. "We appeal 10,000 times, restart the search."

"I wrote down my feelings. The only reason I could survive all these years is because of these words," Li said.

There is now new hope for closure. During a remembrance event in Kuala Lumpur last Sunday, Malaysia's government said it will consider a proposal for a new search by U.S. marine robotics firm Ocean Infinity, which conducted a "no find, no fee" hunt in 2018.

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said during a speech at Australian National University in Canberra on Thursday that he was inclined to support reopening an investigation into what happened to MH370, but that the decision must be based on compelling facts.

It is unclear whether Ocean Infinity has new data to pinpoint the location of the plane.

"Once we know what happened, only then can a true form of healing begin ... until those questions are answered, no matter how much you try to move on or how much you try to close that chapter, it will never go away," Grace said.

Her mother was originally not meant to be on the flight. She was due to fly a week earlier but delayed her trip to care for Grace's ailing grandmother, who died months after the plane's disappearance.

"MH370 extends far beyond our need for closure and I just want everybody to know that MH370 is not history. It's the future of aviation safety because until we find MH370, we cannot prevent something like this from happening again," Grace said.

Jacquita Gomes, whose husband Patrick was an inflight supervisor on the plane, said 126 books have been written and numerous documentaries have been made about MH370, but much of that has been speculation with no real answers.

"We keep the memories of him alive and constantly talk about him. He might be gone but not forgotten and never will be, so we urge for the search to go on." she said. "We need to make sure that flights are safe again. ... Let's not forget all those on board."

Alabama governor signs legislation protecting IVF providers from legal liability into law

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Facing pressure to get in vitro fertilization services restarted in the state, Alabama's governor swiftly signed legislation into law Wednesday shielding doctors from potential legal liability raised by a court ruling that equated frozen embryos to children.

Republican Gov. Kay Ivey signed the bill after it was approved in a late-night session by lawmakers scrambling to address a wave of criticism after services were halted at some of the state's largest fertility clinics. Doctors from at least one clinic said they would resume IVF services on Thursday.

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"I am pleased to sign this important, short-term measure into law so that couples in Alabama hoping and praying to be parents can grow their families through IVF," Ivey said.

Republicans in the GOP-dominated Alabama Legislature opted to back the immunity proposal as a solution to the clinics' concerns. But they shied away from proposals that would address the legal status of embryos created in IVF labs, action that some said would be needed to permanently settle the issue.

The Alabama Supreme Court last month ruled that three couples whose frozen embryos were destroyed in an accident at a storage facility could pursue wrongful death lawsuits for their "extrauterine children." The ruling, treating an embryo the same as a child or gestating fetus under the wrongful death statute, raised concerns about civil liabilities for clinics. Three major IVF providers paused services.

The new law, which took effect immediately, shields providers from prosecution and civil lawsuits "for the damage to or death of an embryo" during IVF services. Civil lawsuits could be pursued against manufacturers of IVF-related goods, such as the nutrient-rich solutions used to grow embryos, but damages would be capped to "the price paid for the impacted in vitro cycle."

Patients and doctors had traveled to Montgomery, to urge lawmakers to find a solution. They described appointments that were abruptly canceled and how their paths to parenthood were suddenly put in doubt.

Doctors from Alabama Fertility, one of the clinics that paused IVF services, watched as the bill got final passage. They said it will allow them to resume embryo transfers "starting tomorrow."

"We have some transfers tomorrow and some Friday. This means that we will be able to do embryo transfers and hopefully have more pregnancies and babies in the state of Alabama," Dr. Mamie McLean said after the vote.

The University of Alabama at Birmingham similarly said it is "moving to promptly resume IVF treatments."

Liz Goldman was at home giving her daughter a bottle as she watched the Senate vote on a livestream. "She didn't understand, but it made me excited," Goldman said of her daughter.

Goldman, whose daughter was conceived through IVF after a uterus transplant, hopes to become pregnant with a second child. But her plans were cast into doubt when IVF services were paused. With a team of doctors involved in her care, she couldn't just move to another state, she said.

"I'm super thankful. The past two-and-a-half weeks have been the most stressful time of my journey and I've been through a lot," Goldman said.

Republican Sen. Larry Stutts, an obstetrician who cast the lone no vote in the Senate Wednesday, said the bill is an "IVF provider and supplier protection bill" and does not protect patients.

"It is actually limiting the ability of mothers who are involved in IVF to have recourse and it is placing a dollar value on human life," Stutts said.

House Democrats proposed legislation stating that a human embryo outside a uterus cannot be considered an unborn child or human being under state law. Democrats argued that was the most direct way to deal with the issue. Republicans did not bring the proposal up for a vote.

"We aren't providing a solution here," said Rep. Chris England, a Democrat from Tuscaloosa. "We're creating more problems. We have to confront the elephant in the room."

State Republicans are reckoning with a crisis they partly helped create with anti-abortion language added to the Alabama Constitution in 2018. The amendment, which was approved by 59% of voters, says it is state policy to recognize the "rights of unborn children."

The phrase became the basis of the court's ruling. At the time, supporters said it would allow the state to ban abortion if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned, but opponents argued it could establish "personhood" for fertilized eggs.

England said the legislation is an attempt to play "lawsuit whack-a-mole" instead of confronting the real issue — the implications of personhood-like language in the Alabama Constitution.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine, a group representing IVF providers across the country, says the legislation does not go far enough. Sean Tipton, a spokesperson for the organization, said this week that the legislation does not correct the fundamental problem, which is the court ruling "conflating fertilized eggs with children."

The bill's sponsors, Republican Sen. Tim Melson and Republican Rep. Terri Collins, said the proposal was the best immediate solution they could find to get IVF services resumed.

"The goal is to get these clinics back open and women going through their treatment and have successful pregnancies," Melson said.

Republicans are also trying to navigate tricky political waters — torn between widespread popularity and support for IVF — and conflicts within their own party. The leaders of several anti-abortion and conservative groups, including Students for Life Action and Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America, urged Ivey to veto the bill, which they called a "rash reaction to a troubling situation."

"Any legislation on this issue must take into consideration the millions of human lives who face the fate of either being discarded or frozen indefinitely, violating the inherent dignity they possess by virtue of being human," they wrote

Melson and Collins said lawmakers may have to explore additional action, but said it's a difficult subject.

"I think there is too much difference of opinion on when actual life begins. A lot of people say conception. A lot of people say implantation. Others say heartbeat," Melson said when asked about proposals to say frozen embryos couldn't be considered children under state law.

Melson, who is a doctor, said any additional legislation should be "based on science and not just gut feelings."

"I can tell you right now there are a lot of different opinions on what the right thing to do is," he said.

Why are clocks set forward in the spring? Thank wars, confusion and a hunger for sunlight

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Once again, most Americans will set their clocks forward by one hour this weekend, losing perhaps a bit of sleep but gaining more glorious sunlight in the evenings as the days warm into summer.

Where did this all come from, though?

How we came to move the clock forward in the spring, and then push it back in the fall, is a tale of that spans over more than a century — one that's driven by two world wars, mass confusion at times and a human desire to bask in the sun for as long as possible.

There's been plenty of debate over the practice, but about 70 countries — about 40% of those across the globe — currently use what Americans call daylight saving time.

While springing the clocks forward "kind of jolts our system," the extra daylight gets people outdoors, exercising and having fun, says Anne Buckle, web editor at timeanddate.com, which features information on time, time zones and astronomy.

"The really, really awesome advantage is the bright evenings, right?" she says. "It is actually having hours of daylight after you come home from work to spend time with your family or activities. And that is wonderful."

Here are some things to know so you'll be conversant about the practice of humans changing time:

HOW DID THIS ALL GET STARTED?

In the 1890s, George Vernon Hudson, an astronomer and entomologist in New Zealand, proposed a time shift in the spring and fall to increase the daylight. And in the early 1900s, British home builder William Willett, troubled that people weren't up enjoying the morning sunlight, made a similar push. But neither proposal gained enough traction to be implemented.

Germany began using daylight saving time during World War I with the thought that it would save energy. Other countries, including the United States, soon followed suit. During World War II, the U.S. once again instituted what was dubbed "war time" nationwide, this time year-round.

In the United States today, every state except Hawaii and Arizona observes daylight saving time. Around the world, Europe, much of Canada and part of Australia also implement it, while Russia and Asia don't currently.

INCONSISTENCY AND MASS CONFUSION

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After World War II, a patchwork of timekeeping emerged across the United States, with some areas keeping daylight saving time and others ditching it.

"You might have one town has daylight saving time, the neighboring town might have daylight saving time but start it and end it on different dates and the third neighboring town might not have it at all," says David Prerau, author of the book "Seize the Daylight: The Curious and Contentious Story of Daylight Saving Time."

At one point, if riders on a 35-mile (56-kilometer) bus ride from Steubenville, Ohio, to Moundsville, West Virginia, wanted their watches to be accurate, they'd need to change them seven times as they dipped in and out of daylight saving time, Prerau says.

So in 1966, the U.S. Congress passed the Uniform Time Act, which say states can either implement daylight saving time or not, but it has to be statewide. The act also mandates the day that daylight saving time starts and ends across the country.

Confusion over the time change isn't just something from the past. In the nation of Lebanon last spring, chaos ensued when the government announced a last-minute decision to delay the start of daylight saving time by a month — until the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Some institutions made the change and others refused as citizens tried to piece together their schedules. Within days, the decision was reversed.

"It really turned into a huge mess where nobody knew what time it was," Buckle says.

WHAT WOULD IT BE LIKE IF WE DIDN'T CHANGE THE CLOCKS?

Changing the clocks twice a year leads to a lot of grumbling, and pushes to either use standard time all year, or stick to daylight saving time all year often crop up.

During the 1970s energy crisis, the U.S. started doing daylight saving time all year long, and Americans didn't like it. With the sun not rising in the winter in some areas till around 9 a.m. or even later, people were waking up in the dark, going to work in the dark and sending their children to school in the dark, Prerau says.

"It became very unpopular very quickly," Prerau says.

And, he notes, using standard time all year would mean losing that extra hour of daylight for eight months in the evenings in the United States.

A NOD TO THE EARLY ADOPTERS

In 1908, the Canadian city of Thunder Bay — then the two cities of Fort William and Port Arthur — changed from the central time zone to the eastern time zone for the summer and fall after a citizen named John Hewitson argued that would afford an extra hour of daylight to enjoy the outdoors, says Michael deJong, curator/archivist at the Thunder Bay Museum.

The next year, though, Port Arthur stayed on eastern time, while Fort William changed back to central time in the fall, which, predictably, "led to all sorts of confusion," deJong says.

Today, the city of Thunder Bay is on eastern time, and observes daylight saving time, giving the area, "just delightfully warm, long days to enjoy" in the summer, says Paul Pepe, tourism manager for Thunder Bay Community Economic Development Commission.

The city, located on Lake Superior, is far enough north that the sun sets at around 10 p.m. in the summer, Pepe says, and that helps make up for their cold dark winters. Residents, he says, tend to go on vacations in the winter and stay home in the summer: "I think for a lot of folks here, the long days, the warm summer temperatures, it's a vacation in your backyard."

Evidence of traumatic brain injury in shooter who killed 18 in deadliest shooting in Maine history

By DAVID SHARP and PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) — Robert Card, an Army reservist who shot and killed 18 people in Maine last year, had significant evidence of traumatic brain injuries, according to a brain tissue analysis by research-

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ers from Boston University that was released Wednesday.

There was degeneration in the nerve fibers that allow for communication between different areas of the brain, inflammation and small blood vessel injury, according to Dr. Ann McKee of Boston University's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) Center. The analysis was released by Card's family.

Card had been an instructor at an Army hand grenade training range, where it is believed he was exposed to thousands of low-level blasts.

"While I cannot say with certainty that these pathological findings underlie Mr. Card's behavioral changes in the last 10 months of life, based on our previous work, brain injury likely played a role in his symptoms," McKee said in the statement from the family.

Card's family members also apologized for the attack in the statement, saying they are heartbroken for the victims, survivors and their loved ones.

Army officials will testify Thursday before a special commission investigating the deadliest mass shooting in Maine history.

The commission, established by Democratic Gov. Janet Mills, is reviewing the facts surrounding the Oct. 25 shootings that killed 18 people in a bowling alley and at a restaurant and bar in Lewiston. The panel, which includes former judges and prosecutors, is also reviewing the police response to the shootings.

Police and the Army were both warned that shooter, Card, was suffering from deteriorating mental health in the months that preceded the shootings.

Some of the 40-year-old Card's relatives warned police that he was displaying paranoid behavior and they were concerned about his access to guns. Body camera video of police interviews with reservists before Card's two-week hospitalization in upstate New York last summer also showed fellow reservists expressing worry and alarm about his behavior and weight loss.

Card was hospitalized in July after he shoved a fellow reservist and locked himself in a motel room during training. Later, in September, a fellow reservist told an Army superior he was concerned Card was going to "snap and do a mass shooting."

Card was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound after the biggest search in state history. Victims' families, politicians, gun control advocates and others have said in the months since the shootings that law enforcement missed several opportunities to intercede and remove guns from Card. They've also raised questions about the state's mental health system.

Thursday's hearing in Augusta is the seventh and final one currently slated for the commission. Commission chair Daniel Wathen said at a hearing with victims earlier this week that an interim report could be released by April 1.

Wathen said during the session with victims that the commission's hearings have been critical to unraveling the case.

"This was a great tragedy for you folks, unbelievable," Wathen said during Monday's hearing. "But I think has affected everybody in Maine and beyond."

In previous hearings, law enforcement officials have defended the approach they took with Card in the months before the shootings. Members of the Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office testified that the state's yellow flag law makes it difficult to remove guns from a potentially dangerous person.

Democrats in Maine are looking to make changes to the state's gun laws in the wake of the shootings. Mills wants to change state law to allow law enforcement to go directly to a judge to seek a protective custody warrant to take a dangerous person into custody to remove weapons.

Other Democrats in Maine have proposed a 72-hour waiting period for most gun purchases. Gun control advocates held a rally for gun safety in Augusta earlier this week.

"Gun violence represents a significant public health emergency. It's through a combination of meaningful gun safety reform and public health investment that we can best keep our communities safe," said Nacole Palmer, executive director of the Maine Gun Safety Coalition.

Houthi missile attack kills 3 crew members in Yemen rebels' first fatal assault on shipping

By JON GAMBRELL and TARA COPP Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A missile attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels on a commercial ship in the Gulf of Aden on Wednesday killed three of its crew members and forced survivors to abandon the vessel, the U.S. military said. It was the first fatal strike in a campaign of assaults by the Iranian-backed group over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The attack on the Barbados-flagged, Liberian-owned bulk carrier True Confidence further escalates the conflict on a crucial maritime route linking Asia and the Middle East to Europe that has disrupted global shipping. The Houthis have launched attacks since November, and the U.S. began an airstrike campaign in January that so far hasn't halted their attacks.

Meanwhile, Iran announced Wednesday that it would confiscate a \$50 million cargo of Kuwaiti crude oil for American energy firm Chevron Corp. aboard a tanker it seized nearly a year earlier. It is the latest twist in a yearslong shadow war playing out in the Middle East's waterways even before the Houthi attacks began.

The U.S. military's Central Command said an anti-ship ballistic missile launched from a Houthi-controlled area in Yemen struck the True Confidence, causing significant damage to the ship. In addition to the three deaths, at least four crew members were wounded, with three in critical condition.

Two aerial photos released by the U.S. military showed the the ship's bridge and cargo on board ablaze.

"These reckless attacks by the Houthis have disrupted global trade and taken the lives of international seafarers simply doing their jobs, which are some of the hardest jobs in the world, and the ones relied on by the global public for sustainment of supply chains," Central Command said.

The attack came after the ship had been hailed over radio by men claiming to be the Yemeni military, officials said. The Houthis have been hailing ships over the radio in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden since beginning their attacks, with analysts suspecting the rebels want to seize the vessels.

After the missile hit, the crew abandoned the ship and deployed lifeboats. A U.S. warship and the Indian navy were on the scene, trying to assist in rescue efforts.

The ship's managers and owners said the ship's crew of 20 included one Indian, 15 Filipino and four Vietnamese. Three armed guards, two from Sri Lanka and one from Nepal, also were on board. The ship had been carrying steel from China to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

"One Vietnamese and two Filipino crew members have lost their lives," a statement from the owners and managers of the True Confidence said early Thursday. "A further two Filipinos crew members have suffered serious injuries. All crew members were taken to Djibouti."

The Philippines' Migrant Workers Department confirmed the deaths and the number of wounded from the attack.

The Philippines "calls for continued diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions and to address the causes of the current conflict in the Middle East," it said.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, claimed the attack in a prerecorded message, saying its missile fire set the vessel ablaze. He said the rebels' attacks would only stop when the "siege on the Palestinian people in the Gaza is lifted."

The United Nations called on the Houthis "to cease all attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, expressing serious concern about the continuing attacks, including the latest incident where the status of the crew is unknown.

Dujarric said the attacks are causing risks "to property, to life, to ecology in the area."

At the State Department in Washington, spokesman Matthew Miller condemned the attack. "We continue to watch these reckless attacks with no regard for the well being of innocent civilians who are transiting through the Red Sea. And now they have, unfortunately and tragically, killed innocent civilians," he told reporters.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre separately warned: "The U.S. obviously is going to continue to take action."

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The rebels have repeatedly targeted ships in the Red Sea and surrounding waters over the Israel-Hamas war, but up to Wednesday hadn't killed any crew members. The vessels have included at least one with cargo bound for Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor, and an aid ship later bound for Houthi-controlled territory.

Despite more than a month and a half of U.S.-led airstrikes, Houthi rebels have remained capable of launching significant attacks. They include the attack last month on a cargo ship carrying fertilizer, the Rubymar, which sank on Saturday after drifting for several days, and the downing of an American drone worth tens of millions of dollars.

It was unclear why the Houthis targeted the True Confidence. However, it had previously been owned by Oaktree Capital Management, a Los Angeles-based fund that finances vessels on installments. Oaktree declined to comment.

The Houthis have held Yemen's capital, Sanaa, since 2014. They've battled a Saudi-led coalition since 2015 in a long-stalemated war there.

Iran separately announced the seizure of the crude oil aboard the Advantage Sweet through an announcement carried by the judiciary's state-run Mizan news agency. At the time, Iran alleged that the Advantage Sweet collided with another ship, without offering any evidence.

The court order for the seizure offered an entirely different reason for the confiscation. Mizan said it was part of a court order over U.S. sanctions it alleged barred the importation of a Swedish medicine used to treat patients suffering from epidermolysis bullosa, a rare genetic condition that causes blisters all over the body and eyes. It didn't reconcile the different reasons for the seizure.

The Advantage Sweet had been in the Persian Gulf in late April, but its track showed no unusual behavior as it transited through the Strait of Hormuz, where a fifth of all traded oil passes. Iran has made allegations in other seizures that later fell apart as it became clear that Tehran was trying to leverage the capture as a bargaining chip to negotiate with foreign nations.

Chevron, based in San Ramon, California, said Wednesday that the Advantage Sweet had been "seized under false pretenses" and that the company "has not had any direct communication with Iran over the seizure of the vessel."

"Chevron has not been permitted access to the vessel and considers the cargo a total loss due to Iran's illegal actions," Chevron said in a statement. "We now consider the cargo the responsibility of the Iranian government."

Ship seizures and explosions have roiled the region since 2019. The incidents began after then President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

Europe's inflation is way down. But hope is gone for a quick interest rate cut

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — Europe's energy crisis sparked by Russia's war in Ukraine has eased. Inflation is way down from its painful double-digit peak. But there likely won't be an interest rate cut at the European Central Bank's meeting Thursday, even as higher borrowing costs weigh on the stalled economy.

And the wait could be longer than many originally expected.

ECB President Christine Lagarde is likely to emphasize that the bank wants to see conclusive evidence that inflation figures will keep gliding down toward the bank's goal of 2%.

