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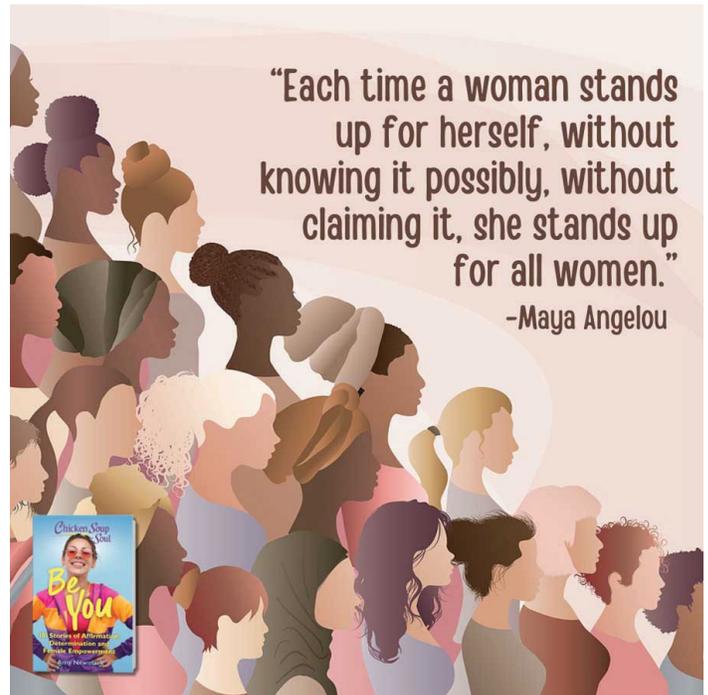
Friday, March 8

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.

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



Sunday, March 10

Spring ahead for Daylight Savings Time
Open Gym: Grades JK-8 2:00-3:30 [Students accompanied by adults] Grades 6-12 3:30-5:00
Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m., SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday school, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran worship, 9 a.m.; Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday school, at 9:45 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., and at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation Sunday, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:30 a.m.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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1440

In partnership with **smartasset**[™]

A number of fertility clinics in Alabama are expected to resume in vitro fertilization treatments after Gov. Kay Ivey (R) signed a bill into law Wednesday meant to protect providers of the procedure and their employees.

Sweden officially became the 32nd member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization yesterday after its prime minister, Ulf Kristersson, deposited its document of accession with the US government, the treaty's caretaker. The Nordic country's admission to the mutual

defense pact formally ends its over two centuries of military nonalignment.

Today marks 10 years since the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 as Malaysian authorities say they may consider reopening an investigation into one of the most enduring aviation mysteries.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 96th annual Academy Awards set for Sunday (7 pm ET, ABC); see preview and predictions for every major category.

Team USA will take on Brazil in the women's CONCACAF Gold Cup championship Sunday (8:15 pm ET, Paramount+) after topping Canada in penalty kicks in the semifinal. Mike Tyson, 57, to face YouTube star Jake Paul, 27, in boxing match July 20 (Netflix) from AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

South by Southwest 2024 kicks off today from Austin, Texas; see full SXSW schedule of livestreamed panels, keynotes, interviews, and events. Pop star Ariana Grande releases anticipated seventh album overnight.

Science & Technology

James Webb Space Telescope spots the oldest "dead" galaxy observed to date; cosmic cluster appears to have stopped birthing new stars 13 billion years ago.

Satellite analysis suggests two dozen US coastal cities are sinking into the surrounding land by as much as 0.2 inches per year, exacerbating the effect of sea level rise; problem particularly acute near the Gulf of Mexico.

Study finds stimulating gamma brain waves—fast electrical signals typically present during periods of intense focus—may help treat cognitive impairment associated with chemotherapy known as "chemo brain".

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.0%, Dow +0.3%, Nasdaq +1.5%), with S&P 500 at record high. European Central Bank keeps interest rates steady as inflation nears 2% target; could reassess rate cuts in June.

Jobs report data released today expected to show slower job growth in February. Layoffs last month rose to highest levels for the month of February since 2009, with tech sector accounting for one-third of layoffs.

Rivian shares close up 13% after company reveals new electric vehicle models, including cheaper, midsize SUV, and announces over \$2B in savings related to pausing plans to build Georgia plant.

Politics & World Affairs

President Joe Biden delivers State of the Union address; key moments include plans to create a temporary port in Gaza for aid delivery and man escorted out for heckling. Alabama Sen. Katie Britt (R) provides rebuttal; see highlights. Centrist No Labels group expected today to vote to plan a third-party presidential bid; no candidates revealed as of yet.

House panel unanimously advances bill barring TikTok (170 million US users) from app stores unless Chinese-based ByteDance divests; potential introduction on House floor. Company sends pop-up messages to users, who flood House members with calls.

More than 280 students kidnapped from northwest Nigeria, second mass kidnapping in the country in less than a week. Haiti extends state of emergency amid ongoing gang attacks in capital.

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Service Notice: Vera Weisenberger

Memorial Services for Alvera "Vera" Weisenberger, 88, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Tuesday, March 12th at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Rev. Jeremy Yeadon will officiate. Inurnment will follow in St. John's Lutheran Cemetery, Bowdle.

Vera passed away March 6, 2024 at her home.

www.paetznick-garness.com

Code Enforcement to begin in Groton

The Groton City Council has hired Mike Olson with OCCS to begin a surveillance of code enforcement services next week. Starting off, this will involve, as he states, driving down each street and alley, taking pictures of any code violations he stumbles upon. He anticipates that it will likely take him a full day for this initial review process. If you see a grey/silver GMC Acadia going down your alley/street and taking pictures, it is the code enforcer.