That is the read from analysts who follow the bank, and financial markets seem to be falling into line. While they had previously priced in a chance for a rate cut as early as April, those bets have faded and markets now are factoring in a quarter-point cut in June.

A similar situation is shaping up in the U.S., where Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell told Congress on Wednesday that the central bank needs more confidence inflation is under control before cutting rates. Fed officials have signaled three rate cuts this year, but Powell has given no indication when they might start.

In Europe, inflation was down to 2.6% in February, well below its peak of 10.6% in October 2022. But

the consumer price index has been stuck between 2% and 3% for five months, raising concern that the last mile toward the ECB's goal may be slower than hoped.

While the spikes in food and energy prices that helped drive the outbreak of inflation have eased, inflation has spread to services, a broad sector of the economy that includes everything from movie tickets and office cleaning to tuition and medical care.

Meanwhile, wages rose as workers started bargaining for higher pay to make up for lost purchasing power as inflation ballooned.

Prices for natural gas — which is used to power factories, heat homes and generate electricity — have fallen to around 24 euros (\$26) per megawatt hour, not much higher than levels seen before Russia started threatening Ukraine.

And oil prices have been flat as Saudi Arabia and other members of the OPEC+ coalition of oil producers maintain cuts to output that have only put a floor under prices.

"Given that most officials seem to be coalescing around a start to the easing cycle in June, the (ECB) governing council is likely content with current market pricing," wrote analysts at ABN AMRO Financial Markets Research. "Therefore, the aim of communication following the end of the meeting will likely try to not rock the boat one way or the other."

Lagarde's message will likely be that "the central bank wants to see more evidence that domestic inflationary pressures are abating," the analysts said in a note.

The ECB has raised its key rate from minus 0.5% to a record-high 4% in just over a year, starting in July 2022. Higher interest rates dampen inflation by making it more expensive to borrow and buy things on credit, reducing demand for goods. But high rates can weigh on economic growth, too.

Pressure for a rate cut is coming as the economy has stalled. The 20 countries that use the euro currency saw no growth in the fourth quarter of last year after shrinking 0.1% in the previous quarter. Germany, Europe's largest economy, expects to grow just 0.2% this year.

Complicating matters is the fact that it's not a classic downturn because unemployment remains low. Markets will watch closely for signals on when the first rate cut will come.

With recent economic data, "the pressure on the ECB to cut rates earlier has gone up," Carsten Brzeski, chief of global macro at ING bank, wrote in an analyst note. "We still think that the ECB has good reasons to resist that pressure and to push back expectations."

Lagarde's comments at her post-meeting news conference will likely be "sending more precise signals for a June rate cut," he said.

Opening remarks, evidence next in manslaughter trial of Michigan school shooter's dad

By ED WHITE Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — Jurors will hear opening statements and the first batch of witnesses Thursday in the trial of the second parent accused of having responsibility for a Michigan school shooting committed by his son.

James Crumbley, 47, is charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter, one for each teenager killed by Ethan Crumbley at Oxford High School in 2021.

The father is accused of failing to safely store a gun and ammunition at home and ignoring the mental health needs of his son, who was 15 at the time of the shooting.

Lawyers picked a jury Wednesday after nearly two days of asking people for their views about guns, mental illness and the challenges of raising teenagers. The judge also wanted to scratch anyone who said they couldn't be fair following extensive publicity about the tragedy.

"Are you able to set aside any sympathy you naturally feel and decide this case on evidence and facts?" Judge Cheryl Matthews asked.

James and Jennifer Crumbley are the first U.S. parents to be charged with having criminal responsibility for a mass school shooting committed by a child. Jennifer Crumbley was found guilty of involuntary

manslaughter in February.

James Crumbley, accompanied by Ethan, bought a Sig Sauer 9 mm handgun over Thanksgiving weekend in 2021. The boy called it his "new beauty" on social media. His mother described the gun as a Christmas gift and took him to a shooting range.

Four days after the purchase, the parents went to Oxford High to discuss a violent image their son had drawn on a math assignment, accompanied by disturbing phrases: "The thoughts won't stop. Help me." There was a gun on the paper that looked similar to the Sig Sauer.

The Crumbleys didn't take Ethan home, and school staff — believing he might be suicidal — also didn't demand it. But no one checked the boy's backpack for a gun, and the shooting happened that afternoon.

Defense lawyers insist the parents could not have foreseen the shooting and didn't commit a crime. One man was excused from the jury pool Wednesday when he said the charges were an "injustice" and a response to a "mob."

Defense attorney Mariell Lehman repeatedly asked prospective jurors about their trust of teenagers and their own parenting styles.

Ethan, now 17, is serving a life prison sentence for murder and terrorism.

Jennifer Crumbley, 45, is scheduled to return to court for her sentence on April 9. Her minimum prison term could be as high as 10 years.

Uvalde City Council to release investigation of the police response to 2022 school massacre

By ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

UVALDE, Texas (AP) — Nearly two years after the deadly school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, that left 19 children and two teachers dead, the city council will discuss the results of an independent investigation it requested into the response by local police officers.

The report is one of multiple investigations into the deadly school massacre after Texas lawmakers found in 2022 that nearly 400 officers rushed to the scene but waited for over an hour before confronting the gunman. It follows a report by the Department of Justice earlier this year that criticized the "cascading failures" of responding law enforcement personnel from more than 20 local, state and federal agencies.

Uvalde City Council leaders will meet Thursday to discuss the results of the investigation, which began months after the shooting and was led by Jesse Prado, an Austin-based investigator and former police detective. Councilmembers will meet in a private executive session before presenting the results publicly and inviting citizen comment.

A criminal investigation by Uvalde District Attorney Christina Mitchell's office into the law enforcement response to the May 2022 shooting remains open. A grand jury was summoned earlier this year and some law enforcement officials have already been asked to testify.

Tensions remain high between Uvalde city officials and the local prosecutor, while the community of more than 15,000, about 85 miles (140 kilometers) southwest of San Antonio, is plagued with trauma and divided over accountability.

Those tensions peaked in December 2022, when the city of Uvalde sued the local prosecutor's office seeking access to records and other investigative materials regarding the shooting at Robb Elementary School. That lawsuit is among the topics that the city council could revisit Thursday.

The city's independent investigation comes after a nearly 600-page January report by the Department of Justice found massive failures by law enforcement, including acting with "no urgency" to establish a command post, assuming the subject was barricaded despite ongoing gunfire, and communicating inaccurate information to grieving families.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said the victims "deserved better," as he presented the Justice Department's findings to the affected families in Uvalde.

"Had law enforcement agencies followed generally accepted practices in active shooter situations and gone right after the shooter and stopped him, lives would have been saved and people would have sur-

vived," Garland said at the news conference in January.

The report also found failings in the aftermath, with untrained hospital staff improperly delivering painful news and officials giving families mixed messages and misinformation about victims and survivors. One official told waiting families that another bus of survivors was coming, but that was untrue.

Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott initially praised the law enforcement response, saying the reason the shooting was "not worse is because law enforcement officials did what they do." He claimed that officers had run toward gunfire to save lives.

But in the weeks following the shooting, that story changed as information released through media reports and lawmakers' findings illustrated the botched law enforcement response.

At least five officers who were on the scene have lost their jobs, including two Department of Public Safety officers and the on-site commander, Pete Arredondo, the former school police chief. No officers have faced criminal charges.

Putin's crackdown casts a wide net, ensnaring the LGBTQ+ community, lawyers and many others

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — It's not just opposition politicians who are targeted in the crackdown by Russian President Vladimir Putin's government in recent years. Also falling victim are independent voices as well as those who don't conform to what the state sees as the country's "traditional values."

Russia's once-thriving free press after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been largely reduced to either state-controlled media or independent journalists operating from abroad, with few critical outlets still working in the country. Prominent rights groups have been outlawed or classified as agents of foreigners. Lawyers who represented dissidents have been prosecuted. LGBTQ+ activists have been labeled "extremists."

A look at those who have come under attack during Putin's 24-year rule that is likely to be extended by six more years in this month's presidential election:

INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Independent news sites largely have been blocked in Russia since the first weeks of the war in Ukraine. Many have moved their newsrooms abroad and continue to operate, accessible in Russia via virtual private networks, or VPNs. Reporting inside Russia or earning money off Russian advertisers has been difficult.

Russian authorities since 2021 also have labeled dozens of outlets and individual journalists as "foreign agents" — a designation implying additional government scrutiny and carrying strong pejorative connotations aimed at discrediting the recipient. Some have also been outlawed as "undesirable organizations" under a 2015 law that makes involvement with such organizations a criminal offense.

Journalists have been arrested and imprisoned on a variety of charges.

"The Russian authorities decided to destroy civil society institutions and independent journalism completely after Feb. 24, 2022," said Ivan Kolpakov, chief editor of Russia's most popular independent news site Meduza, referring to the date of the invasion. Meduza was declared "undesirable" in January 2023.

More restrictions appear to be coming. Parliament passed a law banning advertisers from doing business with "foreign agents," likely affecting not just news sites but also blogs on YouTube that need advertising and are a popular source of news and analysis.

Journalist Katerina Gordeyeva initially said she was suspending her YouTube channel with 1.6 million subscribers due to the new law but changed her mind after an outpouring of support. "Giving up now would be too simple and too easy a decision," she said. "We will try to hang in there."

RIGHTS GROUPS

Dozens of rights groups, charities and other nongovernmental organizations have been labeled "foreign agents" and outlawed as "undesirable" in recent years. Many had to shut down.

In December 2021, a court in Moscow ordered the closure of Memorial, one of Russia's oldest and most prominent human rights organizations. It drew international acclaim for its studies of repression in the

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Soviet Union; several months after the ruling, it won the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize. In yet another crippling blow, its 70-year-old co-chair, Oleg Orlov, was sentenced last month to 2½ years in prison over criticism of the war.

Another prominent rights group leader behind bars is Grigory Melkonyants, co-chair of Golos, which monitored Russian elections since 2000. He is in pre-trial detention on charges widely seen as an attempt to pressure the group ahead of this month's vote.

His arrest last year wasn't a surprise, said the group's other leader, Stanislav Andreychuk, in an interview with The Associated Press, because Golos has been under pressure since it detailed widespread violations in the 2011 parliamentary election that led to mass protests.

Pressure against Golos came in waves, however, and at times, the group was able to work constructively with election authorities. It even won two presidential grants.

"We are like a town on a high river bank," Andriy chuk said. "The river eats away at the bank, and the bank recedes slowly. ... At some point, we found ourselves on the cliffside."

LAWYERS

Lawyers who represent Kremlin critics and work on politically motivated cases also have faced growing pressure. Some prominent ones have left Russia, fearing prosecution.

Human rights and legal aid group Agora was labeled "undesirable" in 2023, making its operations and any dealings with it illegal.

Three lawyers who represented Alexei Navalny are jailed on charges of involvement with an extremist organization. Associates of the late opposition leader said it was a way to isolate him while in prison.

Prominent human rights lawyer Ivan Pavlov told AP the pressure has scared some attorneys away from political cases. Pavlov left Russia in 2021 while defending former journalist Ivan Safronov on treason charges. After Pavlov spoke out about the case, authorities opened a criminal investigation against him and barred him from using the phone and the internet. "They simply paralyzed my work," he said.

Dmitry Talantov, another lawyer for Safronov, was arrested in 2022 for criticizing the war and is on trial. He faces up to 10 years in prison.

LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

The crackdown on LGBTQ+ rights has gone on for more than a decade and often was accompanied by Putin's criticism of Western nations trying to impose their values on Russia. In 2022, authorities adopted a law banning propaganda of "nontraditional sexual relations" among adults, effectively outlawing any public endorsement of LGBTQ+ rights.

Another law enacted in 2023 prohibited gender transitioning procedures and gender-affirming care, as well as changing a person's gender in official documents and public records.

In November, the Supreme Court banned what the government called the LGBTQ+ "movement" in Russia, labeling it as an extremist organization. That effectively outlawed any LGBTQ+ activism. Shortly afterward, authorities started imposing fines for displaying rainbow-colored items.

Igor Kochetkov, human rights advocate and founder of the Russian LGBT Network, told AP the Supreme Court ruling was more about ideology than anything else.

"So far we haven't seen attempts to ban gay relations" and criminalize them, as the Soviet Union did, Kochetkov said. Rather, it's an attempt to suppress "any independent opinion that doesn't fit with the official state ideology ... and any organized civic activity that the government can't control," he added.

RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS

In perhaps a similar vein, the government, closely allied with the Russian Orthodox Church, has cracked down on smaller religious denominations and groups, banning some. Authorities went further with Jehovah's Witnesses, prosecuting hundreds of believers across the country, often simply for gathering to pray.

The Supreme Court in 2017 declared Jehovah's Witnesses to be an extremist organization, exposing those involved with it to potential criminal charges.

Jehovah's Witnesses spokesman Jarrod Lopes said over 400 believers have been jailed since then, and 131 men and women are in prison. Nearly 800 Jehovah's Witnesses have faced charges, and over 500

were added to Russia's register of extremists and terrorists.

"It's absurd to us, because ... part of our belief system is to obey the authorities. We want to be good citizens. We want to help our community," he told AP. "We're also not anti-government, we are neutral. We're not going to stage a protest."

In 2018, Putin himself said "Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians, too, I don't quite understand why clamp down on them," and he promised to look into it. But the number of arrests and raids targeting them only grew.

Putin has distanced himself from the law enforcement and security structures that carry out the crack-downs, says Tatyana Stanovaya, senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.

"They have a certain domain, and they have a mandate in this domain, and they act in accordance with it," Stanovaya says. "Putin knows it and agrees with it. ... It's convenient for him."

Kansas could soon make doctors ask patients why they want abortions and report the answers

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas would require abortion providers to ask patients why they're terminating their pregnancies and report the answers to the state under a measure moving through the Republican-controlled Legislature. Frustrated Democrats are pointedly suggesting a similar rule for vasectomies and erectile dysfunction.

The state House planned to take a final vote Thursday. The bill would require providers to ask patients 11 questions about their reasons for terminating a pregnancy, including that they can't afford another child, raising a child would hinder their education or careers, or a spouse or partner wanted her to have an abortion. At least seven states require similar reporting.

Backers of the bill argued during a House debate Wednesday that the state needs data so lawmakers can create programs to address their concerns. Opponents saw an attempt to harass abortion providers, shame patients and stigmatize abortion.

Approval in the House would send the measure to the Senate. Both chambers have large anti-abortion majorities, and last year Republicans overrode vetoes of other restrictions on providers by Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly, a strong supporter of abortion rights.

Democrats are frustrated because Republicans and anti-abortion groups have pursued new rules for abortion providers and aid to anti-abortion counseling centers despite a decisive statewide vote in August 2022 to protect abortion rights under the state constitution.

"Quite honestly, I don't understand it, you know, because I think Kansans made it very, very clear how they want Kansas to operate in this arena," Kelly said during a brief Associated Press interview. "Why would an elected official who's facing an election in November go against the wishes of their constituents?"

Unable to stop the bill from passing — and possibly becoming law — Democrats, particularly female lawmakers, attacked what they saw as the unfairness of requiring women to face detailed questions about their motives for seeking health care when men would not. Democrats started with vasectomies.

Then, Kansas City-area Democratic Rep. Stephanie Sawyer Clayton called erectile dysfunction "a scourge" that lowered the state's birth rate. She suggested requiring doctors to ask male patients whether they wanted to treat it because a spouse wanted that or because it caused the man stress or embarrassment.

"If we are going to subject one group to humiliating questions when they get legal health care, then all groups should be subjected to humiliating questions when they get legal health care," she said. "Or we can vote against this bill."

Republicans argued that doctors often ask patients questions when they seek care, including about their mental health and whether they have guns in their homes.

"This is about abortion reporting. It has nothing to do with the male body parts," said House health committee Chair Brenda Landwehr, a Wichita Republican.

In Kansas, a doctor who provides an abortion already are must report the patient's age and ethnicity,

whether the person was married, and the method used to terminate a pregnancy.

The state allows abortions for almost any reason until the 22nd week of pregnancy, and that wouldn't change under the bill.

States requiring doctors to report the reasons for an abortion include Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota and Utah. Minnesota's Democratic-controlled Legislature repealed its similar reporting requirement repealed it last year.

The law in Oklahoma, where most abortions are banned, includes a list of more than 30 questions that a provider must ask a patient about her motives. Potential reasons include relationship problems and not feeling mature enough to raise a child.

"Everyone on both sides of this issue should agree on the need for better reporting," said Tessa Longbons Cox, a senior research associate at the anti-abortion Charlotte Lozier Institute.

But none of the other states with such a reporting law have had a statewide vote on protecting abortion rights, as Kansas has. In pursuing anti-abortion measures, Republican lawmakers have said their new rules don't go against voters' wish to maintain some abortion access.

"This bill has nothing to do with eliminating abortion in Kansas, doesn't ban it, doesn't touch on that whatsoever," Landwehr said. "I've respected that vote."

The Biden and Trump campaigns are readying for their rematch, starting with rival events in Georgia

By BILL BARROW and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Joe Biden and Donald Trump each won the White House by razor-thin margins in key states.

Now, with a rematch of their bitter 2020 campaign all but officially set after Super Tuesday, the two campaigns are unveiling their strategies for an unprecedented matchup between a president and his immediate predecessor.

Both campaigns will fight the hardest in seven battleground states, five of which flipped from Trump in 2016 to Biden four years ago. Biden's reelection campaign claims a jump on hiring staff and targeting swing-state voters. Trump campaign officials are finalizing a takeover of the Republican National Committee this week and looking to expand their field operation.

Biden and Trump will each hold events in Georgia on Saturday, a week after they did simultaneous U.S.-Mexico border trips in Texas. That's a reflection of how closely their campaigns will bump up against each other but also how they will work for votes differently. Biden will be in metro Atlanta, home to a fast-growing and diverse population. Trump will visit rural northwest Georgia and the district of Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a firebrand conservative discussed as a possible running mate.

In a statement Tuesday night, Biden blistered Trump, saying the former president is "driven by grievance and grift, focused on his own revenge and retribution" and "determined to destroy democracy, rip away fundamental freedoms like the ability for women to make their own health care decisions and pass another round of billions of dollars in tax cuts for the wealthy."

Trump has spent months skewering Biden for inflation, an uptick in migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, crime in U.S. cities and the wars in Ukraine and Israel. "This is a magnificent country and it's so sad to see where it's gone," he said Tuesday night. "We're going to straighten it out."

Biden: A post-pandemic chance at traditional campaigning

Biden's campaign has hired leadership teams of three to five people — each with deep, in-state political experience — in eight states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. Of those, only Florida and North Carolina have twice gone for Trump, though North Carolina is seen by both parties as competitive. Both Biden and 2016 Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton won Nevada.

The campaign plans to expand those teams to as many as 15 people each, then bring on hundreds of paid organizers across the battleground map in the coming weeks. Those organizers, in turn, will be tasked with coordinating tens of thousands of volunteers.

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Biden's effort will feature "a large brick-and-mortar operation that we couldn't do in 2020" because of COVID-19 restrictions, said Dan Kanninen, the campaign's battleground states director. That means returning to door-knocking and phone-banking with the campaign prioritizing the quality of voter contact rather than just the quantity. It will also train volunteers and give them the flexibility to influence their own social networks — promoting Biden's campaign in non-traditional online spaces that can best sway their relatives, friends and neighbors.

"I see what we're doing now as the smarter extension of what we learned in '12 and also the smarter extension of what we learned in '20," Kanninen said, referring to both Biden's victory and the successful reelection of then-President Barack Obama.

Biden's campaign has lists of existing volunteers who were involved in the 2020 and 2022 elections, meaning they can reactivate existing networks rather than starting from scratch. In Arizona, it has prioritized Spanish-language outreach early, opening its first Arizona field office in Maryvale, an area of Phoenix that is about 75% Hispanic.