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
Land Brokers – Auctioneers – Realtors – Farm Managers
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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

March 11, 2024 – 6:00 PM

Columbia American Legion (102 N Broadway St. Columbia, SD)

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

PUBLIC DISCUSSION REGARDING DISTRICT OPT-OUT PROPOSAL

RECESS

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of February 12, 2024 school board meeting and February 29, 2024 special school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of February 2024 District bills for payment.
3. Approval of February 2024 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of February 2024 School Lunch Report.
5. Approval of February 2024 School Transportation Report.
6. Approve list of surplus property of no value for disposal.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Discussion regarding football cooperative with Langford School District.
3. Second reading and approval of Maintenance Director Job Description.
4. Second reading and approval of District Wellness Policy.
5. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Authorize Superintendent to sign Section 179D Allocation Letter for Sichmeller Engineering, Inc.
2. Approve Cahill Bauer & Associates, LLC to conduct FY2024 District Audit and authorize Business Manager to sign formal engagement letter.
3. Approve 2024 Driver's Education Fees and Instructor Agreements.
4. Approve hiring Megan Serr, Elementary Special Education Teacher, for the 2024-25 school year with salary to be published in July.
5. Approve hiring Lindsey Vander Wal, Ag Education Teacher/FFA Advisor, for the 2024-25 school year with salary to be published in July.
6. Approve hiring Carrie Cole, 1st Grade Teacher, for the 2024-25 school year with salary to be published in July.
7. Approve resignation from Ryan Scepaniak, Assistant Wrestling Coach.
8. Approve hiring Ryan Scepaniak, Head Custodian, effective March 7, 2024.

ADJOURN

2024 South Dakota Legislative Session Ends with Several Wins for Healthcare

As the 2024 South Dakota Legislative session wraps up, SDAHO is excited to report several wins for healthcare this year. At the beginning of the session Governor Kristi Noem proposed a 4% increase for Medicaid Providers, including nursing homes, assisted living, behavioral health, and in-home services.

Lawmakers approved the 4% which breaks down to 62.6 million total funds going to healthcare providers, which includes 25.9 million coming from general funds. In addition to the 4%, the legislature approved moving to 98% of methodology for community-based providers, which means an additional \$13.3 million total funds, including:

- \$3M Assisted Living
- \$2.9M Behavioral Health
- \$1.9M Nursing Homes
- \$700K In-home Services

Tim Rave, President/CEO, SDAHO. "We are pleased with the funding allocations made by the legislature this year. Early on Governor Noem proposed a 4% increase, which we are grateful for. We also want to thank lawmakers for approving additional funding to get community-based providers to 98% methodology. Policymakers understand the challenges impacting the healthcare industry and the decisions made during the 2024 legislative session will help in providing sustainable solutions to those challenges."

Lawmakers passed two bills that will assist long term care facilities with infrastructure and technology needs. SB 80, will provide general funds to improve technology equipment in long-term care. The amended version provides \$2 million from the State's general fund with the intent to fund innovative ideas to improve operational efficiencies and help with workforce challenges.

SB 209 will provide \$5 million from the American Rescue Plan Act in grant funding for assisted living centers and nursing facilities to purchase and install technology and infrastructure for telemedicine. The South Dakota Department of Health will oversee the grant process.

In addition, we are pleased with the passage of several bills that will positively impact our member hospitals. HB 1147, address discriminatory acts against entities participating in a 340B program, will help to protect 340B hospitals and contract pharmacies from discriminatory acts from Pharmacy Benefit Managers.

HB 1097 will authorize transportation activities by air ambulance operators ,which will take some of the pressure off our EMS operators and help get patients to the right level of care in a timely fashion.

SB 147, provides for the distribution of informational materials regarding palliative care, which is the first step in providing palliative care education and funding the care team in the future.

This year's general bill, HB 1205, which is the ongoing funding for state government will begin on July 1st.

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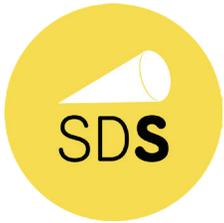
Groton Chamber of Commerce

March 6, 2024 ~ 12pm City Hall

- Individuals present: Hannah Gruenwald, Katelyn Nehlich, Douglas Heinrich, Ashley Bentz, April Abeln, and Paul Kosel
- Minutes from the previous meeting were approved on a motion by Heinrich and seconded by Katelyn. All members present voted aye.
- Treasurer's report was given. Dacotah Bank checking account balance is \$43,732.03. \$2214.80 is in the Bucks account. The report was approved by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich. All members present voted aye.
 - A thank you note from Snow Queen was read aloud.
 - Members were asked to RSVP to Abeln by 3/20/24 if they are planning on attending the SDML District 6 meeting. The event is to be held April 10th at the Groton Legion with social hour starting at 6pm.
 - An email motion was made by Kutter and seconded by Heinrich to pay \$25 to GDI Live for nsponsorship of all post season basketball games. All members present via email voted aye. The total invoice will be \$125.
 - Motion by Heinrich and seconded by Nehlich to enter into an agreement with the Groton Transit for a ¼ size advertisement on their white van. The agreement will be a 1-year contract for \$360 with the contract renewing yearly. All members present voted aye.
 - Rack cards have been printed and are available at City Hall for distribution. The Chamber has signed up for the Publication Program again. Nehlich will make sure the Geffdog invoice gets paid.
 - Motion by Abeln and seconded by Nehlich to advertise with The Groton Independent. All members present voted aye. Advertising includes sponsorship of local event ads with \$100 max monthly contribution; State A Tournament sponsorship for \$30 and possible \$100 full page ad if the paper transitions as Kosel described. Advertisements will also be included on his website and shared on Facebook. Kosel will bring monthly event advertising options to future Chamber meetings.
 - Giveaway baskets have been put together for the Spring Vendor Fair, Dueling Duo, and Fireman's Spring Social.
 - A free bike certificate was included in Lions eggs for their upcoming Easter Egg Hunt.
 - Motion by Nehlich and seconded by Heinrich to do a ½ page ad in the Yellowstone Trail. All members present voted aye. Kosel will work on verbiage and pictures. It was mentioned to highlight economic development and the school.
 - Donations were discussed. Motion by Abeln and seconded by Heinrich to donate \$300 to the Yelduz Shrine for kids' circus tickets. All members present voted aye.
 - A welcome may be scheduled with MGGQ Sunset once her Facebook page is created and the business is more established. It was mentioned these welcomes should be shared with The Groton Independent.
 - Fundraising options were discussed as well as starting to design our 2024 shirts. Kosel suggested replacement of the Main Street garbages and will bring a quote to the next meeting. Topper has started repair work on the Main Street benches.
 - It was mentioned that email reminders should be sent to members about meeting times, perhaps sent the day before.
 - Kosel suggested an online payment method for dues.
 - Scholarship Review: March 21, 2024, at Topper's Store on Main Street, 6:00pm with potluck
 - Next Meeting: April 3, 2024, at City Hall at 12:00pm

Upcoming events

- 03/23/2024 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
- 03/23/2024 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-3pm
- 03/23/2024 Common Cents Community Thrift Store extended hours 10am-3pm
- 03/23/2024 Men's Bowling Tournament at the Jungle 1pm & 4pm
- 03/23/2024 Billy Shilhanek Benefit at the Legion, 3-7pm
- 04/06/2024 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/13-14/2024 Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip
- 04/20/2024 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am
- 04/21/2024 Princess Prom at GHS Arena 4:30-8pm
- 05/04/2024 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

New hearing ordered for woman sentenced to prison without aid of attorney

Court-appointed lawyer had asked to withdraw over 'serious communication breakdown,' was denied

BY: JOHN HULT - MARCH 7, 2024 3:15 PM

When Tashina Abraham-Medved appeared in a Roberts County courtroom to be sentenced for felony drug ingestion in April of 2022, her lawyer asked to be removed from the case.

That court-appointed attorney, Robert Doody, said there had been a "serious communication breakdown" between himself and his client.

Judge Jon Flemmer denied the request and sent Abraham-Medved to prison.

On Thursday, the South Dakota Supreme Court ruled that the judge made the wrong call on Doody's request for removal. On a 5-0 vote, the justices overturned Abraham-Medved's five-year sentence and ordered a new sentencing take place.

The decision was largely tied to the fact that Abraham-Medved had to argue on her own behalf during sentencing. Her crime carries a presumption of probation in South Dakota, and she asked for a sentence of treatment and supervision.

Doody said only that he "believed" his client wanted a suspended execution of sentence, meaning she would only serve prison time if she failed to abide by the terms of her probation.

Because of her record in Minnesota and her failure to appear at previous hearings and keep in contact with Doody, though, Flemmer sentenced her to five years in prison with two suspended.

Abraham-Medved is currently on parole for that sentence.

The state's high court concluded that Judge Flemmer's failure to explore the nature of the "serious communication breakdown" and his conclusion that Abraham-Medved didn't need a lawyer at the final stage of the case were errors too significant to let the sentence stand.

Notably, Justice Patricia DeVaney wrote for the court, Flemmer expressed a willingness to consider probation and treatment "had those arrangements been made or presented as a viable option."

"Here, in light of the court's comments and Doody's deficient performance, which left Abraham-Medved to fend for herself, we cannot on this record say, with confidence, that the court would have imposed the same sentence had there been some advocacy on her behalf," DeVaney wrote for the court.

The court did eventually allow Doody to withdraw from Abraham-Medved's case, at her request, and she filed her appeal through another court-appointed attorney named David Geyer.

Judge Marshall Lovrien now presides over her case. Judge Flemmer died four months after issuing his sentence.

Bill allowing counties, cities to reject initiative petitions fails by one vote

Legislation was in response to push for hand counts and bans on voting machines in multiple counties

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 7, 2024 2:45 PM

A bill that would have allowed county commissioners or city finance officers to reject local ballot-question petitions if they violate state or federal law failed by one vote on the last day of the legislative session.

The bill was a response to petitions regarding election security concerns circulating in at least 18 of

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South Dakota's 66 counties. Petitions turned in to Lawrence and McPherson counties this week would ask local voters to not only ban electronic tabulators and require votes to be hand counted in elections, but also prohibit the use of all electronic devices in elections – including devices to help disabled people vote.

Rep. Kristin Conzet, R-Rapid City, told lawmakers that the bill, if passed, would point out an “unintended flaw” for petitioners.

“What we did here was insert an out clause for the parties to realize – at least two of the counties – that what they have done here is going to put the state in judicial jeopardy,” Conzet said.

State law requires an electronic ballot marking system be available if a candidate for a federal office is on the ballot.

The Help America Vote Act of 2002 requires that each polling place for a federal election provide a voting device allowing voters with disabilities to vote independently and privately, according to the secretary of state's website.

The House failed to pass the bill when it deadlocked 35-35, after it passed the Senate earlier in the day. Opponents argued that the bill would disenfranchise voters and that broad assumptions about lawsuits didn't hold water. They also argued that the bill would saddle petition circulators with court costs if they challenged the governing body's rejection.

“We've talked about whether this is a clear violation or not of state or federal law, but we don't know if it's clear or not,” said Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids. “A lot of these times it's not clear. That's why litigation gets spun up.”

The Lawrence County Commission will take up its submitted petition at its March 12 meeting. McPherson County commissioners will meet on April 2.

Based on current law, those counties must accept the petitions and put them to a public vote if they have verified signatures from at least 5% of registered voters in the county. Since the primary election is less than three months away, county residents would vote on the election security measures in the June 4 primary election. If approved by voters, the measures would then be in effect for the Nov. 5 general election.

Despite that, legal experts worry that the submitted petitions aren't legally sound. A private lawyer in Rapid City specializing in election law, Sara Frankenstein, said in an earlier interview with South Dakota Searchlight that in addition to the possible violation regarding disability rights, several other requirements outlined in the petitions don't “jibe” with the language in state statute, which could create problems. For example, she said, the way “tabulation” is written in the petitions means something different than the definitions in state law.

“If that petition passed and was called to a vote, then we'd have to campaign on the legality of something that shouldn't ever be put to a vote anyway,” Frankenstein said. “What a waste of campaign dollars that these poor people are going to have to put up to not pass something illegal.”

Prisons, education and the end of federal pandemic aid:

Legislature passes \$7.3 billion budget

Lawmakers finish 2024 session, except for Veto Day on March 25

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 7, 2024 2:06 PM

South Dakota lawmakers ended the main part of their legislative session Thursday by approving a \$7.3 billion balanced state budget for next fiscal year, starting July 1 – including a \$27 million increase above what Gov. Kristi Noem recommended in December.

Legislators are scheduled to return to Pierre for one day on March 25 to consider vetoes, if Gov. Kristi Noem issues any.

Rapid City Republican Rep. Mike Derby is co-chair of the Joint Appropriations Committee, which drafted the budget.