"We are making sure that we're using the next couple of months to build up really quickly to lay that foundation for the general election," said Sean McEnerney, Biden's campaign manager in Arizona.

Kanninen said he doubts Trump has enough time to ratchet up the Republican National Committee's organizing efforts the same way.

The Biden campaign and the Democratic National Committee have vastly outraised Republicans so far. The Biden campaign reported \$56 million on hand at the end of January, according to federal disclosures, while Trump's campaign reported a balance of \$30.5 million.

"He can't buy this time back," Kanninen said. "You just cannot replicate this by writing a big check, even if they had the money."

Trump: An RNC takeover and lining up behind 'the boss'

For Trump, the next post-Super Tuesday step is to complete a takeover of the RNC at the party's spring meeting that begins Thursday.

The former president effectively will absorb GOP headquarters into his campaign, installing his preferred leadership with a priority on catching up to the fundraising and organizing operation that Biden's reelection team shares with the DNC.

"It's message and mechanics," said Trump senior adviser Chris LaCivita. "If we do what we're supposed to do from the campaign standpoint, we'll be able to really drive and increase the states where we are competitive."

LaCivita, who is set to become the RNC's chief operating officer while retaining his campaign role, listed seven of the same eight states the Biden campaign sees as battlegrounds. He clarified that he expects Trump to win Florida again but promised the campaign would not be caught flat-footed there. He also said Trump could be "competitive" in Virginia, which Democrats have won in every presidential race since 2008.

He plans for the RNC to begin expanding its field operation and adding staff to coordinate voter outreach "immediately" after the leadership transition at this week's party meeting. LaCivita and Lara Trump, the president's daughter-in-law, will represent the former president at the meeting in Houston. Lara Trump will become RNC co-chair alongside incoming chair Michael Whatley, the current head of the North Carolina party.

"As soon as we get in, everything changes, and there will be more of a focus on battleground states, as opposed to community centers in Jacksonville, Florida," LaCivita said.

That's a shot at previous RNC investments in community outreach centers targeting Black and other minority voters that historically back Democrats in large percentages. At its peak in the 2022 cycle, the RNC had 38 such centers. That total has now dwindled to seven, with locations in potential swing-state North Carolina but also New York, California and Texas, a trio that won't be competitive in the presidential race.

LaCivita's promised buildout will take a financial turnaround. The DNC began the year with 2.5 times as much in the bank as the RNC after outraising and outspending Republicans in 2023.

But LaCivita said he isn't worried about the overall dynamics as the general election takes shape. "What advantage they may have in timing, they will soon lose on message," he said Tuesday night.

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The RNC has established a full-time election integrity department with directors in 15 key states to safeguard voting and spearhead post-election litigation. That's expected given Trump's demands that the RNC do more to boost his lies about widespread voter fraud. Lawyers backing Trump launched dozens of failed lawsuits after he lost in 2020.

The committee has also hired political staff in 15 battlegrounds, including those with important House and Senate races, like New York, California and Montana, while beginning an early in-person voting and ballot harvesting initiative called "Bank Your Vote" in all 50 states, six territories and six languages.

LaCivita, meanwhile, noted another wild card: Trump, he said, "is very keen on New York," the heavily Democratic state where the former president was born, raised and anchored his real estate, marketing and reality television success. New York last went for a Republican presidential candidate in 1984.

Asked what he thinks about the prospects of flipping New York to Trump, LaCivita laughed and said, "I do what the boss says. The boss drives."

For social platforms, the outage was short. But people's stories vanished, and that's no small thing

By DEEPTI HAJELA and WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Once upon a time, there was a brief outage on some social media platforms. It got fixed. The end. On the face of it, kind of a boring story.

But the widespread attention given to the blanking of Meta's Facebook, Instagram, Threads and Messenger platforms on Tuesday suggests another, perhaps less obvious tale: the one that shows that social media platforms, like the books or newspapers or insert-medium-here of other times in history, matter more than just being entertaining pastimes.

Wait, you mean those posts from that cousin you rarely see, sharing updates from her kids' lives? That reel from the influencer, introducing you to a culture or bit of knowledge you never knew? That photo collage you put up as a memorial to a loved one whose loss you're grieving? The back-and-forth debate between people on your feed trying to one-up each other on topics that interest you?

Yes. The technologies might be recent. But the things we use them for? That taps into something age-old: Humans are wired to love stories. Telling them. Listening to them. Relating to each other and our communities through them. And, of late, showing them to the world piece by piece through our devices — so much so that one of Instagram's primary features is called, simply, "Stories."

"Our narrative capacity is ... one of the best ways through which we are able to connect with one another," says Evynn McFalls, vice president of marketing and brand at the NeuroLeadership Institute, a consultancy that incorporates neuroscience into its corporate work. "Our brains like stories because it makes it easier for us to understand other people, other circumstances."

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A COMMUNITY OF STORIES

In his book "The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human," scholar Jonathan Gottschall says this: "The human imperative to make and consume stories runs even more deeply than literature, dreams and fantasy. We are soaked to the bone in story."

And in these times, social media is so often where they're told — whether in pictures, videos, memes, text threads or mashups of all four. People can get news and information (and OK, yes, misinformation) there, learn and possibly sympathize with others' plights, see things in ways that help us make sense of the world. We tell our own stories on them, make connections with others that might not exist in any other space.

In many ways, these social spaces are where we do "human."

"It's almost impossible for many people, especially in the United States, to think about their lives and communication without thinking about social media," says Samuel Woolley, an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin's School of Journalism and Media.

So when they're disrupted? Uh-oh. Threads of connection can disappear. Endorphin-generating activities get cut off. Routines — for better and for worse — are interrupted, and expected flows of information and

storytelling hiccup and falter.

"Outside of the trivial nature of these platforms, they've also really morphed over the last 15 years into an advocacy space," says Imani Cheers, associate professor of digital storytelling at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. "Those types of outages can really cause disruption in the passing and service of information."

It can also ratchet up the impact if the interruption comes at a moment when communication and information are perceived to be needed the most, Woolley notes: In the United States, the outage corresponded with the moments many were heading to the polls for Super Tuesday.

"Even though the recent outage only lasted a handful of hours for most people, it still resulted in a lack of access to the news," Woolley says. "And that's a problem."

A CREEPING SENSE OF UNEASE?

After the outages happened Tuesday, Andy Stone, Meta's head of communications, acknowledged them on X, formerly known as Twitter. "We apologize for any inconvenience," he wrote. But for some, it was more visceral than simple inconvenience. Their stories and their online lives were at stake.

When Taylor Cole Miller, an assistant professor of communication studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, first realized that he wasn't getting into his Facebook account Tuesday, his initial concern was security — that he had somehow been hacked.

Shortly afterward came creeping panic: What if he had lost almost two decades of his Facebook existence, including some connections with people he only had over the platform?

"I hesitate to say that my life flashed before my eyes, because that's just so overwrought," he says. "But the fact of the matter is that as someone who's been on Facebook for 20 years, a significant amount of my life is archived" there.

"Many of the ways that I connect with people is merely through Facebook. What happens if poof, it just goes away really fast? What does that mean for who I am as a person and how I interact with other people?"

That type of reaction about losing something that's so part of the fabric of one's day speaks to the power of story to connect us, says Melanie Green, a professor in the department of communication at the University of Buffalo. And, not incidentally, to the platforms that amplify those stories.

"Humans have a need to belong. We're social species, our survival often depends on being part of groups," she says. "Stories can help us feel that sense of belongingness."

Mexico's most dangerous city for police refuses to give up or negotiate with cartels

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

CELAYA, Mexico (AP) — A dead man lay on his back in the parking lot of a convenience store in late February when journalists rolled in to the north-central Mexico city of Celaya to interview police. A spray of bullet casings and spent projectiles lay around the corpse, a sight all too common in Guanajuato state, which has Mexico's highest number of homicides.

A policeman had been driving his wife to work on Feb. 28 when cartel gunmen — who had apparently followed from their home — opened fire on their car. The policeman killed one attacker before dying.

His wife and 1-year-old daughter were unharmed. But a week earlier, cartel gunmen shot a police officer to death while she took her 8-year-old daughter to school. They killed the girl, too.

Welcome to Celaya, arguably the most dangerous place, per capita, to be a cop in North America. At least 34 police officers have been killed in this city of 500,000 people in the last three years. In Guanajuato state, its population just over 6 million, more police were shot to death in 2023 — about 60 — than in all of the United States.

As Mexico's June 2 presidential election approaches, this city lies at the crossroads of a national debate about security policy.

Celaya has declined to follow President Andres Manuel López Obrador's policy of not confronting the

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cartels, and ignored his policy of encouraging local people to seek out peace pacts with the gangs. When Roman Catholic bishops announced they had met with cartel bosses in February to negotiate a truce between warring gangs, López Obrador said, "I think it is very good."

Mexico's president dislikes police and would like to rely on the military for everything. He dissolved the old federal police, accusing them of corruption, and cut almost all federal funding for training and equipping local police.

Unlike some other cities, Celaya, a farming and industrial hub northwest of Mexico City, has refused to eliminate its local police force and then rely almost completely on soldiers and the quasi-military National Guard for policing.

That means it has had to take on the Santa Rosa de Lima cartel, a gang so unreflectively violent that any sort of truce or negotiation was probably out of the question anyway.

"The Santa Rosa de Lima cartel controlled Celaya," said Guanajuato security analyst David Saucedo. "The current mayor, Javier Mendoza, made the decision to break the criminal control. It was a decision that cost the life of his son," who was shot to death last year.

Now the cartel is trying to hunt Celaya's cops into submission, or extinction. Two officers were killed in their car Sunday in Irapuato, the next town over, and the Santa Rosa de Lima cartel left a claim of responsibility.

Killings of police in Mexico rose last year even as López Obrador says overall homicide numbers have dropped under his administration.

"The safety of the public is not something you can negotiate. Never," said Celaya police chief Jesús Rivera Peralta. "These criminals have no values ... we can't negotiate with the devil, that's impossible."

Rivera Peralta said he is proud of the mayor's slogan: "With everything, come what may, without fear."

Under the president's approach, Mexico has both a shortage of police — there are none in some towns — and, at the same time, thousands of experienced former federal police officers who chose not to join the militarized National Guard are now unemployed.

Celaya decided to hire some of them.

Rivera Peralta, like most of his force, is a former member of the federal police. They're almost all from outside Celaya. They live in secure barracks and go out only to patrol, earning the nickname "Fedepales," a combination of the word "federal" and "municipal."

Because they're outsiders, the new cops are less likely to have ties to the cartel, Saucedo said.

Most of the locals who used to work as municipal police have resigned, and it's easy to see why. Estefani, a Celaya policewoman who would not give her last name for security reasons, narrowly escaped an attack as she drove to work in early 2023. The cartel apparently knew her route.

"I stopped at a red light, and all I saw were two men on a motorcycle shooting at me," Estefani said. "I was hit by three rounds. One shot went into the left side of my face ... the bullet was lodged in my neck."

As blood streamed, she walked to a clinic. Doctors managed to stabilize her.

It was all too common.

"Right now, most of the attacks are coming precisely from motorcycles. There are always two people on them, dressed in black. That seems to be a trend," said a police officer who spoke on condition of anonymity for security reasons.

The attackers are usually young men, often carrying an AR-15 rifle with the stock removed to make it shorter.

Celaya police are now sensitive to motorcycles.

A couple of residents, who would not give their names for fear of reprisals, spoke disparagingly of the "fedepales," accusing them of stopping motorcycles to check for stolen vehicles, and then taking the bikes.

But during a ride-along with police performing routine checks on motorcycles, other residents waved a friendly greeting.

López Obrador would like to rely more on the military; he wants to hand over the National Guard to army control — but at the same time, he doesn't want troops to directly confront the cartels.

That has led to strange scenes. For example, in the neighboring state of Michoacan, a National Guard or

army truck may roll by a corner store on a patrol while inside the store everything costs 40% more than normal because its owner is forced to pay protection money to the local cartel.

The National Guard doesn't arrest many suspects or investigate crimes. Like the military, it mainly follows orders and arrests criminals only if they are caught in the act.

Celaya, unusual among municipal police, does its own intelligence and investigation work.

"What good does it do to have soldiers and National Guard in the street if they don't do anything? They only put up crime scene tape after something has already happened," said Amadeo Hernández Barajas, a farmer in Acambaro, a town south of Celaya. He said the cartel forces many farmers to pay a tax on each ton of corn produced.

Claudia Sheinbaum, the presidential candidate for López Obrador's Morena party in the June 2 elections, vows to stick to his approach.

"We will address public safety from a perspective of addressing the causes and not allowing impunity," Sheinbaum said at her first campaign event. "We are not going to engage in the idea of 'a heavy hand,' that is not our style."

The idea that the cartels will be left without recruits, as government scholarship and training programs provide youths with other opportunities, appears a long way off. The gangs have started recruiting younger hitmen, as well as experienced fighters from South America and northern Mexico.

Rivera Peralta says half of all the suspects arrested in Celaya are now between 14 and 24 years old. They have also caught gunmen from the Scorpions, a gang based in the border city of Matamoros, and several former guerrilla fighters from Colombia.

Opposition presidential candidate Xóchitl Gálvez is taking a different approach. She pledges to double the number of National Guard troopers but also restore training and equipment funding to local police forces.

"We can't have police who will take care of us unless we take care of our police," she said at her campaign launch.

For their part, police in Celaya are putting their trust in "the man in the tower," a standing firing post welded to the bed of a pickup. The "tower" has a higher and wider range of vision for the officer to spot any attack coming — and a Galil automatic rifle.

"He is our front line. He is the spearhead to resist any attack," said one officer.

8 teens wounded by gunfire at Philadelphia bus stop in city's 4th transit shooting in as many days

By RON TODT Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Police say eight Philadelphia high school students waiting to board a city bus after classes Wednesday were wounded by gunshots from suspects who jumped from a car and opened fire, the fourth shooting on the transit system in as many days.

The previous three shootings each involved a fatality. Those wounded at the bus stop included a 16-year-old who was hit nine times and was in critical condition, Kevin Bethel, the city's police commissioner, said at a news conference. Police said later that a second victim was also in critical condition. The others were said to be in stable condition.

Bethel said the Northeast High School students, ranging in age from 15 to 17, were waiting for the bus around 3 p.m. when three people emerged from the car, which was waiting at the scene, and fired more than 30 shots. Police said the attackers were masked and the car was a dark blue Hyundai Sonata.

Police then received numerous 911 calls about a "mass shooting on the highway near Dunkin' Donuts," in northeast Philadelphia, according to police spokesperson Tanya Little.

The injured teens were taken to Einstein Medical Center and Jefferson Torresdale Hospital, according to John Golden, a spokesperson for the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, or SEPTA. Two buses — a Route 18 bus and a Route 67 bus — were hit by gunfire, but there were no reports of injuries to passengers or the driver.

Northeast High School is more than a mile from where the shooting took place and the largest public

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high school in the city, with more than 3,000 students.

Monique Braxton, deputy chief of communications for the Philadelphia school district, said the shooting occurred near Crossan Elementary, which was dismissing students at the time but pulled them back inside and locked down. It later got an all-clear from police.

Mayor Cherrele Parker, standing at the scene with the city police commissioner and prosecutor and the school superintendent, said she wanted people to know that "we will not be held hostage, that we will use every legal tool in the toolbox to ensure the public health and safety of the people of our city."

Superintendent Tony Watlington Sr. said officials were "absolutely heartbroken and angry that innocent children walking home from school would be impacted by gun violence, and we agree with the mayor: Enough is enough."

In the evening, police released surveillance camera video showing the Hyundai in a parking lot, its windshield wipers swiping back and forth. Suddenly three figures in dark clothing burst from the front passenger side and both rear doors and run across the lot, apparently toward the bus stop. Some people can be seen fleeing. A person apparently has remained in the driver's seat and steers the vehicle part of the way toward the three, who return and quickly pile back inside. The car then speeds off.

The vehicle's windows were darkly tinted and the license plate was unknown, police said. The car was missing an "H" emblem on the front grill. The department asked for the public's assistance in identifying the suspects but warned against approaching them.

The scene was cordoned off with yellow police tape in the aftermath of the shooting, with dozens of evidence markers lying on the rain-slicked pavement.

Neighborhood resident Jessica Healy, who was with her 2-year-old daughter, said the area has become more unsafe in recent years, and she has neighbors who are already in the process of moving due to previous incidents.

"I think it's really sad and just dangerous that I don't even want to walk my daughter out here," Healy said.

"It's not safe. ... I don't like it here. I would like to move. But my boyfriend has a good job here, so this is why we stay," she added.

Another longtime resident, Brenda Keith, said she doesn't take extraordinary measures to stay safe, other than being aware of her surroundings in case she suddenly needs to get away from trouble. She understands if people don't feel safe in the city right now or are uneasy about riding SEPTA, but she's determined not to let shootings stop her from living her life.

"But we're not the only city that's going through this. ... I've been here a long time and things have gotten worse, but that's the way life is," Keith said.

Wednesday's shooting followed shootings the previous three days in which someone was killed while riding, entering or leaving a SEPTA bus.

Tuesday's shooting occurred around 6:35 p.m., when police said a verbal argument and then a physical fight began. One of the two passengers exited, turned and fired two shots from a 9 mm handgun, hitting a man later identified as 37-year-old Carmelo Drayton. He died shortly afterward at a hospital.

The shooter, who officials said was wearing one of the kinds of masks not allowed on the transit system, fled. Authorities were investigating possible motive, and no other injuries were reported.

SEPTA's chief of transit police, Charles Lawson, said the shots were fired at the victim while the driver was "immediately behind."

On Monday, a 17-year-old student was killed and four other people were wounded when gunfire erupted at a bus stop. The victims included two women who were riding on a bus.

And on Sunday, around 11:30 p.m., a 27-year-old man was killed by another passenger moments after they both got off a bus. Witnesses said the two had argued, but a motive remains under investigation.

No arrests have been made in any of the shootings, Frank Vanore, deputy commissioner of the Philadelphia police department, said Wednesday.

While serious crime overall is down along the transportation system, Lawson said, a pattern that has emerged over the past year and a half is people carrying weapons, usually illegally, getting into an argu-

ment and then opening fire. He vowed that officials would enforce crime aggressively and unapologetically and use "every legal means at our disposal to target illegal gun possession."

"We're going to target individuals concealing their identity. We're going to target fare evasion. We're going to target open drug use," Lawson said. "We're going to target every criminal code on the books."

Officials are increasing monitoring of security cameras and looking into ways to let employees report potential problems discreetly and safely, Lawson added.

Pressure grows on Israel to open more aid routes into Gaza by land and sea as hunger worsens

By TIA GOLDENBERG and WAFSA SHURAFSA Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Efforts to get desperately needed humanitarian aid to war-racked northern Gaza gained momentum Wednesday with the European Union increasing pressure for the creation of a sea route from Cyprus to Gaza and British Foreign Minister David Cameron saying that Israel's allies were losing patience.

While aid groups say all of Gaza is mired in a humanitarian crisis, the situation in the largely isolated north stands out. Many of the estimated 300,000 people still living there have been reduced to eating animal fodder to survive. The U.N. says that one in six children younger than 2 in the north suffers from acute malnutrition.

Amid the global pressure to alleviate the crisis, two Israeli officials said Wednesday the government will begin allowing aid to move directly from its territory into northern Gaza and will also cooperate with the creation of the sea route from Cyprus.

Israel would allow 20 to 30 aid trucks to enter northern Gaza from Israel on Friday, the start of more regular deliveries via that route, one of the officials said. It will also begin doing security checks Sunday on aid in Cyprus before it's delivered via sea to Gaza, the official said. The ship will be part of a pilot project to test the feasibility of the sea route. The aid is UAE-funded and made possible with US involvement.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the upcoming shipments with the media.