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"This is a budget that invests in the people of South Dakota and that will have a positive impact for generations," Derby told lawmakers before the House passed it 61-9. The Senate passed the bill 32-2.

Among other things, the new budget includes:

A 4% increase for state government employee pay, education funding and reimbursement to health care providers throughout the state.

A third consecutive tuition freeze for students at South Dakota public universities and technical colleges.

Over \$226 million set aside for the construction of a future men's prison in rural Lincoln County and a future women's prison in Rapid City, in addition to money set aside previously.

An increase to reach 98% cost reimbursement for nursing homes and other health care providers that have patients on government-funded care such as Medicaid.

The creation and funding of a statewide public defender's office and governing commission, to reduce some of the burden on counties for paying to defend criminal defendants who can't afford an attorney.

Over \$20 million for Medicaid expansion, which continues to be implemented after voters approved expanded eligibility in 2022.

The Legislature also passed several bills appropriating nearly \$120 million from the federal American Rescue Plan Act, which is the last remaining money from billions in federal pandemic aid sent to the state. Among the approved spending of those dollars is:

\$5 million in telemedicine grants to nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Over \$100 million to water and wastewater projects for state government and local projects statewide (with authority to spend more if other approved ARPA uses aren't spent by federal deadlines).

Over \$12 million for water and sewer infrastructure at the sites of the future men's and women's prisons.

The increase over Noem's recommended budget is due to higher revenue projections despite cutting the state sales tax last session from 4.5% to 4.2%. That cut includes a sunset in 2027 when the tax is scheduled to return to 4.5%. Some legislators are worried about another impending tax cut in the meantime, with a citizen initiative potentially headed to the ballot in November that would eliminate the state sales tax on anything sold for human consumption, sometimes referred to as the food tax or grocery tax.

Gov. Kristi Noem cautioned legislators last session that the proposed ballot measure will likely pass, which could leave lawmakers scrambling for revenue. A statewide South Dakota News Watch poll released in December showed that 60.6% of registered voters support eliminating the tax.

"If that consumption tax passes on the ballot, you take all that money out of our budget and you're going to train wreck," Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck, R-Watertown, said during the weekly Republican leadership conference.

Democratic leaders agreed. House Minority Leader Oren Lesmeister, from Parade, said the state "cannot survive" both cuts.

"If this measure passes, they're going to have a hard task of figuring out what they're going to raise for taxes, whatever it is, because this budget will not survive that tax cut on top of of the one we already have," Lesmeister said during the leadership conference. "That's just a simple way to put it."

If the food tax is eliminated, officials expect it'll cost the state roughly \$100 million.

Rounds votes yes, Thune no as US Senate endorses extension of radiation exposure fund

South Dakota uranium workers eligible for program

BY: DANIELLE PROKOP - MARCH 7, 2024 5:52 PM

The U.S. Senate voted Thursday to expand eligibility and extend the life of a fund for people exposed to radiation by the federal government.

South Dakotans who worked in uranium mining, milling and transport decades ago in Edgemont are among those already eligible for the program who could benefit from the extension.

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In a 69-30 vote, the Senate passed S. 3853, which funds the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act — called RECA — past its June sunset date for another six years. The bill also increases the payment amount and broadens who can receive payments from the fund around the country.

South Dakota's Republican senators split their votes on the measure. Sen. Mike Rounds voted for it, and Sen. John Thune voted against it. Neither of their offices immediately responded to requests for comments.

U.S. nuclear testing, waste disposal and uranium mining exposed people to radiation in communities that have been left with high rates of cancers and other diseases. Many have still received no compensation.

As of 2023, people living in South Dakota had submitted 114 claims to RECA since its inception, resulting in 37 denials, 76 awards and one claim that was pending. Total payouts to South Dakotans from the fund stood at \$6.56 million.

Before the vote Thursday, U.S. Sen. Ben Ray Luján, D-New Mexico, recounted Anastacio Cordova's life on the Senate floor, noting that he was 4 years old and living in Tularosa, New Mexico, when the 1945 Trinity Test detonation over the Jornada Del Muerto occurred 45 miles away. Like many families in the area, he was often drinking water from open cisterns, eating crops fed by acequias, and hunting and eating game caught in the area.

"Little Anastasio didn't know it at the time — none of the families there did — but the world they were living in was contaminated by radioactive particles from the first nuclear test," Luján said.

He noted this was one heartbreak in a string of deaths from cancer and diseases after radiation exposure.

He thanked Anastacio's daughter, Tina Cordova, who sat in the gallery for the vote, adding that she's his guest for the State of the Union address on Thursday.

"I'm thankful to have her by my side for this cause," Luján said, then paused. "I'm going to change that — I'm honored that she allowed me on this journey with her, to help other people."

Tina Cordova is a cancer survivor and longtime advocate for southern New Mexicans who've been impacted for generations.

In a phone call with Source New Mexico, she said the day was marked by both the vote and the 11-year anniversary of the death of her father, who had inoperable cancer.

"Just one of those amazing coincidences," Cordova said.

She said she's better prepared to try and convince Republican House members to support the measure.

"We need to make sure they understand this is a nonpartisan issue," she said. "For House members from places like Utah, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada and Montana, that they understand voting against this is voting against people impacted in their states."

Luján has tried to widen the program since 2009. He was part of a bipartisan group of seven senators co-sponsoring the bill, including Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Missouri, Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-New Mexico, Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Arizona, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, I-Arizona, Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, and Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Missouri.

The U.S. Department of Justice calls the unique fund an "apology." It provides lump-sum compensation for certain cancers and serious diseases people contracted as a result of working in the uranium industry or after exposure during above-ground nuclear tests. But the fund remains limited.

Many "downwind" communities are excluded from compensation. The expansion bill would fold in for the first time thousands of New Mexicans from the area surrounding the Trinity Test Site, along with people from Idaho, Montana, Colorado and Guam. And instead of just a handful of counties where fallout fell, the entire states of Utah, Nevada and Arizona would be included.

In addition, the bill would significantly expand how many uranium workers could be covered by extending the time period past 1971 through 1990.

And the bill acknowledges communities where nuclear waste was dumped in Missouri, as well as Kentucky, Tennessee, and Alaska.