Aid groups have said it has become nearly impossible to deliver supplies within most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, the ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order. It is even more difficult to get aid to the north.

Trucks carrying humanitarian aid have to drive from the Rafah crossing with Egypt or the Kerem Shalom crossing with Israel, both on the southern edge of Gaza, through the conflict zone to reach the largely cut-off areas in the north.

Last week, an attempt by the Israeli military to facilitate the movement of aid ended in tragedy when more than 100 Palestinians were fatally shot by Israeli forces or trampled to death in a melee.

On Wednesday, hundreds of people ran along a seaside road on the outskirts of Gaza City to collect bags of flour and boxes of water and canned food donated by Turkey and Egypt and were part of a shipment trucked in from southern Gaza.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron met with Benny Gantz, a visiting member of Israel's war Cabinet, and pressed him to increase the flow of aid into Gaza.

"We are still not seeing improvements on the ground. This must change," Cameron said in a statement posted on X, formerly known as Twitter.

South Africa, which filed a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, asked the court Wednesday to order Israel to allow in aid "to address famine and starvation" in Gaza.

Meanwhile, European Union Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen will visit Cyprus on Friday to inspect installations at the port of Larnaca, from where aid would leave for Gaza if a sea route is established, Cypriot government spokesman Constantinos Letymbiotis said.

EU spokesman Eric Mamer said the bloc is hopeful the corridor will open "very soon."

Concerned by the lack of access to food, the United States, Jordan and other nations have begun mak-

ing air drops of aid in recent days, but aid groups say only a fraction of the needed assistance can be delivered by air.

The war began with a Hamas attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7 in which Palestinian militants killed around 1,200 people and took about 250 hostages. More than 100 of them were released during a week-long cease-fire in November.

The attack sparked an Israeli invasion of the enclave of 2.3 million people. Gaza's Health Ministry said Wednesday the Palestinian death toll from the war climbed to 30,717. The ministry is part of the Hamas-run government and maintains detailed casualty records. It does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its tallies but says women and children make up around two-thirds of those killed.

Israel says it has killed over 13,000 Hamas fighters, without providing evidence.

Aid groups say the fighting has displaced most of the territory's population and pushed a quarter of the population to the brink of famine.

Meanwhile, efforts to negotiate a cease-fire to start before the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in a few days have so far borne no fruit. The U.S., Qatar and Egypt have worked on an agreement in which Hamas would release up to 40 hostages in return for a six-week cease-fire, the release of some Palestinian prisoners and a major influx of aid to Gaza. Hamas has said it wants a full end to the war and Israeli forces' withdrawal.

Judge sentences 4 defendants in US terrorism and kidnapping case to life in prison, appeals planned

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — A U.S. judge on Wednesday sentenced four family members to life in prison for convictions stemming from a federal terrorism and kidnapping case that began in 2017 with the search for a toddler who went missing from Georgia and was later found dead when authorities raided a squalid compound in northern New Mexico.

The sentencing comes months after jurors convicted the four defendants in what prosecutors had called a "sick end-of-times scheme."

The defendants were unsuccessful in their arguments that the severity of the sentences violated their constitutional rights. That will be just one of the arguments they plan to bring up when appealing their convictions. At trial, they suggested that the case was the product of "government overreach" and that they were targeted because they are Muslim.

The fifth defendant — Jany Leveille, a Haitian national — avoided being part of a three-week trial last fall by pleading guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists and being in possession of a firearm while unlawfully in the United States. Under the terms of her plea agreement, she had faced up to 17 years in prison.

Judge William Johnson sentenced her to 15 years, noting that Leveille had received treatment for a diagnosis of acute schizophrenia that followed her arrest in 2018. She had undergone competency evaluations and began taking medication.

"The facts are so horrendous. But also with Ms. Leveille, this is the first time there has been any acceptance of responsibility" among the defendants, the judge said, noting that it was significant that Leveille apologized to the toddler's mother and to her co-defendants.

Prosecutors said during the trial that it was under Leveille's instruction that the family fled Georgia with the boy, ending up in a remote stretch of the high desert where they conducted firearms and tactical training to prepare for attacks against the government. It was tied to a belief that the boy would be resurrected and then instruct the family which corrupt government and private institutions needed to be eliminated.

Some of Leveille's writings about the plans were presented as evidence during the trial. She was described as a spiritual leader for the group.

Leveille addressed the court Wednesday, saying it was her 41st birthday and now that she can think clearly, it sickens her to think about what happened because of her delusions and the voices she was hearing.

Prosecutors said it was unclear when Leveille's mental health issues began to manifest.

Siraj Ibn Wahhaj, the boy's father and Leveille's partner, was convicted of three terrorism-related charges. Wahhaj's brother-in-law, Lucas Morton, also was convicted of terrorism charges, conspiracy to commit kidnapping, and kidnapping that resulted in the boy's death. Wahhaj's two sisters — Hujrah and Subhanah Wahhaj — were convicted only on the kidnapping charges.

Defense attorneys for the sisters argued that a life sentence was grossly disproportionate to the crimes their clients were accused of committing and that the women had no control over the situation. Prosecutors disputed those claims.

Johnson said he was bound by the federal kidnapping statute, which carries a mandatory minimum sentence of life in prison when such a crime results in death. The statute dates back nearly a century to the abduction of the son of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh and his wife, Anne.

While some federal sentencing statutes have evolved over time, Johnson said a precedent has been set by the U.S. Supreme Court and circuit courts in limiting judges' discretion in such instances. Prosecutors added that there have been no federal cases in which the mandatory sentence for a deadly kidnapping case has been overturned due to questions of constitutionality.

In a complex case that took years to get to trial, jurors heard weeks of testimony from children who had lived with their parents at the compound, other family members, firearms experts, doctors and forensic technicians.

Authorities raided the family's compound in August 2018, finding 11 hungry children and dismal living conditions without running water. They also found 11 firearms and ammunition that were used at a makeshift shooting range on the property on the outskirts of Amalia near the Colorado state line.

The remains of Wahhaj's 3-year-old son, Abdul-Ghani Wahhaj, were found in an underground tunnel at the compound. Testimony during the trial indicated that the boy died just weeks after arriving in New Mexico and that his body was kept for months with Leveille promising the others that he would be resurrected.

An exact cause of death was never determined amid accusations that the boy, who had frequent seizures, had been deprived of crucial medication.

Abdul-Ghani's mother, Hakima Ramzi, appeared by video Wednesday and offered a tearful plea for the judge to impose the maximum sentence.

The grandfather of the boy is Muslim cleric Siraj Wahhaj, who leads a well-known New York City mosque. He stood up in court Wednesday and delivered a simple message to his children and the other defendants.

"I'm saying to you I forgive you," the elder Wahhaj said, adding that he didn't think they intended for the boy to die. "We're human beings and we make mistakes."

His daughters began to cry, and Leveille hung her head low.

Third-party group No Labels is expected to move forward with a 2024 campaign, AP sources say

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The third-party presidential movement No Labels is planning to move toward fielding a presidential candidate in the November election, even as high-profile contenders for the ticket have decided not to run, two people familiar with the matter said Wednesday.

After months of leaving open whether the group would offer a ticket, No Labels delegates are expected to vote Friday in favor of launching a presidential campaign for this fall's election, according to the people familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the group's internal deliberations.

No Labels will not name its presidential and vice presidential picks on Friday, when roughly 800 delegates meet virtually in a private meeting. The group is instead expected to debut a formal selection process late next week for potential candidates who would be selected in the coming weeks, the people said.

Democratic President Joe Biden and Republican Donald Trump's romp on Super Tuesday all but ensured a November rematch of the 2020 election. Polls suggest many Americans don't have favorable views of Biden or Trump, a dynamic No Labels sees as an opening to offer a bipartisan ticket. But Biden support-

ers worry No Labels will pull votes away from the president in battleground states and are critical of how the group won't disclose its donors or much of its decision-making.

No Labels officials would not publicly confirm plans for Friday's meeting. In a statement, senior strategist Ryan Clancy said only, "We expect our delegates to encourage the process to continue."

The two people familiar with the group noted that No Labels' plans could change ahead of the vote. But they said there has been enthusiasm across its regional chapters for running a candidate, giving momentum to the idea of a vote on Friday.

The group has been weighing what it would present as a "unity ticket" to appeal to voters unhappy with both Biden and Trump. No Labels' strategists have said they'll give their ballot line to a bipartisan ticket with a presidential nominee from one major party and a vice presidential nominee from the other if they see a viable path to victory.

Group officials have said they are communicating with several potential candidates but have not disclosed any names.

Former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley has said she's not interested in running as a No Labels candidate. After Haley dropped out of the Republican race on Wednesday, No Labels in a statement congratulated her for "running a great campaign and appealing to the large swath of commonsense voters."

West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a moderate Democrat who is not seeking re-election this year, has said he will not seek the presidency. Republican former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, who had been involved with No Labels, is instead seeking a U.S. Senate seat in November.

No Labels has stockpiled cash from people it has declined to name, including former Republican donors who have become disenchanted with the party's direction in the Trump era, and worked to secure ballot access in every state.

Britain's Conservative government announces tax cuts it hopes can lift its ailing election fortunes

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — British Treasury chief Jeremy Hunt sought Wednesday to bolster spirits within his Conservative Party with another tax cut for 27 million working people, hoping it can turn the political tide ahead of a general election this year.

But with the tax cut trailed in advance and no major surprises in Hunt's economic statement to Parliament, speculation that the government planned to use the budget as a springboard for a May election appeared to have diminished.

Even though the British economy has hit one definition of recession and public finances will remain stretched over coming years, Hunt had come under pressure from his Conservative peers to cut taxes.

And he did, with a reduction in national insurance, which workers pay to qualify for a state pension, by 2 percentage points, to 8%. He also hinted at its eventual abolition.

Hunt cut this tax on wages by the same amount in November, meaning that in combination, workers with average earnings will benefit to the tune of around 1,000 pounds (\$1,270) a year.

"We will continue to cut national insurance contributions as we have done today so we truly make work pay," Hunt said in a packed and often rowdy House of Commons chamber.

To the likely disappointment of many of his Conservative peers nervous about losing their seats in the upcoming election, Hunt made no mention of reducing the basic rate of income tax, which would have benefited retirees and savers, too.

Poll after poll suggests the Conservatives, in power since 2010, are on course to lose to the main opposition Labour Party.

Labour leader Keir Starmer challenged Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to call an election for May 2, while describing the budget statement as the "last desperate act of a party that has failed."

There had been speculation that Sunak, who has the power to name the election date, might call it for

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May alongside local and mayoral elections. The general election must be held by January 2025.

Sunak has previously said the vote is likely to take place in the second half of the year, potentially coinciding with the U.S. presidential election, but has kept his options open. He may be hoping the economic backdrop becomes more benign, with a "feelgood" factor emerging alongside higher economic growth, lower inflation and dropping interest rates and mortgage costs.

Hunt told Sky News after his statement that a fall election remains the "working assumption" but that "in the end, it's a choice the prime minister makes."

Tim Bale, professor of politics at Queen Mary University of London, said he doubted the modest measures in the budget would be enough to make Sunak gamble on a May election.

"There are just too few rabbits out of too few hats to create any great excitement that the Tories would need to go to the country sooner rather than later," he said.

"People are pretty cynical about politics in general, and very, very cynical now about the Conservative government," he said.

Hunt argued that the British economy was "turning the corner" following the coronavirus pandemic and a sharp spike in energy prices tied to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which sent inflation soaring and prompted the Bank of England to raise interest rates aggressively.

"We can now help families not just with temporary cost-of-living support but with permanent cuts in taxation," Hunt said.

In addition to the cut in national insurance, Hunt announced other voter-friendly moves, including freezing taxes on alcohol and gas at the pump and raising the amount of money individuals can earn before they have to pay back a child benefit from the state.

The tax giveaway will be partly paid for by keeping a lid on spending for already cash-starved public services as well as a series of tax increases to take effect at different times over the coming years.

Those tax hikes will affect business class fares, vapes and oil and natural gas producers, which saw a windfall after Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Hunt also abolished "non-domiciled" tax status, which allows some wealthy individuals to avoid paying U.K. taxes. That announcement could be perceived as an attempt to blindside Labour, which has been calling for its abolition to pay for spending at the state-run National Health Service.

"We've learned to expect some degree of smoke and mirrors in the budget," said Paul Johnson, director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies think-tank. "Today was no different."

Sunak and Hunt have restored a measure of economic stability after the short-lived premiership of Liz Truss, which foundered after a series of unfunded tax cuts roiled financial markets and sent borrowing costs surging.

Truss' premiership is one of the main reasons Labour is so far ahead in the polls. Labour leader Starmer brought up her legacy when accusing the government of being blind to the harsh economic reality facing millions of people.

"As the captain of the Titanic and the former prime minister herself might have said: Iceberg? What iceberg?" he said.

Starmer said the Conservatives had delivered falling living standards, a smaller economy than when Sunak took office in late 2022 and despite Wednesday's measures, the highest tax burden for 70 years following the worst cost-of-living crisis in decades.

"That is their record, it is still their record, give with one hand and take even more with the other — and nothing they do between now and the election will change that," he said.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's campaign donor says his Panera Bread restaurants will follow minimum wage law

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — A wealthy campaign donor of California Gov. Gavin Newsom said the Panera Bread restaurants he owns will start paying workers at least \$20 an hour on April 1 after controversy over whether a new state minimum wage law for fast food workers applies to his businesses.

California's statewide minimum wage is \$16 per hour. Newsom signed a law last year that says fast food restaurants that are part of a chain with at least 60 locations nationally must pay their workers at least \$20 per hour beginning April 1. But the law does not apply to restaurants that have their own bakeries to make and sell bread as a stand-alone menu item.

That exception appeared to apply to restaurants like Panera Bread. Last week, Bloomberg News reported that Newsom had pushed for such a carve-out to benefit donor Greg Flynn, whose company owns and operates 24 Panera Bread restaurants in California.

The Democratic governor and Flynn denied the report, with Newsom calling it "absurd." Newsom spokesperson Alex Stack said the administration's legal team analyzed the law "in response to recent news articles" and concluded Panera Bread restaurants are likely not exempt because the dough they use to make bread is mixed off site.

Flynn has not said whether he agrees with the Newsom administration's interpretation. But on Tuesday, he announced that all of the Panera Bread restaurants his company owns and operates will pay all hourly workers pre-tip wages of "\$20 per hour or higher."

"At Flynn Group, we are in the people business and believe our people are our most valuable assets," Flynn said. "Our goal is to attract and retain the best team members to deliver the restaurant experience our guests know and love."

Flynn had previously said the exemption has "very little practical value" because — even if Panera Bread restaurants were exempt — its competitors in the fast-food world were not exempt and Panera would have to pay similar wages order to attract and retain workers.

He declined an interview request through a spokesperson.

There are 188 Panera Bread restaurants in California. Panera Bread representatives declined to comment.

Chris Micheli, a California lobbyist and adjunct professor of law at McGeorge School of Law, said Flynn likely would have had a good case had he chose to challenge the Newsom administration's interpretation of the law. The law defines what a fast-food restaurant is, and says it is not an establishment that "operates a bakery that produces for sale on the establishment's premises bread."

The law goes on to say the exemption only applies "where the establishment produces for sale bread as a stand-alone menu item, and does not apply if the bread is available for sale solely as part of another menu item."

"On its face it appears that it would be applicable, however a court might have to determine what is included in the word 'produce' in order for the exemption to apply," Micheli said.

As for which businesses would be exempt from the law, Newsom's office said the newly created Fast Food Council "may develop regulations and the Labor Commissioner has enforcement authority over individual claims based on the facts of individual cases."

"Ultimately, the courts may have to make the final ruling," said Alex Stack, Newsom's spokesperson.

Last week, Flynn denied asking for an exemption or "special considerations." He said he did participate in a group meeting with some of Newsom's staff and other restaurant owners. He said if the intent of the bill was to address labor code violations in the fast-food industry, he suggested the bill make a distinction between fast-food restaurants and "fast-casual restaurants."

In an interview with KNBC in Los Angeles earlier this week, Newsom said negotiations about the law included "some discussions around bakeries and this and that," but he said those talks were only "as it relates to the carve-outs and the details that were done with this deep coalition" that included labor unions and fast-food industry representatives.

The political effects of the issue could linger whether the allegations are true or not, said Kevin Liao, a California-based Democratic political consultant. While Flynn now won't benefit from the exemption in the law, that likely won't deter Newsom's opponents from using the allegations against him.

"Anyone who wants to take a shot at Newsom will use this. That's just politics," Liao said. "When you have someone who many think has national aspirations, they are going to pick at any scab that exists and try to exploit it."

Nikki Haley suspends her campaign and leaves Donald Trump as the last major Republican candidate

By STEVE PEOPLES and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Nikki Haley suspended her presidential campaign on Wednesday after being soundly defeated across the country on Super Tuesday, leaving Donald Trump as the last remaining major candidate for the 2024 Republican nomination.

Haley didn't endorse the former president in a speech in Charleston, South Carolina. Instead, she challenged him to win the support of the moderate Republicans and independent voters who supported her.

"It is now up to Donald Trump to earn the votes of those in our party and beyond it who did not support him. And I hope he does that," she said. "At its best, politics is about bringing people into your cause, not turning them away. And our conservative cause badly needs more people."

Haley, a former South Carolina governor and U.N. ambassador, was Trump's first significant rival when she jumped into the race in February 2023. She spent the final phase of her campaign aggressively warning the GOP against embracing Trump, whom she argued was too consumed by chaos and personal grievance to defeat President Joe Biden in the general election.

Her departure clears Trump to focus solely on his likely rematch in November with Biden. The former president is on track to reach the necessary 1,215 delegates to clinch the Republican nomination later this month.

Haley's defeat marks a painful, if predictable, blow to those voters, donors and Republican Party officials who opposed Trump and his fiery brand of "Make America Great Again" politics. She was especially popular among moderates and college-educated voters, constituencies that will likely play a pivotal role in the general election. It's unclear whether Trump, who recently declared that Haley donors would be permanently banned from his movement, can ultimately unify a deeply divided party.

Haley planned to address donors on a Zoom meeting Wednesday afternoon, according to two people familiar with the plans.

Trump on Tuesday night declared that the GOP was united behind him, but in a statement shortly afterward, Haley spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas said, "Unity is not achieved by simply claiming, 'We're united.'"

"Today, in state after state, there remains a large block of Republican primary voters who are expressing deep concerns about Donald Trump," Perez-Cubas said. "That is not the unity our party needs for success. Addressing those voters' concerns will make the Republican Party and America better."

Haley has made clear she doesn't want to serve as Trump's vice president or run on a third-party ticket arranged by the group No Labels. She leaves the race with an elevated national profile that could help her in a future presidential run.

Swiftly following her speech Wednesday, Trump's campaign in a fundraising email falsely claimed that Haley had endorsed his candidacy and did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the message. Earlier this week, Haley said she no longer feels bound by a pledge that required all GOP contenders to support the party's eventual nominee in order to participate in the primary debates.

In a social media post, Trump continued to mock his former rival, while at the same time extending an invitation to "all of the Haley supporters to join the greatest movement in the history of our Nation. BIDEN IS THE ENEMY, HE IS DESTROYING OUR COUNTRY," he wrote. "MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!!!"

On Wednesday, Biden welcomed any voters who had backed Haley, acknowledging Trump's previous

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rejection of her supporters.

"Donald Trump made it clear he doesn't want Nikki Haley's supporters. I want to be clear: There is a place for them in my campaign," Biden said in a statement. "I know there is a lot we won't agree on. But on the fundamental issues of preserving American democracy, on standing up for the rule of law, on treating each other with decency and dignity and respect, on preserving NATO and standing up to America's adversaries, I hope and believe we can find common ground."