In remarks on the floor before the vote, Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-New Mexico) urged colleagues to support the measure, saying they would be "standing on the right side of history."

"Today, we have a chance to finally deliver justice for the Trinity downwinders, and for all Americans who are exposed to radioactive nuclear materials," Heinrich said.

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On Wednesday, the eve of the vote, the White House issued a policy memo backing the legislation.

"The President believes we have a solemn obligation to address toxic exposure, especially among those who have been placed in harm's way by the government's actions," the memo stated.

Previous RECA expansions have been cut from funding bills. In 2022, supporters managed to keep the fund alive after an eleventh-hour extension eked through.

In July 2023, the Senate voted to add an amendment expanding RECA to the more than \$800 billion defense package. It was later struck during negotiations.

This bill approved by the Senate Thursday significantly cut the fund extension. Instead of continuing the program for another 19 years, the new legislation would extend the life of RECA until 2030 — only six years.

The measure still faces a vote in the House.

U.S. Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández (D-New Mexico) told Source NM that the support from Republicans in the Senate for a standalone bill was encouraging and said she hoped it sends a message to the House.

"We won't be able to get a standalone bill in the House, but we are hopeful that we'll be able to include it into one of the packages that will move forward," she said.

Leger Fernández and uranium miner Phil Harrison (Navajo) were gathered with others watching the vote, calling it an emotional affair.

"This story is one of sadness and heartbreak, and Congress has the ability to write a new ending to this story," Leger Fernández said.

On the phone, Harrison said the vote is a moment of long-awaited recognition, but it's marred by concern for people still struggling after exposure to radiation.

"While the vote was being completed, I thought of all those people that were sick or suffering from cancer, miners that are on oxygen," he said.

He thanked the senators who voted for the bill and said he was optimistic about support.

"This is a step forward," he said. "But from now, we have a lot of work still ahead of us."

Since 1990, RECA has paid out \$2.6 billion dollars in claims, a fraction of a percent of what the U.S. spends on nuclear weapons. According to Congressional Budget Office estimates, the federal government is expecting nuclear weapons to cost \$756 billion between 2023 and 2032.

The staff of South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.

What does S. 3853 do?

Downwinders: The bill would allow RECA to cover people in Idaho, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico and Guam, and includes all of Nevada, Arizona and Utah, instead of just certain counties. It specifically acknowledges Trinity Test and Guam downwinders for the first time.

Uranium miners: The measure would extend the time frame for eligible uranium workers through 1990 instead of cutting it off at 1971. It compensates those who mined, milled or transported ore in Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming, South Dakota, Washington, Utah, Idaho, North Dakota, Oregon and Texas.

More conditions: The bill would cover new cancers, and it would also allow chronic kidney illness as a qualifying disease for uranium workers.

Waste disposal: Communities harmed by Manhattan Project waste or waste from other tests deposited in certain areas of Missouri, Alaska, Tennessee and Kentucky could receive compensation up to \$25,000 under the bill.

Better compensation: Accounting for inflation, the measure increases lump-sum compensation to \$100,000 for downwinders and on-site participants — up from the \$50,000 and \$75,000. If signed, the bill would allow previous claimants to submit new claims to make up the difference.

Biden to announce U.S. will construct a port on Gaza coast to deliver humanitarian aid

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - MARCH 7, 2024 12:16 PM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is expected to use his State of the Union address Thursday night to announce that the U.S. military will build port infrastructure on the Gaza Strip coast to allow humanitarian aid to arrive by sea.

Senior White House officials briefed reporters earlier in the day on the plan that they say will require no American boots on the ground in Gaza, where starvation after five months of the Israel-Hamas war has reached disastrous levels, nongovernmental agencies warn.

Rather, an unspecified number of U.S. troops will construct what officials described as a pier or causeway from an offshore military vessel.

"The U.S. military has unique capabilities, and they can do things from just offshore that are extraordinary," a senior White House official said on the call. "And so that is the concept of operations that the president has been briefed on that he is going to authorize and then we will work here over the coming days to get this underway."

The plan will be done in partnership with allies, including with the Israelis who will provide security on the ground and the United Nations and other nongovernmental organizations that will coordinate distribution of shipments, Biden administration officials said.

The U.S. construction will enable delivery of shipments from Cyprus, the Mediterranean island nation that initially proposed the plan last year.

"This new significant capability will take a number of weeks to plan and execute," a senior official said, without providing a specific timeline.

"The forces that will be required to complete this mission are either already in the region or will begin to move there soon. We look forward to working with our close partners and allies in Europe, the Middle East and beyond to build a coalition of countries that will contribute capabilities and funding for this initiative," the official said.

Biden's announcement comes a week after more than 100 Palestinians died and hundreds were injured in a rush to aid trucks along a coastal road just southwest of Gaza City. Palestinian health authorities maintain many died from bullets fired by Israeli forces, which Israel denies. Other witnesses have said most killed were run over by trucks.

The United Nations warned this week that hunger in the Gaza Strip "has reached catastrophic levels."

The agency is pushing for a plan to transport aid into the Gaza Strip's northern area via a military access road. White House officials told reporters that the U.N. confirmed Thursday that a first delivery using the northern route will occur this week.

Pressures on administration

Biden continues to face pressure as negotiations over a temporary cease-fire and releases of Israeli hostages have stalled.

Voters in numerous primary states cast "uncommitted" ballots as recently as the Democratic 2024 Super Tuesday presidential nominating contests, apparently as a protest of Biden's continued support of Israel's bombardment in the Gaza Strip.

While just a tiny fraction of the delegate count, Biden lost 11 delegates to "uncommitted" in Minnesota Tuesday, seven in Hawaii Wednesday and two in Michigan last month.

White House officials said Thursday the onus is on Hamas. The Gaza-based militant group has so far refused to agree to a deal during ongoing negotiations in Cairo, Egypt.

"It is essential that we see a temporary cease-fire in Gaza. The path to a cease-fire is straightforward," a senior White House official said. "There could be at least a six-week cease-fire today if Hamas would agree to release a defined category of vulnerable hostages, including women, elderly, sick and the wounded.

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That deal is on the table now and has been for more than the past week.”