A group that had targeted independents and Democrats to vote for Haley over Trump in Republican primaries is now pushing those voters to back Biden in November. On Wednesday, Primary Pivot said it was "pivoting" again with a new initiative — Haley Voters for Biden — which might ultimately amount to basically encouraging Democrats to revert back to supporting their party's likely eventual nominee.

By staying in the campaign until now, Haley drew enough support from suburbanites and college-educated voters to highlight Trump's apparent weaknesses with those groups.

In AP VoteCast surveys conducted among Republican primary and caucus voters in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, between 61% and 76% of Haley's supporters said they would be so dissatisfied if Trump became the GOP nominee that they wouldn't vote for him in the November general election. Voters in the early Republican head-to-head contests who said they wouldn't vote for Trump in the fall represented a small but significant segment of the electorate: 2 in 10 Iowa voters, one-third of New Hampshire voters, and one-quarter of South Carolina voters.

Haley leaves the 2024 presidential contest having made history as the first woman to win a Republican primary contest. She beat Trump in the District of Columbia on Sunday and in Vermont on Tuesday.

She had insisted she would stay in the race through Super Tuesday and crossed the country campaigning in states holding Republican contests. Ultimately, she was unable to knock Trump off his glide path to a third straight nomination.

Haley's allies note that she exceeded most of the political world's expectations by making it as far as she did.

She had initially ruled out running against Trump in 2024. But she changed her mind and ended up launching her bid three months after he did, citing among other things the country's economic troubles and the need for "generational change." Haley, 52, later called for competency tests for politicians over the age of 75 — a knock on both Trump, who is 77, and Biden, who is 81.

Her candidacy was slow to attract donors and support, but she ultimately outlasted all of her other GOP rivals, including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, former Vice President Mike Pence and Sen. Tim Scott, her fellow South Carolinian whom she appointed to the Senate in 2012. And the money flowed in until the very end. Her campaign said it raised more than \$12 million in February alone.

She gained popularity with many Republican donors, independent voters and the "Never Trump" crowd, even though she criticized the criminal cases against him as politically motivated and pledged that, if president, she would pardon him if he were convicted in federal court.

House passes \$460 billion package of spending bills. Senate expected to act before shutdown deadline

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House passed a \$460 billion package of spending bills Wednesday that would keep money flowing to key federal agencies through the remainder of the budget year. The Senate is expected to take up the legislation before a midnight Friday shutdown deadline.

Lawmakers are negotiating a second package of six bills, including defense, in an effort to have all federal agencies fully funded before a March 22 deadline. In the end, total discretionary spending set by Congress is expected to come in at about \$1.66 trillion for the full entire year.

A significant number of House Republicans have lined up in opposition to the spending packages, forcing House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., to use an expedited process to bring the bill up for a vote. That process requires two-thirds of the House to vote for the measure for it to pass.

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The House passed the measure by a vote of 339-85.

The nondefense spending in this year's bills is relatively flat compared to the previous year. Supporters say that keeping that spending below the rate of inflation is tantamount to a cut, forcing agencies to be more frugal and focus manpower on top priorities. Johnson cited a 10% cut to the Environmental Protection Agency, a 7% cut to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives and a 6% cut to the FBI.

But many Republican lawmakers were seeking much steeper cuts and more policy victories. The House Freedom Caucus, which contains dozens of the GOP's most conservative members, urged Republicans to vote against the first spending package and oppose the second one being negotiated.

"Despite giving Democrats higher spending levels, the omnibus text released so far punts on nearly every single Republican policy priority," the group said.

Johnson countered that House Republicans have just a two-vote majority in the House while Democrats control the Senate and White House.

"We have to be realistic about what we're able to achieve," Johnson said.

Democrats staved off most of the policy riders that House Republicans sought to include in the package. For example, they beat back an effort to block new rules that expand access to the abortion pill mifepristone.

Democrats also said the bill would fully fund a nutrition program for low-income women, infants and children, providing about \$7 billion for what is known as the WIC program. That's a \$1 billion increase from the previous year.

As part of those negotiations, House Republicans pushed to give a few states the ability to disallow the purchase of non-nutritious food, such as sugary drinks and snacks, in the food stamp program known as SNAP. The GOP's effort was unsuccessful for now, but supporters say they'll try again in next year's spending bills.

"The bill certainly doesn't have everything that we may have wanted, but I am very proud to say we successfully defeated the vast majority of the extreme cuts and hundreds of harmful policy riders proposed by the House Republicans," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the top-ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee.

House Republicans were able to achieve some policy wins, however. One provision, for example, will prevent the sale of oil in the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to China. Another policy mandate prohibits the Justice Department from investigating parents who exercise free speech at local school board meetings.

Another provision strengthens gun rights for certain veterans.

Under current law, the Department of Veterans Affairs must send a beneficiary's name to the FBI's National Instant Criminal Background Check System whenever a fiduciary is appointed to help manage someone's benefits because they lack the mental capacity to manage their own affairs. This year's spending package prohibits the department from transmitting that information unless a relevant judicial authority rules that the beneficiary is a danger to himself or herself, or others.

Rep. Mark Takano, the top Democrat on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, said a finding of mental incompetency by the VA is typically based on "very serious mental health conditions like schizophrenia and dementia."

"They wanted so badly to make sure that vulnerable veterans could access more firearms," Takano said. "This is wrong. Lives are on the line. Veterans' lives are on the line, and I will not agree to legislation that will cause more people's lives to be lost to gun violence."

Republicans have argued that current VA policy deters some veterans from seeking the care and benefits they have earned.

In a closed-door meeting with the House GOP, Johnson, looking to show that Republicans did get some policy wins in the negotiations, read from a news report about how Democrats were having "heartburn" about the gun provision, according to a Republican familiar with the discussion who was not authorized to discuss it publicly.

The bills to fund federal agencies are more than five months past due with the budget year beginning Oct. 1. House Republicans are describing an improved process nevertheless, saying they have broken the

cycle of passing all the spending bills in one massive package that lawmakers have little time to study before being asked to vote on it or risk a government shutdown.

But critics of the bill, such as Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., were dismissive about how much the process really changed.

The first package covers the departments of Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Interior and Transportation, among others.

Democrats overwhelmingly supported the bill, with 207 voting for it and two voting against. The vote among Republicans was 132-83.

"Once again, Democrats protected the American people and delivered the overwhelming majority of votes necessary to get things done," House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said.

Rep. Kevin Hern, R-Okla., said he opposed the bill because "I've not made any bones about it since I've been here. We have to get spending under control and we've lost the leverage."

Politicians seek new alliances to lead Haiti as gangs take over and premier tries to return home

By EVENS SANON and BERT WILKINSON Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — Haitian politicians started pursuing new alliances Wednesday, seeking a coalition that could lead the country out of the gang violence that has fueled lawlessness, closed the main airport and prevented embattled Prime Minister Ariel Henry from returning home.

Haiti remained largely paralyzed, with schools and businesses still closed amid heavy gunfire blamed on the gangs that control an estimated 80% of the capital, Port-au-Prince, where several bodies lay on empty streets. The country's two biggest prisons were also raided, resulting in the release of more than 4,000 inmates over the weekend.

Henry faces increasing pressure to resign, which would likely trigger a U.S.-supported transition to a new government.

One new political alliance involves former rebel leader Guy Philippe and ex-presidential candidate and senator Moïse Jean Charles, who told Radio Caraïbes on Wednesday that they signed a deal to form a three-person council to lead Haiti.

Philippe, a key figure in the 2004 rebellion that ousted former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, returned to Haiti in November and has been calling for Henry's resignation. He spent several years in prison in the U.S. after pleading guilty to a money laundering charge.

Meanwhile, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations was asked Wednesday whether the United States asked Henry to step down.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield replied that the U.S. has asked Henry to "move forward on a political process that will lead to the establishment of a presidential transitional council that will lead to elections."

American officials believe it's urgent for Henry to start "the process of bringing normalcy back to the people of Haiti," she said.

U.S. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller echoed her remarks, saying the United States was not acting unilaterally but rather in consultation with partners in the region.

"And what we are saying to the prime minister is that he needs to expedite the transition to empowered and inclusive governance," Miller said.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the organization continued to deal with Henry as prime minister, adding that diplomats were "not in the business of encouraging him to resign."

He said the U.N. chief is urging the government and all parties to set aside their differences and agree on "a common path towards the restoration of democratic institutions."

Dujarric described the situation in Port-au-Prince as "extremely fragile," with sporadic attacks forcing the cancellation of all flights in and out of Haiti.

"Health infrastructure is on the brink of collapse," he said, noting that wounded civilians were overwhelming hospitals and blood products were urgently needed.

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U.N. human rights chief Volker Turk said nearly 1,200 people have been killed in Haiti since the beginning of the year "because of this man-made violence."

Caribbean leaders who have traveled to Haiti and previously met with Henry said Wednesday that a political solution is needed before the crisis worsens.

"In spite of many, many meetings, we have not been able to reach any form of consensus between the government, the private sector, civil society, religious organizations," said Irfaan Ali, president of Guyana, a country on South America's Atlantic coast.

The challenges are "compounded by the absence of key institutions" such as the presidency and parliament, as well as the violence and the lack of humanitarian aid, he said.

The prime minister has not made any public comments since gangs began attacking critical infrastructure late last week while he was in Kenya pushing for the U.N.-backed deployment of a police force from the East African country to help fight the surge in violence in the troubled Caribbean nation.

Before flying to Kenya, Henry was in Guyana for a summit held by a regional trade bloc known as Caricom, where Haiti was high on the agenda.

Meanwhile, a Caribbean official told The Associated Press on Wednesday that leaders of Caricom spoke with Henry late Tuesday and presented several alternatives to end Haiti's deepening crisis, including his resignation, which he refused to do. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to share details about the talks.

Henry landed Tuesday in Puerto Rico after he was not allowed to land in the Dominican Republic, where officials closed the airspace around Haiti. Héctor Porcella, director of the Dominican Institute of Civil Aviation, told reporters the plane did not have a required flight plan.

The Dominican Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement Wednesday that U.S. and Haitian officials informally contacted it to inquire about the possibility of Henry's plane making an "indefinite stop" in the Dominican Republic, adding that the prime minister was in New York at the time.

The government said it twice told foreign officials that such a move would require a defined flight plan.

"It is essential to note that the Dominican Republic maintains its willingness to continue cooperating with the international community to facilitate Haiti's return to normalcy. However, it is imperative that any action taken does not compromise our national security," the foreign affairs office said.

Dickon Mitchell, prime minister of the eastern Caribbean island of Grenada, told the AP that regional leaders spoke late Tuesday with Henry, who did not indicate anything except "that he is trying to get back into Haiti." Mitchell did not provide details.

Henry was appointed prime minister with the backing of the international community shortly after the July 2021 assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

As he tried to return to Haiti on Wednesday, heavy gunfire echoed throughout Port-au-Prince as Haitians feared additional attacks led by powerful gang leaders.

It was not clear when the country's international airport would reopen.

Oscars producers promise cameos and surprises for Sunday's (1 hour earlier) show

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — With just a few days to go until the 96th Academy Awards on Sunday, the show's producers are feeling good about what they've put together.

The nominees are some of the best the Oscars have seen, including some true blockbusters like "Oppenheimer" and "Barbie." Ryan Gosling is singing "I'm Just Ken" during the show. There will be a live orchestra in the theater. And the ever-reliable Jimmy Kimmel is back to host the proceedings for the fourth time.

"We're really excited about this year," said Molly McNearney, who is executive producing the show for the fourth time. "It's a phenomenal year of movies. And we have great movies that the home audience is familiar with, which makes our jobs easier."

The producers were hired earlier than usual, meaning they've had more time to plan and study past

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Oscars broadcasts to try to home in on what works and what doesn't. One thing they've learned is that if the room is laughing, the audience at home is usually laughing too.

McNearney, who is married to Kimmel, said that they're focusing on jokes over big, highly produced comedy bits. Kimmel will do his 10-minute monologue to kick off the show and will be sprinkled throughout.

"I think an evening that just makes people feel good is a win," McNearney said. "Our job as producers is to keep that feeling good moving quickly because it is a long show and we want to make sure people are staying throughout."

Another thing that works: When the speeches are good and people feel invested in the winners. Last year there were a lot of great comeback and underdog stories, from Brendan Fraser to Ke Huy Quan, which helped. This is not something the producers have any control over, but they are optimistic about the nominees and setting up scenarios with presenters who have a genuine connection either with each other or people in the audience.

"We want everybody to feel included, that they are part of our story," said executive producer and showrunner Raj Kapoor. "I hope that we have put another kind of modern take on it that really focuses on storytelling and connection and that the audience in the theater and at home will just feel immersed in the experience all throughout the evening."

Kapoor noted that the live performances of the Oscar-nominated original songs should be a real highlight of the show too, from the Osage singers to Gosling. They've also re-designed the stage so that an orchestra of 42 musicians can be in the Dolby Theatre and seen on camera. And Kapoor teased that the In Memoriam sequence is something they've put a lot of time and thought into and that it is poised to tug at audience heartstrings.

"There's going to be entertainment and lots of surprises and a few cameos and things that haven't been announced yet. We're just really excited for everybody to come watch with us," Katy Mullan said. "The Oscars is one of those last giant tentpole pop culture moments that everybody looks forward to and gathers around that TV set. It's co-viewing at its best. And we're in this moment where there's more interest around these big live moments than there has been in years."

Their main concern at the moment is that the global audience remembers that the broadcast begins an hour earlier than normal, at 7 p.m. EDT. It's also the first day of daylight saving time.

"I think people are going to bed earlier and people are very excited, hopefully, that it's starting at 7," Mullan said. "It won't be so late for everyone hanging on for the best picture announcement."

The 96th Oscars will be broadcast live on ABC from the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles on March 10 with the pre-show beginning at 6:30 p.m. EDT.

State of the Union: What to watch as Biden addresses the nation

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The State of the Union speech is one of the biggest pieces of political theater every year. It's rooted in a simple requirement in the U.S. Constitution that directs the president to "give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." But in modern times, it's a televised extravaganza where every detail is carefully scrutinized.

Here's how to watch and what to look for during Thursday's address by President Joe Biden.

Where to find it

You can find the State of the Union on all major networks, which will be carrying it live. It will also be streamed online by the White House and The Associated Press. The speech starts at 9 p.m. ET.

Cast of characters

You might notice a new face behind Biden when he starts his speech. Rep. Mike Johnson of Louisiana became the House speaker in October after unhappy Republicans ousted Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California. Rep. Nancy Pelosi had the job before McCarthy but lost it when Democrats failed to keep the majority in the 2022 midterm elections.

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That makes Johnson the third House speaker to sit behind Biden during a State of the Union, reflecting the political instability in Washington and a challenging shift for Biden. House leadership has fallen further under the sway of the chamber's right flank, making it harder for the president to cut deals with the opposing party.

Biden's age

No president gets a free pass on the world's biggest stage, but Biden will be watched more carefully than most because of his age. At 81 years old, he's the oldest commander-in-chief in history, and he would be 86 at the end of a potential second term.

Donald Trump, Biden's Republican predecessor and likely opponent in this year's election, is 77. A majority of U.S. adults doubt either of them have the mental capabilities to serve as president, according to a new survey by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The State of the Union is a chance for Biden to dispel doubts about whether he's up for the job at an age when most Americans are retired. Any verbal slips or apparent confusion would provide fodder for his opponents.

Policy agenda

Keep your ears open for any new policy proposals. The State of the Union is a chance for presidents to lay out their goals and rally Americans to support their plans. For example, Biden used a previous speech to discuss his "unity agenda," which included expanded healthcare benefits for veterans.

The White House hasn't disclosed specific proposals that will be in this year's speech. But he could reference unfinished business from his first term, and he'll likely press for military assistance for Ukraine to reinforce American leadership overseas.

Special guests

There are more than just lawmakers and top officials in the chamber for the speech. Politicians bring guests to the gallery to put a face to whatever issue they want to highlight.

The most high-profile guests are invited by the White House and are often recognized during the president's speech. So far the White House has disclosed only one, Kate Cox, a Texas woman who was unable to get an abortion in her home state even though her health was in danger and her fetus had a fatal condition. Democrats are eager to demonstrate how the U.S. Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has limited reproductive rights.

Lawmakers will have their own guests too. Johnson and two New York representatives are bringing police officers whose brawl with migrants in Times Square caused a political uproar among Republicans who have blamed Biden for loose border security. Rep. Elise Stefanik, another New York Republican, invited a Border Patrol officer who also serves as a union official.

Fashion statements

Television cameras will pan across the chamber during the State of the Union, so you'll have a clear view of everyone in the audience too. This is a chance for lawmakers and guests to send a message of their own with their clothing.

Democratic women wore white, the color of the women's suffrage movement, during Trump's State of the Union in 2019. In 2022, some lawmakers wore blue and yellow ribbons to show their support for Ukraine. (The country's ambassador to the United States, Oksana Markarova, was a guest as well.)

Protest potential

You might think that everything about the State of the Union is scripted, but that's not the case. Even in a tightly controlled environment, it's still possible that someone could stage an interruption. Biden has been shadowed around the country by protests over his support for Israel's war in Gaza. Activists have also planned a demonstration in Lafayette Square near the White House before the speech.

In addition, Republicans have earned a reputation for interruptions. Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado heckled Biden during his State of the Union in 2022. Then in 2023, some Republicans shouted at Biden when he accused them of trying to cut Social Security and Medicare. "I enjoy conversation," Biden said as he urged Congress to unite behind protecting the safety net programs.

Johnson is trying to tamp down on outbursts from his caucus. He encouraged House Republicans to

show "decorum" during the speech, according to a person familiar with his remarks at a private meeting on Wednesday.

Protests can come in other forms too. Pelosi theatrically ripped up a copy of Trump's speech after the State of the Union in 2020.

Republican response

If you're not tired of politics when the State of the Union is over, stay tuned for more. The opposing party traditionally stages its own response to the speech. This year, Republicans chose Sen. Katie Britt of Alabama. At 41 years old, she's the youngest female senator and some party leaders hope she could be a rising star.

But whatever she says, many will be waiting to see Trump's own response. In a post on his Truth Social account, Trump promised to provide "LIVE, Play by Play" commentary on Biden's speech. As Trump cruises toward the Republican presidential nomination, his remarks will help frame the stakes of the election.

Microsoft engineer sounds alarm on AI image-generator to US officials and company's board

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

A Microsoft engineer is sounding alarms about offensive and harmful imagery he says is too easily made by the company's artificial intelligence image-generator tool, sending letters on Wednesday to U.S. regulators and the tech giant's board of directors urging them to take action.

Shane Jones told The Associated Press that he considers himself a whistleblower and that he also met last month with U.S. Senate staffers to share his concerns.

The Federal Trade Commission confirmed it received his letter Wednesday but declined further comment.

Microsoft said it is committed to addressing employee concerns about company policies and that it appreciates Jones' "effort in studying and testing our latest technology to further enhance its safety." It said it had recommended he use the company's own "robust internal reporting channels" to investigate and address the problems. CNBC was first to report about the letters.

Jones, a principal software engineering lead whose job involves working on AI products for Microsoft's retail customers, said he has spent three months trying to address his safety concerns about Microsoft's Copilot Designer, a tool that can generate novel images from written prompts. The tool is derived from another AI image-generator, DALL-E 3, made by Microsoft's close business partner OpenAI.

"One of the most concerning risks with Copilot Designer is when the product generates images that add harmful content despite a benign request from the user," he said in his letter addressed to FTC Chair Lina Khan. "For example, when using just the prompt, 'car accident', Copilot Designer has a tendency to randomly include an inappropriate, sexually objectified image of a woman in some of the pictures it creates."

Other harmful content involves violence as well as "political bias, underaged drinking and drug use, misuse of corporate trademarks and copyrights, conspiracy theories, and religion to name a few," he told the FTC. Jones said he repeatedly asked the company to take the product off the market until it is safer, or at least change its age rating on smartphones to make clear it is for mature audiences.