Thursday marks five months of fighting in the Gaza Strip after Hamas militants stormed southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 in Israel and initially taking roughly 200 hostages into the Hamas-controlled territory.

The Gaza health ministry estimates the death toll in the small strip of land bordered by Israel, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea has surpassed 30,000.

Biden backs RECA legislation ahead of vote

South Dakota among eligible states for uranium workers

BY: DANIELLE PROKOP - MARCH 7, 2024 11:38 AM

The White House endorsed legislation to extend funding and expand eligibility for people exposed to radiation by the federal government.

The White House wrote of its support for a Senate bill extending the expiration date for the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), in a policy memo released Wednesday.

“The President believes we have a solemn obligation to address toxic exposure, especially among those who have been placed in harm’s way by the government’s actions,” the memo said.

South Dakotans who worked in uranium mining, milling and transport decades ago in Edgemont are among those already eligible who could benefit from extended funding. As of 2023, people living in South Dakota had submitted 114 claims to RECA since its inception, resulting in 37 denials, 76 awards and one claim that was pending. Total payouts to South Dakotans from the fund stood at \$6.56 million.

Sen. Ben Ray Luján, D-New Mexico, who has pressed to expand the program in various bills since 2009, expressed his hopes for the legislation.

“I am glad that the Biden administration is putting its support behind strengthening RECA ahead of a Senate vote this week,” Luján wrote in a statement to Source New Mexico. “President Biden voiced his support for RECA last year in New Mexico, and I am hopeful that the Senate will pass this legislation with bipartisan support.”

The bill is scheduled for a vote for today at 2:15 p.m. Eastern time. It will need 60 votes.

RECA basics

RECA emerged in 1990 as an apology and acknowledgment of certain people exposed to radiation from uranium extraction and decades of above-ground nuclear tests in the American West and Pacific Islands.

RECA is a unique fund, paying out lump-sums to qualified people diagnosed with certain cancers and other diseases if they lived and worked in designated places at specific times. The fund remains limited. It’s open to certain uranium miners, millers, transporters, people on-site during nuclear weapons tests and a handful of counties in Utah, Nevada and Arizona where fallout fell.

Many communities who were “downwind” of sites are excluded, including thousands of New Mexicans exposed at the first-ever nuclear blast at Trinity Test Site in 1945.

South Dakota is included in eligibility as a uranium worker state, due to the uranium mining, milling and transport that occurred in the Edgemont area from roughly the 1950s to the 1970s.

What’s in the bill?

The bill — S. 3853 — was introduced by Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Missouri, and has six co-sponsors. Those include New Mexico’s Luján and Sen. Martin Heinrich, Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Arizona, Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, and Sen. Eric Schmitt, R-Missouri.

The bill opens downwinder eligibility to Idaho, Montana, Colorado, New Mexico and Guam, and expands to all of Nevada, Arizona and Utah. The law acknowledges Trinity test and Guam downwinders for the first time. It also extends coverage to uranium miners working until 1990 instead of cutting off coverage after 1971.

The bill increases lump-sum compensation of downwinders and on-site participants to \$100,000 (up from

\$50,000 and \$75,000 respectively). If signed, the bill would allow for past claimants to request to receive the difference between past benefits and new ones.

The bill expands the types of cancers covered and includes chronic kidney illness as a qualifying disease for uranium miners.

Communities impacted by Manhattan Project waste and other nuclear waste in certain areas of Missouri, Alaska, Tennessee and Kentucky could receive compensation up to \$25,000.

The most recent legislation significantly cut the extension of the fund compared to an amendment struck from the defense bill last year.

Instead of continuing the fund for another 19 years, the new legislation would extend the life of RECA until 2030 – for six years. Without extension, the fund is set to expire this year.

The new legislation also directs the Government Accountability Office to submit a study to Congress on “unmet medical benefits coverage” for people exposed to radiation during federal atmospheric nuclear tests and make recommendations to provide additional coverage within one year of the bill’s passage.

Tina Cordova, the founder of the Tularosa Basin Downwinders Consortium told Source New Mexico, the bill was cut down to “be more palatable” for Republican House members.

Cordova, a cancer survivor, has pushed for recognition and justice for New Mexico Downwinders for nearly two decades.

The consortium represents Southern New Mexicans and their descendants fighting for recognition from the federal government about cancers, deaths and other impacts of the detonation at the Trinity Site 78 years ago.

“This is one of those amazing moments,” she said over intercom noise, as she boarded a flight to D.C., as Luján’s guest for the State of the Union address this Thursday.

“But we still have to fight for the bill in the House,” she said.

The staff of South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.

Fluoride in public water has slashed tooth decay, but some states may end mandates

South Dakota among states with laws mandating fluoridation in some cities

BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA - MARCH 7, 2024 10:19 AM

Kentucky state Rep. Mark Hart has been drinking fluoridated water his entire life. In 1954, five years before Hart was born, his home state mandated adding or adjusting levels of the mineral, which occurs naturally in water, in drinking water systems of populations larger than 3,000.

But after hearing from a constituent a few years ago, Hart believes the matter of what’s in Kentucky cities’ drinking water should be a decision made by those drinking it. He’s been trying to reverse the state’s mandate since 2018, with several unsuccessful legislative attempts.

This year, with more than 20 co-sponsors, his bill has so far passed out of committee on its route to the House floor.

In 1945, Grand Rapids, Michigan, became the first city to fluoridate its water. The decline in tooth decay that followed the widespread adoption of fluoridation has been hailed as one of the greatest public health achievements of the past century. Fluoridation lessens tooth decay in children and adults by 25%, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But there’s been pushback against fluoridation, including a lawsuit by advocates seeking the federal government to ban the practice entirely. Some state lawmakers want to reverse or relax requirements for communities to fluoridate, and several localities across the country in recent years have chosen to stop doing it. Health experts say the rise in anti-fluoridation measures is an example of the increased skepticism toward science and public health measures — exacerbated by the mask and vaccine mandates during the pandemic.

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"At the heart of these big public health issues — including water fluoridation — is science. But over the past few years, there's been skepticism of science," said Jane Grover, senior director of the Council on Access, Prevention and Interprofessional Relations at the American Dental Association.

Roughly 73% of the U.S. population with public water access in 2020 received drinking water with fluoride adjusted to the "optimal" concentration of 0.7 milligrams per liter, according to the CDC.

At least a dozen states have laws mandating that larger communities fluoridate. Among them are California, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, Ohio and South Dakota.

Yet lawmakers in three of those states — Georgia, Kentucky and Nebraska — have filed bills that would reverse the mandates and leave the choice up to a local voter referendum or to the governing body of local water systems.

Three states — Maine, New Hampshire and Utah — require a public vote for fluoridation by municipalities and their public water systems.

What the science says

Hart, a Republican, said he didn't give much thought to his drinking water until a constituent sent him studies that linked very high levels of fluoridation to lower IQs in rural communities of China and India. (U.S. public health experts say those cases don't correspond to fluoridation in the United States.)

"I was shocked by all the research I was reading. I hadn't put much stock into my drinking water when I first joined the [Kentucky legislature]," said Hart.

He'd personally rather avoid fluoridated water altogether, but said at a minimum Kentucky's statewide mandate ought to be overturned.

"What goes in your drinking water isn't for the states or big government to decide. That to me is a local control issue — give people a choice on what they're drinking, you know?" Hart said.

Much of the research used by anti-fluoride activists has been resoundingly debunked by the medical community. Public health officials note that studies touted by anti-fluoridation groups are often cited out of context, may not be peer-reviewed, and often are conducted in countries where fluoridation levels can be several times that of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recommendation.

"Good public health policy is built on decades and decades of scientific review, not junk science. Because we need reputable, peer-reviewed science to assess what's necessary to protect public health," said Kathleen Hoke, a University of Maryland law professor and the eastern region director of the Network for Public Health Law, a professional group that provides technical legal assistance on public health matters.

"The EPA's recommendation for fluoride levels is based on scientific, peer-reviewed data. It's up to our public health measures to reflect that same type of reputable science," she added.

And organizations such as the CDC, the American Dental Association and the National Cancer Institute are in consensus that U.S. fluoridation is safe, and is not linked to lower IQs or critical health problems.

Local debates

For most of the United States, fluoridation already is a matter of local control. Hawaii is the only state that bans fluoridation; most others leave it to individual water systems or localities.

There are bills in Hawaii and New Jersey to mandate water fluoridation statewide, but the legislation is stalled in committee.

Hawaii state Sen. Stanley Chang, a Democrat, said his concern over the oral health of his newborn daughter inspired the bill, which would require all state suppliers of public water to meet fluoridation levels set by the EPA.

"I think this will prevail in the end. When it comes to health and science, there's an information plateau if you're not an expert," Chang told Stateline. "I'm not an expert. It's why my job is to ask experts, so that I can be equipped to make that information accessible and reliable for my constituents."

Debora Teixeira, the oral health systems coordinator at the Vermont Department of Public Health, said

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her agency will send educators to local communities to talk about fluoridation in the hope of helping residents understand the benefits.

"When requested, we go to the place where fluoridation is being challenged," Teixeira said.

"It's less of advocating law, and more of an education and information about the science behind it," she said. "Because there's decades and decades of research that supports fluoridation, but we want to engage with those who may be skeptical or have been misinformed."

This year, local governments in Union County, North Carolina, and Collier County, Florida, prohibited the adding of fluoride to their drinking water.

Last year, State College, Pennsylvania, and Brushy Creek, Texas, stopped adding fluoride to their water systems.

In a September 2023 memo announcing the decision to terminate fluoridation, Shean R. Dalton, general manager of Brushy Creek Municipal Utility District, cited health concerns, personal choice and cost-effectiveness as reasons to forgo the practice.

A 2022 University of Calgary study showed increases in tooth decay procedures in Calgary, Canada, and Juneau, Alaska, after each city ended water fluoridation.

Last month, a federal court in San Francisco heard arguments in a lawsuit by Food and Water Watch and anti-fluoridation advocacy groups against the EPA, arguing that fluoride ought to be regulated as a toxin. The lawsuit, filed in 2017, is seeking a ban on fluoridation of drinking water "to protect fetuses and children" from the risk of neurodevelopmental problems.

"There is a very real trend of states looking to reverse these mandates. We believe that the court's ruling — which we hope is in our favor — will give more states cause to look at what we're doing to our drinking water," said Stuart Cooper, executive director of the Fluoride Action Network, an anti-fluoride advocacy group that is among the plaintiffs in the case.

Meanwhile, residents of Buffalo, New York, have filed a class-action lawsuit against the city after it quietly ended fluoridation without informing residents. One resident said her elementary school-aged son suffered from oral health problems from a lack of fluoride.