His letter to Microsoft's board asks it to launch an independent investigation that would look at whether Microsoft is marketing unsafe products "without disclosing known risks to consumers, including children."

This is not the first time Jones has publicly aired his concerns. He said Microsoft at first advised him to take his findings directly to OpenAI.

When that didn't work, he also publicly posted a letter to OpenAI on Microsoft-owned LinkedIn in December, leading a manager to inform him that Microsoft's legal team "demanded that I delete the post, which I reluctantly did," according to his letter to the board.

In addition to the U.S. Senate's Commerce Committee, Jones has brought his concerns to the state attorney general in Washington, where Microsoft is headquartered.

Jones told the AP that while the "core issue" is with OpenAI's DALL-E model, those who use OpenAI's ChatGPT to generate AI images won't get the same harmful outputs because the two companies overlay

their products with different safeguards.

"Many of the issues with Copilot Designer are already addressed with ChatGPT's own safeguards," he said via text.

A number of impressive AI image-generators first came on the scene in 2022, including the second generation of OpenAI's DALL-E 2. That — and the subsequent release of OpenAI's chatbot ChatGPT — sparked public fascination that put commercial pressure on tech giants such as Microsoft and Google to release their own versions.

But without effective safeguards, the technology poses dangers, including the ease with which users can generate harmful "deepfake" images of political figures, war zones or nonconsensual nudity that falsely appear to show real people with recognizable faces. Google has temporarily suspended its Gemini chatbot's ability to generate images of people following outrage over how it was depicting race and ethnicity, such as by putting people of color in Nazi-era military uniforms.

Few Americans want US more involved in current wars in Ukraine and Gaza, AP-NORC poll finds

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the U.S. navigates involvement in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, few Americans want the country to take a more active role in solving the world's problems, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

While an American role as the "world's policeman" has become an increasingly contentious partisan issue, a majority of both Democrats and Republicans agree that the U.S. should not get more involved than it currently is in the ongoing conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Hamas.

The poll shows that 4 in 10 U.S. adults want America to broadly take a "less active" role in solving global conflicts. Only about one-quarter think the U.S. should take a more active role, and about one-third say its current role is about right.

The findings underscore the difficult dynamics that both President Joe Biden and the likely Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, face in the leadup to next November's election. Significant swaths of the electorate are frustrated by the searing images of the growing humanitarian crisis in the five month war in Gaza and the hefty costs already incurred by the U.S. in helping Ukraine fend off Russia's invasion.

The Biden administration has become increasingly blunt in recent days in pressing Israel and Hamas to come to terms for a cease-fire that would last at least six weeks and would facilitate the release of dozens of hostages that were taken captive by militants when Hamas launched its Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

Just two decades ago, GOP leaders were calling for Americans to embrace the "ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world." Now, while few U.S. adults on either side of the aisle want the nation to take a more active position, Republicans, at 53%, are roughly twice as likely as Democrats, at 25%, to say the country should have less active involvement abroad. About half (52%) of Democrats say the U.S.'s current position is "about right."

Many Republicans cite America's bloody and futile history of intervention in countries like Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I feel like there's a lot of conflicts that we've been involved in that don't ever have any positive results," Kurt Bunde, a Republican from Idaho, told AP. "We might have good intentions. We might feel obligated to protect our allies' interests, but the results speak for themselves."

Where the U.S. should be focusing its international military resources is also a subject of debate, with Republicans and Democrats disagreeing over whether the nation should be taking a more active role in the war between Ukraine and Russia or the war between Israel and Hamas.

Among U.S. adults overall, there isn't much appetite for a more active role in either conflict: Only about 2 in 10 U.S. adults say the U.S. should be taking a more active role in each war. For each, about 4 in 10 say the current role is about right, and 36% say the U.S. needs to take a step back.

But Republicans and independents are more likely than Democrats to say that the U.S. should dial down

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its support for Ukraine. About half of Republicans and independents want the U.S. to take a less active role in the war between Ukraine and Russia, compared to only 18% of Democrats.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his invasion of Ukraine more than two years ago, the U.S. has sent \$111 billion in weapons, equipment, humanitarian assistance and other aid to Ukraine. A \$95 billion package of aid is now languishing in Congress due to Republican opposition as Ukrainian soldiers begin to ration ammunition.

"America is spread thin like everywhere, and we need to take care of our own first," Matt Wood, a Republican from Kentucky, said in an interview. "Then, if we can, if we have the resources available, then we can help other countries."

Half of Democrats say the U.S.'s current role in the Russia-Ukraine war is about right, and 30% want a more active role. Across the board, Democrats are more likely to favor U.S. intervention in Ukraine: Nearly 6 in 10 think it's very or extremely important for the U.S. to provide aid to Ukraine's military to fight Russia or negotiate a permanent cease-fire between Russia and Ukraine, while only 24% of Republicans prioritize more military aid and 41% of Republicans say it's extremely or very important for the U.S. to help broker a permanent ceasefire.

"I think that we have to take some responsibility just because of the effect of our power and the amount of wealth we have," Christina Taylor, a Maryland Democrat, said. "I think for us to decrease our responsibilities or to decrease our interest in other countries is against the kind of country we are."

Even though aid to Israel usually receives bipartisan support in Congress — and is often a priority for GOP politicians — about 4 in 10 Republicans think the U.S. should take a less active role in the war between Israel and Hamas.

"I really think it's none of us our business because it's Israel's war," Donna Cole, a Missouri Republican, told AP. "The only role that the United States should have is to bring back any Americans who are hostages."

She added, "But we should not be putting restraints on Israel or, for that matter, restraints on the Palestinians."

About half of Democrats think the U.S.'s current role in the Israel-Hamas war is about right, while the rest are split on whether the U.S. should take a more or less active role. Independents are slightly more likely than members of either political party to say the U.S. should take a less active role, and only 11% want the U.S. to be more involved.

There are large partisan divides, too, on the kind of aid that the U.S. should provide in the Israel-Hamas war. About one-third of Republicans think it's extremely or very important for the U.S. to provide aid to Israel's military to fight Hamas, compared to 20% of Democrats. On the other hand, about 6 in 10 Democrats say it's extremely or very important for the U.S. to help negotiate a permanent cease-fire and provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza, while 34% of Republicans prioritize U.S. help with a cease-fire and 15% of Republicans think it's important for the U.S. to provide humanitarian aid.

Taylor, who is a nurse, said that the only active role the U.S. should be taking in the conflict in Gaza is pushing back on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his government's military response.

"We're not doing enough to push the Israelis to lighten up a little bit because I think they're overstepping," Taylor said.

The poll of 1,102 adults was conducted Feb. 22-26, 2024, using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

Associated Press White House reporter Aamer Madhani contributed.

Fed's Powell: Rate cuts likely this year, but more evidence is needed that inflation is tamed

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Chair Jerome Powell reinforced his belief Wednesday that the Federal Reserve will cut its key interest rate this year but said it first wants to see more evidence that inflation is falling sustainably back to the Fed's 2% target.

Powell's comments to a House committee largely echoed those he made at a news conference Jan. 31. Since then, however, government reports have shown that inflation picked up from December to January, and hiring accelerated. Those signs suggested that the economy remains hot and that the process of further slowing inflation will likely be uneven from month to month.

But Powell did not express concern about the inflation data. Instead, he noted that according to the Fed's preferred gauge, inflation "has eased notably over the past year" even though it remains above the central bank's target.

On the first of his two days of semi-annual testimony to Congress, Powell also suggested that the Fed faces two risks: Cutting rates too soon — which could "result in a reversal of progress" in reducing inflation — or cutting them "too late or too little," which could weaken the economy and hiring. The effort to balance those two risks marks a shift from early last year, when the Fed was still rapidly raising its benchmark rate to combat high inflation.

The financial markets are consumed with divining the timing of the Fed's first cut to its benchmark rate, which stands at a 23-year high of about 5.4%. A rate reduction would likely lead, over time, to lower rates for mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and many business loans. Most analysts and investors expect a first rate cut in June, though May remains possible. Fed officials, after meeting in December, projected that they would cut rates three times this year.

In his remarks Wednesday, Powell offered no hints on the potential timing of rate cuts. Wall Street traders put the likelihood of a rate cut in June at 69%, according to futures prices, up slightly from about 64% a week ago.

The Fed chair's testimony to the House Financial Services Committee coincides with intensified efforts by the Biden administration to stem public frustration with inflation, which erupted three years ago and has left average prices well above where they were before. President Joe Biden's bid for re-election will pivot in no small part on voter perceptions of his handling of inflation and the overall economy.

The administration is trying to crack down on what it calls unjustified price hikes by many large companies. Biden recently attacked "shrinkflation," whereby a company shrinks the contents of a product rather than raise its price. The president has also sought to limit so-called "junk fees," which in effect raise the prices that consumers pay.

At Wednesday's hearing, some Democrats on the committee called for the Fed to start reducing its benchmark rate soon to help lower mortgage rates and make homes more affordable.

"We need the Fed to start cutting, because like the rent, interest rates are too damn high," said Rep. Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts.

On a separate topic, Powell replied to a question by saying the Fed will likely alter a central bank proposal that would toughen bank regulation by requiring the 32 largest banks to hold additional capital — assets similar to cash — against potential lending losses. The biggest banks have criticized the proposal, released last summer, arguing that it would force the banks to reduce lending and would slow the economy as a result.

"I do expect there will be broad and material changes to the proposal," Powell said. "I'm confident that the final product will be one that does have broad support both at the Fed and in the broader world," he added, acknowledging that some Fed officials opposed the proposal when it was first released.

Just before the hearing, Republicans on the committee denounced the proposed rule and urged the Fed to withdraw it. Powell said the central bank would consider pulling it and re-issuing an amended version.

"Given the impact that the flawed proposal would have on the banking industry and the American

economy, your agencies must provide greater clarity on what your plans are moving forward," said the letter, signed by Rep. Patrick McHenry of North Carolina, the chairman of the committee, and its 28 other Republican members.

Overall inflation has steadily cooled, having measured at just 2.4% in January compared with a year earlier, according to the Fed's preferred gauge, down from a peak of 7.1% in 2022. Yet recent economic data have complicated the picture and clouded the outlook for rate cuts.

Under questioning at the hearing about what more evidence the Fed needed to feel confident that inflation is coming under control, Powell said the policymakers want to see further data similar to what was reported in the second half of last year. Over the past six months, prices have risen at a 2.5% annual rate, not far above the Fed's target.

"We don't want to have a situation where where it turns out that the six months of good inflation data we had last year didn't turn out to be an accurate signal of where underlying inflation is," he said.

The Fed chair added that with the economy healthy and unemployment low, "we think we can and should be careful" in deciding when to cut the central bank's benchmark rate.

Powell also underscored that the Fed's policymakers believe they are done raising rates, which are likely high enough to restrain the economy and inflation. He stressed that the Fed's rapid rate hikes in 2022 and 2023 haven't led to higher unemployment. And under questioning, he added that he foresees little chance of a recession, which a year ago was widely predicted by most economists.

"There's no reason to think the U.S. economy is in some kind of short-term risk of falling into recession," Powell said.

OpenAI says Musk agreed the ChatGPT maker should become a for-profit company

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

Elon Musk supported making OpenAI a for-profit company, the ChatGPT maker said, attacking a lawsuit from the wealthy investor who has accused the artificial intelligence business of betraying its founding goal to benefit humanity as it pursued profits instead.

In its first response since the Tesla CEO sued last week, OpenAI vowed to get the claim thrown out and released emails from Musk, escalating the feud between the San Francisco-based company and the billionaire that bankrolled its creation years ago.

"The mission of OpenAI is to ensure AGI benefits all of humanity, which means both building safe and beneficial AGI and helping create broadly distributed benefits," OpenAI said in a blog post late Tuesday from five company executives and computer scientists, including CEO Sam Altman. "We intend to move to dismiss all of Elon's claims."

AGI refers to artificial general intelligence, which are general purpose AI systems that can perform just as well as — or even better than — humans in a wide variety of tasks.

The lawsuit from Musk, who now has his own AI startup, says that when he funded OpenAI as it was launching, he secured an agreement that the research lab would remain a nonprofit to develop technology for the public's benefit.

His lawsuit claims breach of contract and seeks an injunction preventing anyone — including Microsoft, which has invested billions in OpenAI — from benefiting financially from its technology.

OpenAI said both the startup and Musk recognized the need for the company to become a for-profit entity to gain enough resources to compete with companies like Google, posting screenshots of emails between the Tesla CEO and OpenAI leaders in which they discuss the possibility but can't agree on terms.

"This needs billions per year immediately or forget it," Musk said in an email dated Dec. 26, 2018, about the level of funding OpenAI would need.

In response to the OpenAI blog post Wednesday, Musk took to his social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

"Change your name," Musk posted. "To ClosedAI and I will drop the lawsuit," he said in a follow-up tweet hours later.

The law firm that brought Musk's case to court didn't immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

Musk was an early investor in OpenAI when it was founded in 2015 and co-chaired its board alongside Altman. He said in his lawsuit that he invested "tens of millions" of dollars in OpenAI.

However, the company said that while Musk invested less than \$45 million, it has raised more than \$90 million from other donors.

OpenAI said that by 2017, the company leaders started to realize that building artificial general intelligence would take vast amounts of computing power.

"We all understood we were going to need a lot more capital to succeed at our mission — billions of dollars per year, which was far more than any of us, especially Elon, thought we'd be able to raise as the non-profit," it said.

In discussions, OpenAI says Musk demanded to be CEO and majority shareholder and have control of the board but OpenAI executives didn't think any single person should have "absolute control."

Musk then suggested OpenAI could be merged with Tesla so that the electric car maker could act as a "cash cow" to compete with Google's well-funded AI efforts.

It didn't happen, and Musk instead left to build his own artificial general intelligence startup, xAI, while remaining supportive of OpenAI's plans to raise billions of dollars, the company said.

OpenAI also pushed back against Musk's argument that it broke its promise to keep its code open to the public instead of walling it off for private gains.

It posted an email from chief scientist Ilya Sutskever saying that open sourcing everything lets "someone unscrupulous" build "unsafe AI" and that "it's totally OK to not share the science." Musk replied: "Yup."

A blast rocks the Ukrainian city of Odesa during a visit by Zelenskyy and Greece's prime minister

By SUSIE BLANN and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The sound of a large explosion reverberated around the Ukrainian port of Odesa as President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Greece's prime minister ended a tour of the war-ravaged southern city Wednesday.

Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the delegations were getting into their vehicles when they heard the blast, which he called a "vivid reminder" that Odesa is gripped by the war with Russia with Russia. It is one thing to hear about the war and "quite another to experience war firsthand," Mitsotakis said.

Zelenskyy said the explosion caused an unknown number of dead and wounded. "You see who we're dealing with, they don't care where to hit," he told reporters.

Russian officials made no immediate comment.

Zelenskyy has regularly visited cities and military units on the front line during the war, always in secrecy until after he has left. Foreign leaders have made numerous trips to Ukraine, and they occasionally have had to take refuge in shelters when air raid sirens sound.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen condemned on X, formerly Twitter, what she called the "vile attack" during the Greek visit. She called it a "new attempt at terror" by Russia.

Zelenskyy showed Mitsotakis around the destruction in Odesa, where in the most recent major Russian attack 12 people — including five children — were killed when debris from a Russian drone hit an apartment block on March 2.

Mitsotakis said Odesa held a special place in Greek history as the place where the Filiki Etairia organization was founded that fought for Greek independence from Ottoman rule in the 19th century.

Trump has become the last Republican standing in the 2024 primary. Here's how he bulldozed the field

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Eight years after Donald Trump outlasted a crowded field of Republican presidential candidates with his pugilistic and sometimes vulgar style, the former reality show star has done it again.

The former president is now the last major GOP candidate standing and poised to be the party's nominee for a third time, outlasting all the other hopefuls now that Nikki Haley bowed out Wednesday.

Trump bulldozed a field of more than a dozen challengers, many of them with high profiles, by refusing to appear with them at debates and instead attacking the strongest of them on his own social media site and at large rallies where he spoke uninterrupted for hours. Trump retained the support of many early-state Republican voters who saw him as an incumbent, believe he was wrongly denied the White House four years ago based on false theories of voter fraud, and was unfairly targeted by federal and state prosecutors.

Other voters skeptical of his personal conduct or legal jeopardy supported his policy ideas and believed he would be best suited to defeat Democratic President Joe Biden in November. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, a longtime and fierce critic of Trump's personal conduct, endorsed him on Wednesday.

"A tranche of them decided that they wanted him to finish the job that he started in 2016," said Roy Bailey, a Texas-based donor who had backed Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in the 2024 White House race. "A tranche of them are base that never left him. A tranche of them are people that came back to him as a result of the weaponization of Biden's government against him because they just innately know that's wrong," he said. "And it shows how resilient and popular he still is."

Trump finished Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses with a 30-percentage point victory that set a Republican record for the state without an incumbent in the race. Second-place finisher DeSantis, long seen as Trump's most formidable challenger, fizzled as voters rallied to Trump while the DeSantis campaign and its allies repeatedly overhauled their strategy and leadership.

Before Haley dropped out, a long list of Republicans had already suspended their campaigns. Among them: South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, and former Vice President Mike Pence. Scott and Ramaswamy endorsed Trump and began appearing on his behalf at campaign events.

By the time of the second contest of the year, the New Hampshire primary in January, it was down to just Haley. Trump went on to defeat her in New Hampshire and then her home state of South Carolina. Then Trump swept all but one state on Super Tuesday, the biggest primary day of the year.

Haley beat Trump in the District of Columbia, in results announced Sunday, and in Vermont on Tuesday, becoming the first woman to win a GOP primary.

Unlike in 2016, when Trump's path to the nomination seemed improbable as he challenged more experienced politicians, this time around it started to seem inevitable long before any votes were cast.

When he launched his latest campaign, Trump was absorbing blame for the party's underwhelming performance in the 2022 midterm election and facing fresh controversy for dining with a white nationalist. The FBI had searched his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, where he kicked off his campaign, to look for classified documents he had refused to return to the National Archives.

But his prospects only improved despite a barrage of legal problems, including four criminal cases in which he faces 91 counts, a civil complaint and a subsequent defamation case in which a jury found him liable for sexual abuse, and a \$355 million fraud verdict against his businesses.

Many voters have echoed Trump's repeated assertions that he is being targeted in the courts by his political enemies. His rivals for the nomination found themselves defending Trump from the cases against him, not wanting to draw blowback from his enthusiastic supporters.

Scot Stebbins Sr., waited in the cold in his city of Laconia, New Hampshire, to see the person he called "the greatest president that we've ever had since Abraham Lincoln."

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"He's for the people. He is not being bought out by all the other government officials that are corrupt. And he has done nothing but good for our nation," Stebbins Sr. said. Stebbins said he didn't worry about Trump's legal cases "one bit because they're all probably made up and it's a witch hunt."

Trump made his pitch his own way. He posted rants and insults on his social media network. He held large rallies in which he cracked jokes, vilified his rivals and enemies, read the lyrics of a dark song, "The Snake," to warn about immigration, and listed the nation's ills while playing an instrumental song that adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory have claimed as their anthem.

His most die-hard fans and supporters couldn't get enough.

Trump has drawn large crowds as he's campaigned in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and other states. He's appeared before cheering crowds decked out in "Make America Great Again" hats, buttons, socks and other items bearing his face, as well as T-shirts with his mug shot when he surrendered on charges that he illegally schemed to overturn the 2020 election in Georgia. Hundreds of rallygoers are often turned away due to capacity concerns.

His Republican rivals not only failed to match that level of enthusiasm, but they seemed to follow the pattern of 2016, when other candidates held back from responding to his attacks or taking him on directly until it was too late.

With Trump on an apparent path to be the Republican nominee and the same for Biden on the Democratic side, it appears the nation is headed to a rematch from 2020.

That election, and Trump's refusal to accept his loss, led to the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol by his supporters and eventually state and federal charges for Trump for trying to overturn the results.

That race — rather than a forward-facing vision — has been the propellant for his 2024 campaign.

As Trump has won over voters in the early primary states, he's laced his speeches and statements with lies about fraud in 2020, cast his legal troubles as a political plot to interfere with the November vote and promised "retribution." He refers to the people imprisoned for their roles in the insurrection as "hostages."

Trump has rocketed through the primary, but he has significant political vulnerabilities in a general election.

Some 58% of Americans would be very or somewhat dissatisfied with Trump winning the Republican nomination, according to a December survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The poll found a similar proportion of dissatisfaction (56%) for Biden winning the Democratic nomination.

Trump may spend weeks or months in a courtroom fighting felony charges that could result in his ending up in prison — an unprecedented scenario in American history. His first trial in New York on charges of trying to silence affair allegations from a porn actress begins March 25.

But his message has been resoundingly embraced by many Republican voters — at least those active in the party's primary contests thus far.

Climate-conscious travelers are jumpstarting Europe's sleeper trains

By ALBERT STUMM Associated Press

After being gently rocked awake in her sleeper cabin, Sarah Marks spent the morning of her 29th birthday watching the Alps zip past the windows of her overnight train to Zurich.

"The train comes in right next to the lake, with the mountains coming up behind it," Marks said wistfully. "Very romantic, I have to say."

By the time of that 2022 journey from Zagreb, Croatia, it had been four years since she had taken a flight— since around the time Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg began to spread the term flygskam, or "flight shame."

They join an increasing number of climate-conscious Europeans, particularly younger travelers, who are shunning carbon-spewing airplanes in favor of overnight trains. In the process, they've spurred something of a night-train revival while discovering what many say is a slower, richer way of traveling, one that had been on the edge of extinction.

"Being able to fall asleep in one city and wake up maybe even in another country, it's amazing to me,"

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said Marks, a Londoner who grew up flying several times a year. "When I switched the plane for the train, it was a no-brainer because, also, this is a superior experience."

REINVESTMENT, PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

Though still a niche and relatively pricey market, demand for sleeper trains is increasing. The online platform Trainline said overnight bookings in 2023 rose 147% compared to 2019, the year before the pandemic. And a climate survey by the European Investment Bank found that 62 percent of respondents supported a ban on short flights.

Governments have begun to reinvest in overnight trains as they search for ways to meet targets to reduce carbon emissions by 2030. The European Commission selected three new night routes in a pilot program aimed to support cross-border travel, including some ambitious private startups.

"Government investment is somehow going back to the good old days of when railways were providing a public service," said Poul Kettler, one of the founders of Back on Track, a pan-European rail advocacy group. "The climate is coming with a price tag, and they're now willing to pay."

Sleeper trains never completely disappeared, particularly in Eastern Europe, but advocates say they suffered years of underinvestment while budget airlines sold tickets for a fraction of the cost.

National railways pivoted resources to high-speed daytime rail, and governments promoted more short-haul air travel by expanding airports and mostly exempting jet fuel from taxes. The supposed death knell for sleeper trains arrived when Germany's Deutsche Bahn shuttered their remaining overnight routes in 2015.

But the turnaround began almost immediately. Austria's railway, ÖBB, gambled on night trains by buying all of Germany's sleeper carriages. They renovated the cars, rebranded it Nightjet and applied cost-saving lessons from the airline industry. Now, Nightjet runs 22 international sleeper routes, mostly in Central Europe but extending from Vienna to Paris and Hamburg to Rome.

In December, Nightjet began rolling out 33 new seven-car trains complete with room key cards, cellphone-permeable window panes for better photos, and digital thermostats in each compartment.

A NEW KIND OF PASSENGER

Nightjet probably saved the entire night-train industry, said Thibault Constant, a former engineer at France's state-owned railway company, SNCF, with 250,000 followers on his Simply Railway Youtube channel.

The atmosphere on sleeper trains has changed dramatically, he said.

"Ten years ago, it was only old people and weirdos taking night trains," Constant, 27, said while riding a train through the Czech Republic. "Now I take the same lines with a bunch of teenagers and all kinds of people."

The success of Nightjet showed other national railways that sleeper trains were worth upgrading, advocates say. In 2023, for instance, the Czech and Hungarian railways began refurbishing their sleeper cars, and national operators in Italy and Finland signed contracts for new ones.

Private companies also are stepping in to fill gaps in service. European Sleeper launched last year — partially relying on crowdfunding — with service from Brussels to Berlin via Amsterdam, and extended the line to Prague in May. The European Commission selected the company's plans for an Amsterdam-to-Barcelona route among its pilot projects.

Still, progress is slow-going. A much-hyped French proposal in 2021 to invest \$1.5 billion in overnight trains still has not begun, according to Back on Track. (France did revive four overnight lines from Paris to the south in the last two years.) And Spain's Renfe discontinued the last of its Trenhotel lines in 2020 with no plans announced to bring them back.

ROMANCE OF THE RAILS, WITH HURDLES

Challenges include the lack of a central booking platform for train tickets; the more than 30 European operators each have their own websites. It's also hard to make night trains profitable, considering that a day-running train car has about 70 seats, compared to the 20 to 40 berths on an average night train.

And there is the issue of price, and competition from budget airlines. For example, a 14-hour overnight train ride in late April from Paris to Berlin on Nightjet was going for 139 euros for a bunk in a 4- to 6-person couchette, whereas a flight on budget carrier Transavia was 50 euros. Private cabins on the train can

cost significantly more, while reclining seats are similar to the price of a flight.

Marks noted, however, that a sleeper car saves travelers the price of a hotel night, not to mention the cost of traveling to city centers from far-flung airports. Headline flight prices rarely include fees for bags, seat assignments and other extras.

Sleeper-car buffs say the experience is worth some extra effort and cost.

Says Mark Smith, whose website *Man in Seat 61* is a guide to European train travel: "What's better than snuggling down in crisp, clean sheets with a bottle of wine while you travel, and then you're there the next morning? It's quite fun."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Albert Stumm lives in Barcelona and writes about food, travel and wellness. Find his work at <https://www.albertstumm.com>

Haley's exit from the GOP race pushes off — again — the day Americans could elect a woman president

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A woman ascends toward the heights of American politics, with the nation's top elected office — the presidency — looming far out of reach. A man at the bottom predicts, unhelpfully: "You'll never make it, sister!"

Asked the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, in a 1922 editorial cartoon published two years after women won the right to vote: "How high will she go?"

More than a century later, that question remains stubbornly unanswered. Nikki Haley's suspension Wednesday of her campaign for the GOP presidential nomination makes her the latest in a long line of women with presidential hopes to crash against the monolith of a man — in this case, Republican Donald Trump — in a nation founded on the concepts of equality and opportunity for all.

Without endorsing Trump, Haley withdrew from the contest with a shoutout to the women and girls who supported her, and by quoting a woman who did make it to the top in a democracy — Margaret Thatcher, Britain's first female prime minister.

"Never just follow the crowd," Haley said, suggesting she'll become a private citizen, for now. "Always make up your own mind."

A PRECEDENT CONTINUES, WHETHER PEOPLE LIKE IT OR NOT

Polls show most Americans do not necessarily oppose electing a woman president, hypothetically. And this year, Haley notched some history: She's the first woman to win a Republican presidential primary, in the District of Columbia; she also won in Vermont. Supporters and analysts say she may have developed a playbook for confronting the former president who dominates the Republican Party — and for running in the post-Trump era.

But once again, there's no woman at the top of either party's ticket. And the prospect of electing a woman president for the first time seems another four years off — again.

Haley's exit from the presidential contest sets up a rematch few people want between two white men of advanced age — Democratic President Joe Biden, 81, and his predecessor, Republican Donald Trump, 77.

"The fact that voters in both parties have thrown their support to two elderly white men indicates that they believe that old white guys are still the most electable in a presidential race," said Karrin Vasby Anderson, a professor at Colorado State University who studies gender and political culture.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem declined to run for the GOP nomination last year, saying no Republican could beat Trump. "Why run if you can't win?" she said on Fox News' "Fox and Friends."

And despite significant hand-wringing among Democrats over Biden, none mounted a serious challenge.

It's not just the presidential contest. California, a Democratic stronghold and the nation's most populous state, won't have a woman in the Senate for the first time in more than three decades. Republican former baseball star Steve Garvey and Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff face off in November for the seat long held

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by the late Dianne Feinstein. She died last year.

This all comes 104 years after women gained the right to vote, in a year when women hold a record percentage of seats in Congress, occupy the vice presidency and sit in four of the nine seats on the U.S. Supreme Court. Women CEOs run a record 10.4% of Fortune 500 companies, according to Forbes. Women are heads of state or government in 26 countries, according to the United Nations. Mexico is poised to elect its first female president.

It's not the brightest moment for the advancement of women in American politics. With Trump squeezing every other rival out, the former South Carolina governor even lost her home state.

But in losing, Haley may have developed a skeleton key of sorts for women seeking the nation's "masculinized" highest office in the post-Trump era. She scored some muscular fund-raising and displayed a temperament aimed at taking on the "fellas" without violating the "likability" standard that plagues women candidates far more than men.

At a polling place in rural Lexington, South Carolina, Crystal Tager said that she faced "a very hard decision" in choosing between the GOP candidates — but ultimately backed Haley, and not because she's a woman.

"I think at the end, it was really about who could go against Biden," and that was Haley, said Tager, who will vote for Trump if he clinches the nomination. "I think people focus too much on whether it be the first woman or the first this or the first that."

But in any post-Trump campaign, Haley would have to prove to people like Amy Casel of Lexington, S.C., that she's not merely someone other than Trump. Casel said she refuses to vote for Trump but likes Haley.

"I think we need a woman president," said Casel, 50, who has voted in Republican primaries for decades. "I think that it would be amazing, awesome, and I think that that would be a great new option for our country."

FOR HALEY, THERE'S TIME

Haley's cross-country dash ahead of Super Tuesday may have built the beginnings of a national network even as powerful donors backed out and she began to acknowledge the inevitability of Trump's GOP nomination.

At 52, Haley has time to wait out Trump's control of the GOP. Her run, said Laurel Elder, professor and chair of political science at Hartwick College, "may bode well for future prospects of a woman in the White House."

"The Republican party does not do much to recruit women candidates, which is a problem as often women need encouragement to run," Elder said in an email. The GOP's stronghold is now in the American South, "the toughest environment for women candidates. But Haley was able to overcome both of these challenges."

She might, too, fit the profile of what analysts theorize would be the nation's first female president.

"Most scholars of gender and the U.S. presidency believe that the first woman to be elected as U.S. president will be a moderate or conservative candidate, because a Republican woman is less likely to be deemed a 'radical feminist,'" Vasby Anderson said. Majorities in a Pew Research Center study last year said that a woman president would be neither better nor worse, or that the president's gender doesn't matter.

Democrat Hillary Clinton showed that Americans are willing to cast a ballot for a woman at the top of a major party ticket when she won the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million ballots cast in 2016. She lost the electoral college vote and the presidency to Trump, only the fifth time in American political history that has happened.

Eight years later, what Clinton dubbed, "the glass ceiling" is cracked, but holds. The woman closest to the presidency is Vice President Kamala Harris, the first woman of color to hold that office. But any ascension she might make to the top job depends ever-so-delicately on the political and personal health of her boss, a man: Biden.

Women have run for president since before they won the legal right to vote in 1920. In 1872, Ohioan Virginia Woodhull was the first. Since 2000, five Republican women, including Haley, have launched campaigns for major party nominations. A dozen Democrats, including Harris, have done the same.

As for Haley, "I think now it's just not the right time for her," said Annie James, a healthcare professional

in Lexington County. James said she thought Haley “did a really good job” as governor but that she “just needed to grow politically” before running for president. “I don’t think she’s quite ready yet to lead our country yet. We’ll be following her.”

Ancient stone tools found in Ukraine date to over 1 million years ago, and may be oldest in Europe

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ancient stone tools found in western Ukraine may be the oldest known evidence of early human presence in Europe, according to research published Wednesday in the journal Nature.

The chipped stones, deliberately fashioned from volcanic rock, were excavated from a quarry in Korolevo in the 1970s. Archaeologists used new methods to date the layers of sedimentary rock surrounding the tools to more than 1 million years old.

“This is the earliest evidence of any type of human in Europe that is dated,” said Mads Faurischou Knudsen, a geophysicist at Aarhus University in Denmark and co-author of the new study.

He said it’s not certain which early human ancestors fashioned the tools, but it may have been Homo erectus, the first species to walk upright and master the use of fire.

“We don’t have fossil remains, so we can’t be sure,” said Roman Garba, an archaeologist at the Czech Academy of Sciences and co-author.

The chipped stone tools were likely used for cutting meat and perhaps scraping animal hides, he said.

The researchers suggest the tools may be as old as 1.4 million years, but other experts say the study methodology suggests that they may be just over 1 million years old, placing them in roughly the same date range as other ancient tools unearthed in Spain.

The very earliest stone tools of this type were found in eastern Africa and date back to 2.8 million years ago, said Rick Potts, who directs the Smithsonian Institution’s Human Origins Program.

The Ukraine site is significant because “it’s the earliest site that far north,” suggesting that the early humans who dispersed from Africa with these tools were able to survive in diverse environments.

“The oldest humans with this old stone tool technology were able to colonize everywhere from warm Iberia (Spain) to Ukraine, where it’s at least seasonally very cold – that’s an amazing level of adaptability,” said Potts.

Super Tuesday takeaways: Biden and Trump momentum can’t be slowed as Haley suspends her campaign

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The picture of the presidential race has hardly been cloudy for some time, even if it is one that most voters say they don’t want to see.

On not-so-Super Tuesday, there were few surprises. It became ever clearer President Joe Biden was on a path to the Democratic nomination that only some kind of personal catastrophe could alter.

His White House predecessor, Donald Trump is headed to a third Republican nomination, and a rematch against Biden — if Trump can navigate the 91 criminal charges against him and avoid any other calamity. Trump’s last major GOP challenger, Nikki Haley, suspended her campaign on Wednesday after being soundly defeated across the country on Super Tuesday.

Enthusiasm for Biden was not the story of Tuesday’s primary contests, with some Democrats even voting “uncommitted” rather than for the incumbent. For Trump, there were cautionary signs even with his string of victories.

Some key takeaways from Super Tuesday:

HALEY’S STEPPING ASIDE

Haley won her first state of the primary season, Vermont, but that was no cause to talk about momentum. The former U.N. ambassador and South Carolina governor continued her long streak of losing big

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to Trump in Republican primaries in every region of the country. Her lone other victory had come in last week's primary in the District of Columbia.

She fell short even in states like Virginia, where the electorate, rich in college-educated suburban voters, played to her strength. Soon came the announcement about her campaign suspension.

That doesn't mean her candidacy wasn't impactful. She repeatedly said that Trump cannot win a general election, in large part because he will have trouble winning over the kind of Republicans who supported her. In a close election, even a small move of voters away from Trump could flip a state and alter the outcome.

Haley didn't endorse Trump during her remarks Wednesday in Charleston, South Carolina. She challenged him to win the support of the moderate Republicans and independent voters who backed her.

During her campaign, Haley delivered the kind of stark personal attacks on Trump that could show up in Democratic ads against him in the fall. She slammed him for an \$83 million judgment against him for defaming a woman who sued him for sexual assault and warned that he could transform the Republican National Committee into his own "legal slush fund."

AS VERMONT GOES, SO GOES VERMONT

Vermont was once a stronghold of old-guard Republicanism, exclusively electing GOP candidates to statewide office for more than a century. But the state that handed Haley her only win on Super Tuesday long ago ceded that reputation.

Now Vermont, which last swung for a Republican in a presidential contest in 1988, is perhaps better known for progressive Sen. Bernie Sanders, the jam band Phish and a crunchy strain of back-to-earth lifestyle.

So, while Vermont handed Haley her first statewide victory, the state itself is decidedly not in step with Trump and the modern Republican Party.

THE BIDEN-TRUMP MIRROR PRIMARY

What has been obvious for weeks, is now beyond reasonable dispute: Biden and Trump are the overwhelming favorites to face each other in November.

They could not be more different in outlook but they seemed to be mirror images of each other during the primary season.

Trump wanted a coronation, but Haley made him fight at least somewhat to win the nomination. She held onto a stubborn chunk of voters, a possible indication that part of the GOP isn't as enthusiastic about Trump as expected.

Biden, on the other hand, faces a lack of Democratic enthusiasm on paper, but not in the primary. Polls show problems for him among some of his party's core demographics, including younger and Black voters. But Biden, who hasn't faced any significant challengers, has won his primaries by huge margins.

The only possible sign of trouble for him Tuesday was an unusually high number of Democrats voting "uncommitted" in Minnesota in protest of the president's handling of the war in Gaza.

It may be that one or both of these two politicians is more hobbled than it appears — but nonetheless they are the only options.

HOUSE RACES, PRIMARY PRIMACY

Super Tuesday is so vast that there were primaries for more than one-quarter of all seats in the House of Representatives — 115 of 438. But only eight of those seats are likely to be competitive in November.

That astonishing statistic comes from Michael Li, a redistricting expert at the Brennan Institute for Justice in New York. That means that most House candidates who won primaries Tuesday are guaranteed seats in Congress, just for securing the votes of the most motivated members of their parties.

That's one of the greatest causes of polarization in the United States. The number of competitive seats in the House has been shrinking steadily for decades. It reflects both partisan gerrymandering and also citizens sorting themselves into increasingly partisan enclaves.

Texas is an example of gerrymandering's role. In 2018 and 2020 it was home to several competitive House races as Democrats began to gain ground in the long-red state. So Republicans who controlled the statehouse simply redrew the lines to protect Republicans, lumping large groups of Democrats together. That meant the Democrats had safe seats but fewer than they normally would have because they couldn't

threaten any GOP incumbents.

Regardless of the cause, it means that much of the battle for the House actually ended Tuesday night.
N.C. GOVERNOR'S RACE COULD ECHO BIDEN V. TRUMP

North Carolina Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson easily won the state's Republican gubernatorial primary. His incendiary rhetoric — he's called Hillary Clinton a "heifer" and Michelle Obama a man — ensures a hotly contested general election in the crucial swing state that could spill over into the presidential race.

Robinson had no prior experience in public office before his 2020 election — and it shows.

He blasted the action hero movie "Black Panther" in 2018 as a "satanic Marxist production" made by a "secular Jew," using a Yiddish slur for black people. He faced calls to resign in 2021 after likening gay and transgender people to "filth."

His brash style earned plaudits from Trump, who on Sunday called Robinson "better than Martin Luther King" while offering his "complete and total endorsement."

But it is also likely to motivate Democrats in the state to turn out in November to support state Attorney General Josh Stein — while raising oodles of advertising dollars to use Robinson's own words against him.

BIDEN & IOWA: 4th TIME'S THE CHARM

On his fourth try, Joe Biden finally won Iowa.

For decades, Biden had been rejected by its voters, from his first abortive run in the 1988 cycle to 2020, when he finished a distant fourth. In 2008, he won less than 1% of the caucus vote.

This time, Iowa wasn't first and it was a primary, not a caucus, and Biden won easily.

His victory Tuesday came only after he was already an incumbent president — and after the state had been stripped of its prized leadoff role and voted along with the masses.

Who is Jason Palmer? A previously unknown Democrat beats Biden in American Samoa's Democratic caucus

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden was sweeping every Democratic contest on Super Tuesday — except for American Samoa.

He fell short there to a previously unknown candidate named Jason Palmer. Out of 91 ballots cast in the territory's caucus, Palmer won 51 and Biden won 40, according to the local party.

"I found out that I had won because my phone started blowing up with friends and campaign staffers texting me," Palmer said in an interview late Tuesday.

Palmer, 52, said he never visited the territory before the caucus.

"I have been campaigning remotely, doing Zoom town halls, talking to people, listening to them about their concerns and what matters to them," he said.

The outcome will hardly derail Biden's march toward his party's nomination. Only six delegates were at stake in the U.S. territory, a tiny collection of islands in the South Pacific with fewer than 50,000 residents. Palmer and Biden each earned three delegates from the race.

On the day before the caucus, Palmer posted on X that "Washington D.C. is long overdue for a president who will be an advocate for American Samoa." His account includes pictures of young people holding homemade campaign signs.

Palmer is a Baltimore resident who has worked for various businesses and nonprofits, often on issues involving technology and education. He said voters want "someone who is more of the 21st century than Joe Biden" to serve as president.

According to campaign finance records, Palmer has loaned his campaign more than \$500,000 of his own money.

"You can't take the money with you when you die," he said. "But you can change the world while you're here."

Residents of U.S. territories vote in primaries but do not have representation in the Electoral College.

American Samoa has been the site of quixotic victories before. During the 2020 Democratic primaries, billionaire Michael Bloomberg's only win came in the territory.

Biden and Trump dominate Super Tuesday races and move closer to a November rematch

By WILL WEISSERT, BILL BARROW and CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, romped through more than a dozen states on Super Tuesday, all but cementing a November rematch and pushing the former president's last major rival, Nikki Haley, out of the Republican race.

Their victories from coast to coast, including the delegate-rich states of California and Texas, left little doubt about the trajectory of the race. Haley won Vermont, denying Trump a full sweep, but the former president carried other states that might have been favorable to her such as Virginia, Massachusetts and Maine, which have large swaths of moderate voters like those who have backed her in previous primaries.

Hours after the last polls closed in Alaska, Haley scheduled a 10 a.m. ET speech in her home state of South Carolina to announce she was suspending her campaign. Three people with direct knowledge who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly confirmed Haley's decision ahead of her announcement.

The only contest Biden lost Tuesday was the Democratic caucus in American Samoa, a tiny U.S. territory in the South Pacific Ocean. Biden was defeated by previously unknown candidate Jason Palmer, 51 votes to 40.

Not enough states will have voted until later this month for Trump or Biden to formally become their parties' presumptive nominees. But the primary's biggest day made their rematch a near-certainty. Both the 81-year-old Biden and the 77-year-old Trump continue to dominate their parties despite facing questions about age and neither having broad popularity across the general electorate.

Haley watched the election results in private. Her campaign said in a statement that the results reflected there were many Republicans "who are expressing deep concerns about Donald Trump."

"Unity is not achieved by simply claiming 'we're united,'" spokesperson Olivia Perez-Cubas said.

Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate, meanwhile, was packed for a victory party. Among those attending were staff and supporters, including the rapper Forgiano Blow and former North Carolina Rep. Madison Cawthorn. The crowd erupted as Fox News, playing on screens around the ballroom, announced that the former president had won North Carolina's GOP primary.

"They call it Super Tuesday for a reason," Trump told a raucous crowd. He went on to attack Biden over the U.S.-Mexico border and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. After beginning the night with victories in Virginia and North Carolina, he wrapped Super Tuesday by winning contests in Alaska and Utah.

Biden didn't give a speech but instead issued a statement warning that Tuesday's results had left Americans with a clear choice and touting his own accomplishments after beating Trump.

"If Donald Trump returns to the White House, all of this progress is at risk," Biden said. "He is driven by grievance and grift, focused on his own revenge and retribution, not the American people."

While much of the focus was on the presidential race, there were also important down-ballot contests. The governor's race took shape in North Carolina, where Republican Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson and Democratic Attorney General Josh Stein will face off in a state that both parties are fiercely contesting ahead of November.

In California, Democratic Rep. Adam Schiff and Republican Steve Garvey, a former Los Angeles Dodgers baseball player, advanced to the general election race to fill the Senate seat long held by Dianne Feinstein.

Despite Biden's and Trump's domination of their parties, polls make it clear that the broader electorate does not want this year's general election to be identical to the 2020 race. A new AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll finds a majority of Americans don't think either Biden or Trump has the necessary mental acuity for the job.

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"Both of them failed, in my opinion, to unify this country," said Brian Hadley, 66, of Raleigh, North Carolina. The final days before Tuesday demonstrated the unique nature of this year's campaign. Rather than barnstorming the states holding primaries, Biden and Trump held rival events last week along the U.S.-Mexico border, each seeking to gain an advantage in the increasingly fraught immigration debate.

After the Supreme Court ruled 9-0 on Monday to restore Trump to primary ballots following attempts to ban him for his role in helping spark the Capitol riot, Trump pointed to the 91 criminal counts against him to accuse Biden of weaponizing the courts.

"Fight your fight yourself," Trump said. "Don't use prosecutors and judges to go after your opponent."

Biden delivers the State of the Union address Thursday, then will campaign in the key swing states of Pennsylvania and Georgia.

The president faces low approval ratings and polls suggesting that many Americans, even a majority of Democrats, don't want to see the 81-year-old running again. His easy Michigan primary win last week was spoiled slightly by an "uncommitted" campaign organized by activists who disapprove of the president's handling of Israel's war in Gaza.

Allies of the "uncommitted" movement pushed similar protest votes elsewhere, such as in Minnesota, which has a significant population of Muslims, including in its Somali American community. At least 45,000 voters in Minnesota selected "uncommitted," which won 19% with almost all votes counted. That exceeds the 13% of voters who selected "uncommitted" in Michigan.

"Joe Biden has not done enough to earn my vote and not done enough to stop the war, stop the massacre," said Sarah Alfaham of the Minneapolis suburb of Bloomington.

Biden also is the oldest president ever and Republicans key on any verbal slip he makes. His aides insist that skeptical voters will come around once it is clear that either Trump or Biden will be elected again in November.

Trump is now the same age Biden was during the 2020 campaign, and he has exacerbated questions about his own fitness with recent flubs, such as mistakenly suggesting he was running against Barack Obama, who left the White House in 2017.

"I would love to see the next generation move up and take leadership roles," said Democrat Susan Steele, 71, who voted Tuesday for Biden in Portland, Maine.

Trump has already vanquished more than a dozen major Republican challengers before Haley, his former U.N. ambassador. She had maintained strong fundraising and notched her first primary victory over the weekend in Washington, D.C., a Democrat-run city with few registered Republicans. Trump scoffed that Haley had been "crowned queen of the swamp."

"We can do better than two 80-year-old candidates for president," Haley said at a rally Monday in the Houston suburbs.

Trump's victories, however dominating, have shown vulnerabilities with influential voter blocs, especially in college towns like Hanover, New Hampshire, home to Dartmouth College, or Ann Arbor, where the University of Michigan is located, as well as areas with high concentrations of independents. That includes Minnesota, a state Trump did not carry in his otherwise overwhelming Super Tuesday performance in 2016.

Seth De Penning, a self-described conservative-leaning independent, voted Tuesday morning in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, for Haley, he said, because the GOP "needs a course correction." De Penning, 40, called his choice a vote of conscience and said he has never voted for Trump because of concerns about his temperament and character.

Hostage crisis poses dilemma for Israel and offers a path to victory for Hamas

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

Over the last five months, Israel has killed thousands of Hamas fighters, destroyed dozens of their tunnels and wreaked unprecedented destruction on the Gaza Strip.

But it still faces a dilemma that was clear from the start of the war and will ultimately determine its outcome: It can either try to annihilate Hamas, which would mean almost certain death for the estimated 100 hostages still held in Gaza, or it can cut a deal that would allow the militants to claim a historic victory.

Either outcome would be excruciating for Israelis. Either would likely seal an ignominious end for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's long political career. And either might be seen as acceptable by Hamas, which valorizes martyrdom.

Netanyahu, at least in public, denies there is any such dilemma. He has vowed to destroy Hamas and recover all the hostages, either through rescue missions or cease-fire agreements, saying victory could come "in a matter of weeks."

As long as the war rages, he can avoid early elections that polls strongly suggest would remove him from power. But it seems inevitable that at some point a choice will have to be made between the hostages and military victory.

Hamas, meanwhile, appears to be in no hurry to reach a temporary cease-fire ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins next week, or to delay an expected Israeli operation in Rafah, the southern city where half of Gaza's population has sought refuge.

Hamas leader Yehya Sinwar, the alleged mastermind of the Oct. 7 attack against Israel, has reason to believe that as long as he holds the hostages, he can eventually end the war on his terms.

SINWAR'S BLOODY GAMBLE

In over two decades spent inside Israeli prisons, Sinwar reportedly learned fluent Hebrew and studied Israeli society, and he identified a chink in the armor of his militarily superior adversary.

He learned that Israel cannot tolerate its people, especially soldiers, being held captive, and will go to extraordinary lengths to bring them home. Sinwar himself was among over 1,000 Palestinian prisoners released in exchange for a single captive soldier in 2011.

For Sinwar, the mass killings on Oct. 7 might have been a horrific sideshow to the main operation, which was to drag large numbers of hostages into a vast labyrinth of tunnels beneath Gaza, where Israel would be unable to rescue them, and where they could serve as human shields for Hamas leaders.

Once that was accomplished, he had a powerful bargaining chip that could be traded for large numbers of Palestinian prisoners, including top leaders serving life sentences, and an end to the Israeli onslaught that Hamas had anticipated.

No amount of 2,000-pound bombs could overcome the strategy's brutal logic.

Israeli officials say the tunnels stretch for hundreds of kilometers (miles) and some are several stories underground, guarded by blast doors and booby traps. Even if Israel locates Hamas leaders, any operation would mean almost certain death for the hostages that likely surround them.

"The objectives are quite contradictory," said Amos Harel, a longtime military correspondent for Israel's Haaretz newspaper. "Of course, you can say it will take a year to defeat Hamas, and we're moving ahead on that, but the problem is that nobody can ensure that the hostages will remain alive."

He added that even if Israel somehow kills Sinwar and other top leaders, others would move up the ranks and replace them, as has happened in the past.

"Israel will have a really hard time winning this," Harel said.

Israel has successfully rescued three hostages since the start of the war, all of whom were aboveground. Israeli troops killed three hostages by mistake, and Hamas says several others were killed in airstrikes or failed rescue operations. More than 100 hostages were released in a cease-fire deal in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Netanyahu says military pressure will eventually bring about the release of the roughly 100 hostages,

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and the remains of 30 others, still held by Hamas.

But in candid remarks in January, Gadi Eisenkot, Israel's former top general and a member of Netanyahu's War Cabinet, said anyone suggesting the remaining hostages could be freed without a cease-fire deal was spreading "illusions."

It's hard to imagine Hamas releasing its most valuable human shields for a temporary cease-fire, only to see Israel resume its attempt to annihilate the group, and Hamas has rejected the idea of its leaders surrendering and going into exile.

For Sinwar, it's better to stay underground with the hostages and see if his bet pays off.

HOW DOES THIS END?

Netanyahu's government is under mounting pressure from families of the hostages, who fear time is running out, and the wider public, which views the return of captives as a sacred obligation.

President Joe Biden, Israel's most important ally, is at risk of losing re-election in November, in part because of Democratic divisions over the war. The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza has sparked worldwide outrage. The war threatens to ignite other fronts across the Middle East.

There's a Hamas proposal on the table in which the hostages come back alive.

It calls for the phased release of all of the captives in return for Israel's gradual withdrawal from Gaza, a long-term cease-fire and reconstruction. Israel would also release hundreds of prisoners, including top Palestinian political leaders and militants convicted of killing civilians.

Hamas would almost certainly remain in control of Gaza and might even hold victory parades. With time, it could recruit new fighters, rebuild tunnels and replenish its arsenals.

It would be an extremely costly victory, with over 30,000 Palestinians killed and the total destruction of much of Gaza. Palestinians would have different opinions on whether it was all worth it.

A rare wartime poll last year found rising support for Hamas, with over 40% of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza backing the group.

That support would only grow if Hamas succeeds in lifting the longstanding blockade on Gaza, said Tahani Mustafa, senior Palestine analyst at the Crisis Group, an international think tank.

"If this is able to bring some serious concessions that can make life just marginally better, then I think not only will this bolster support for Hamas, but it could also bolster support for armed resistance more broadly."

Netanyahu has rejected Hamas' proposal as "delusional," but there is no sign the militant group is backing away from its core demands.

Israel can keep fighting – for weeks, months or years. The army can kill more fighters and demolish more tunnels, while carefully avoiding areas where it thinks the hostages are held.

But at some point, Netanyahu or his successor will likely have to make one of the most agonizing decisions in the country's history, or it will be made for them.

China says economy got a strong start in 2024, sets sights on latest technology, upgrading factories

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China has plenty of room to maneuver to attain its annual target for robust economic growth of about 5% after a strong start for the year, top economic officials said Wednesday, though they acknowledged it's a challenge.

China's exports rose about 10% in the first two months of the year from a year earlier, while medium- and long-term loans from banks jumped more than 30%, said China's top planning official, Zheng Shanjie, who heads the National Development and Reform Commission.

Zheng said the priority will be on "supporting scientific and technological innovation, integrated development of urban and rural regions, food security and energy security, among other areas."

"The potential construction demand in these areas is huge and the investment cycle is long. It's hard to fully meet needs using existing funding channels and there's an urgent need to increase support," he said

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at a news conference on the sidelines of the National People's Congress, China's ceremonial legislature. Premier Li Qiang announced the "around 5%" growth target for the year Tuesday at the opening of the congress, which runs for about a week and mostly just endorses policies set by top leaders of the ruling Communist Party.

China's economy, the world's second largest, grew at a 5.2% pace in 2023, but that was from a relatively low pace since it expanded only 3% the year before, one of the lowest rates since the 1970s. Growth of around 5% would be cause for rejoicing in the U.S. and other major economies, but it's moderate for a developing economy with a huge population like China's.

Pan Gongsheng, the head of China's central bank, and the other senior economic planners speaking on the sidelines of the congress said Beijing has more policy tools it can turn to, such as reducing the reserve ratio requirement, or the amount of funds banks must keep in reserves.

They emphasized Beijing's determination to put 1 trillion yuan (about \$140 billion) in special, ultra long-term bonds to productive use to upgrade industries and advance technologies in key areas such as clean energy.

The market for modernizing factory equipment amounts to about 5 trillion yuan (nearly \$700 billion), Zheng said. That compares with the \$649 billion the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden says private companies have committed to investing in such areas as clean energy, electric vehicles and semiconductors and electronics.

Despite robust growth in China's exports in the first two months of the year, Commerce Minister Wang Wentao said global demand may remain muted given the recent trend toward protectionist measures.

Trade in goods and services rose a mere 0.2% in 2023, according to the World Trade Organization, and will increase this year but not to levels seen before the pandemic.

China's own exports fell last year, adding to drags on the economy from weak consumer demand and a downturn in the property market, a major contributor to demand for construction, appliances and many other industries.

China plans to do more to promote exports of higher-value products and to support smaller and mid-sized companies in tapping world markets, he said.

"We are confident about consolidating the fundamentals of foreign trade and foreign investment," Wang said.

To help spur more consumer spending, an increasingly important driver for growth as China becomes wealthier, the government plans to use tax policies and other incentives to encourage families to scrap their older vehicles, replace aging appliances and redecorate their apartments, the officials said.

In other comments, the chairman of China's Securities Regulatory Commission, Wu Qing, acknowledged intervening in the financial markets at times when authorities deemed it necessary.

China's stock markets languished from late last year, though they have recovered somewhat in recent weeks following a crackdown on price manipulation and insider trading among other confidence-boosting measures.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng index is still 20% below where it stood a year ago, while the Shanghai Composite index has lost 8.5% at a time when many other world markets are breaching record highs.

"Normally there should be no intervention in the markets, but at times when they sharply deviate from fundamentals, show irrational and severe volatility, an extreme lack of liquidity, market panics or a severe lack of confidence, we should act decisively to correct market failures," Wu said.

Today in History: March 7, 'Bloody Sunday' in Selma for civil rights movement

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, March 7, the 67th day of 2024. There are 299 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

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On March 7, 1965, a march by civil rights demonstrators was violently broken up at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, by state troopers and a sheriff's posse in what became known as "Bloody Sunday."

On this date:

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received a U.S. patent for his telephone.

In 1911, President William Howard Taft ordered 20,000 troops to patrol the U.S.-Mexico border in response to the Mexican Revolution.

In 1916, Bavarian Motor Works (BMW) had its beginnings in Munich, Germany, as an airplane engine manufacturer.

In 1926, the first successful trans-Atlantic radio-telephone conversations took place between New York and London.

In 1936, Adolf Hitler ordered his troops to march into the Rhineland, thereby breaking the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Pact.

In 1945, during World War II, U.S. forces crossed the Rhine at Remagen, Germany, using the damaged but still usable Ludendorff Bridge.

In 1975, the U.S. Senate revised its filibuster rule, allowing 60 senators to limit debate in most cases, instead of the previously required two-thirds of senators present.

In 1994, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that a parody that pokes fun at an original work can be considered "fair use." (The ruling concerned a parody of the Roy Orbison song "Oh, Pretty Woman" by the rap group 2 Live Crew.)

In 1999, movie director Stanley Kubrick, whose films included "Dr. Strangelove," "A Clockwork Orange" and "2001: A Space Odyssey," died in Hertfordshire, England, at age 70, having just finished editing "Eyes Wide Shut."

In 2005, President George W. Bush nominated John Bolton to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, an appointment that ran into Democratic opposition, prompting Bush to make a recess appointment.

In 2013, the U.N. Security Council voted unanimously for tough new sanctions to punish North Korea for its latest nuclear test; a furious Pyongyang threatened a nuclear strike against the United States.

In 2016, Peyton Manning announced his retirement after 18 seasons in the National Football League.

In 2017, the Indianapolis Colts released injured quarterback Peyton Manning, who went on to play for the Denver Broncos.

In 2020, health officials in Florida said two people who had tested positive for the new coronavirus had died; the deaths were the first on the East Coast attributed to the outbreak.

In 2022, the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine deepened as Russian forces intensified their shelling and food, water, heat and medicine grew increasingly scarce in what the country condemned as a medieval-style siege by Moscow to batter it into submission.

Today's birthdays: International Motorsports Hall of Famer Janet Guthrie is 86. Actor Daniel J. Travanti is 84. Entertainment executive Michael Eisner is 82. Rock musician Chris White (The Zombies) is 81. Rock singer Peter Wolf is 78. Rock musician Matthew Fisher (Procol Harum) is 78. Pro and College Football Hall of Famer Lynn Swann is 72. R&B singer-musician Ernie Isley (The Isley Brothers) is 72. Rock musician Kenny Aronoff (BoDeans, John Mellencamp) is 71. Actor Bryan Cranston is 68. Actor Donna Murphy is 65. Actor Nick Searcy is 65. Golfer Tom Lehman is 65. International Tennis Hall of Famer Ivan Lendl is 64. Actor Mary Beth Evans is 63. Singer-actor Taylor Dayne is 62. Actor Bill Brochtrup is 61. Author E.L. James is 61. Author Bret Easton Ellis is 60. Opera singer Denyce Graves is 60. Comedian Wanda Sykes is 60. Actor Jonathan Del Arco is 58. Rock musician Randy Guss (Toad the Wet Sprocket) is 57. Actor Rachel Weisz is 54. Actor Peter Sarsgaard is 53. Actor Jay Duplass is 51. Classical singer Sebastien Izambard (Il Divo) is 51. Rock singer Hugo Ferreira (Tantric) is 50. Actor Jenna Fischer is 50. Actor Tobias Menzies is 50. Actor Sarayu Blue is 49. Actor Audrey Marie Anderson is 49. Actor TJ Thyne is 49. Bluegrass singer-musician Frank Solivan is 47. Actor Laura Prepon is 44. Actor Bel Powley is 32. Poet and activist Amanda Gorman is 26. Actor Giselle Eisenberg (TV: "Life in Pieces") is 17.