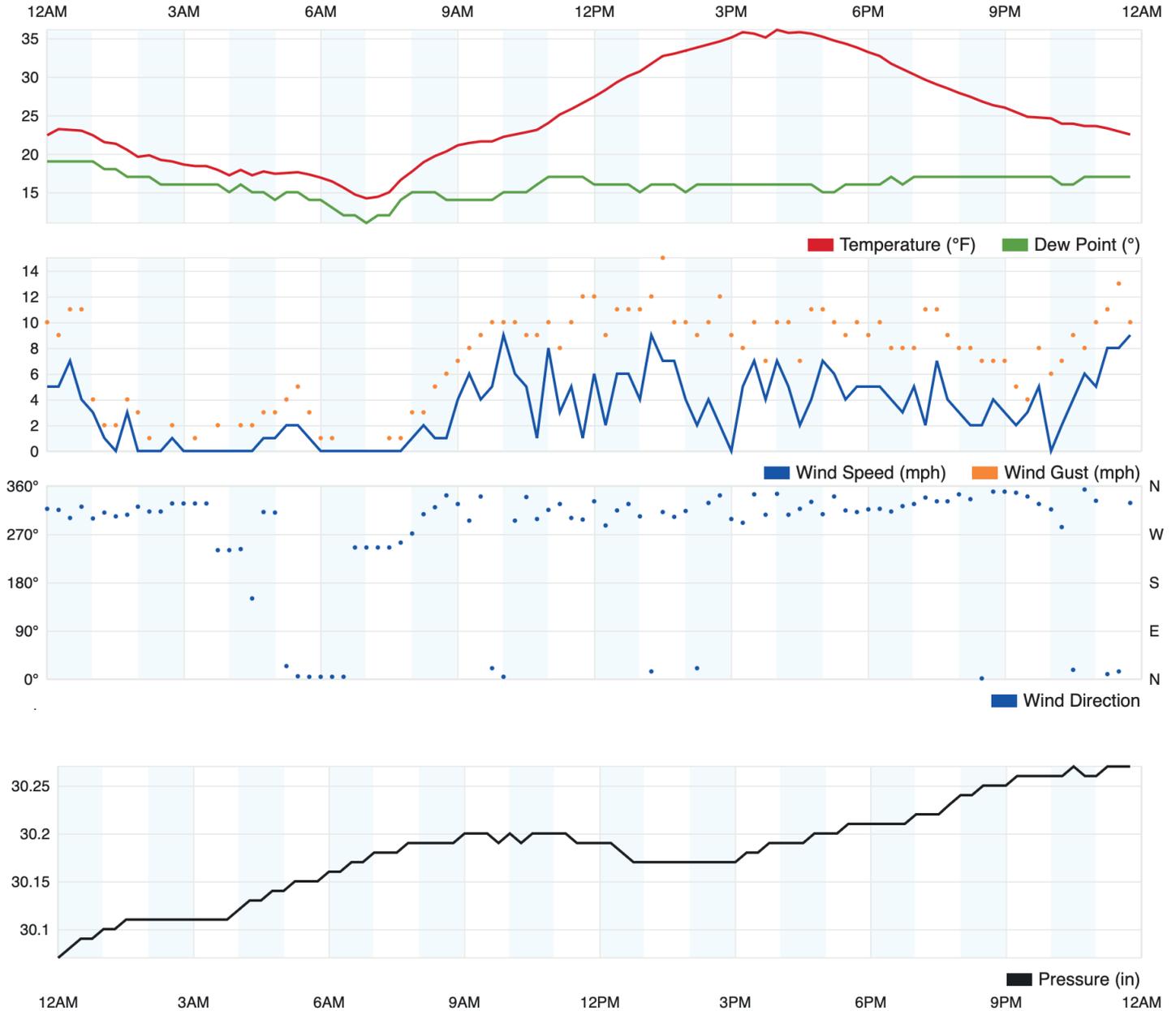
The latest effort at stopping fluoridation was in Rutland, Vermont, where residents this week took their second vote in less than a decade on whether to keep adding the mineral to their drinking water. In 2016, the ballot measure failed.

On Tuesday, it failed again. Rutland will keep its fluoride.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Saturday

Saturday
Night

Sunday



Sunny

High: 41 °F



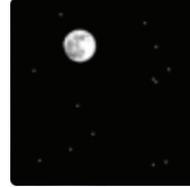
Clear

Low: 16 °F



Sunny

High: 46 °F



Clear

Low: 23 °F



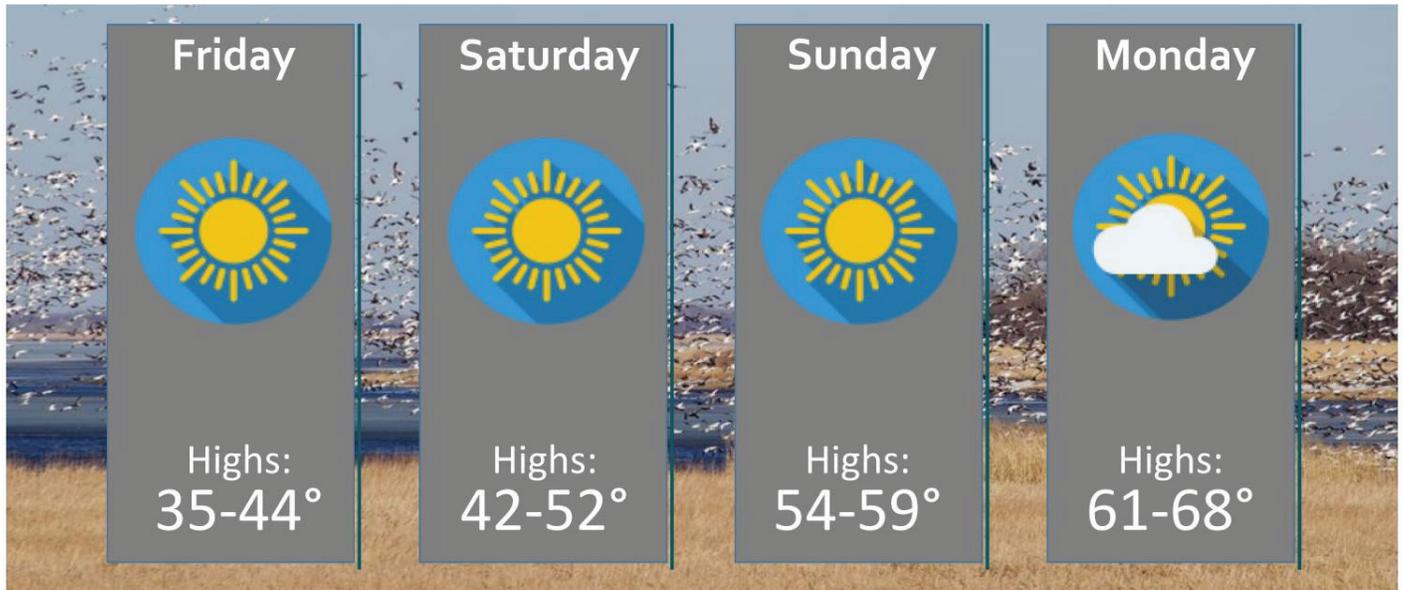
Sunny

High: 57 °F



Continued Mild & Dry

March 8, 2024
3:00 AM



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

It should come as no surprise that we will continue to remain mild and dry through the weekend. Temperatures will be on a warming trend, peaking early next week. For the most part winds will remain 25mph or lower.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 36 °F at 4:01 PM

Low Temp: 14 °F at 7:02 AM

Wind: 15 mph at 1:25 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 11 hours, 36 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 65 in 2021

Record Low: -32 in 1995

Average High: 37

Average Low: 16

Average Precip in March.: 0.19

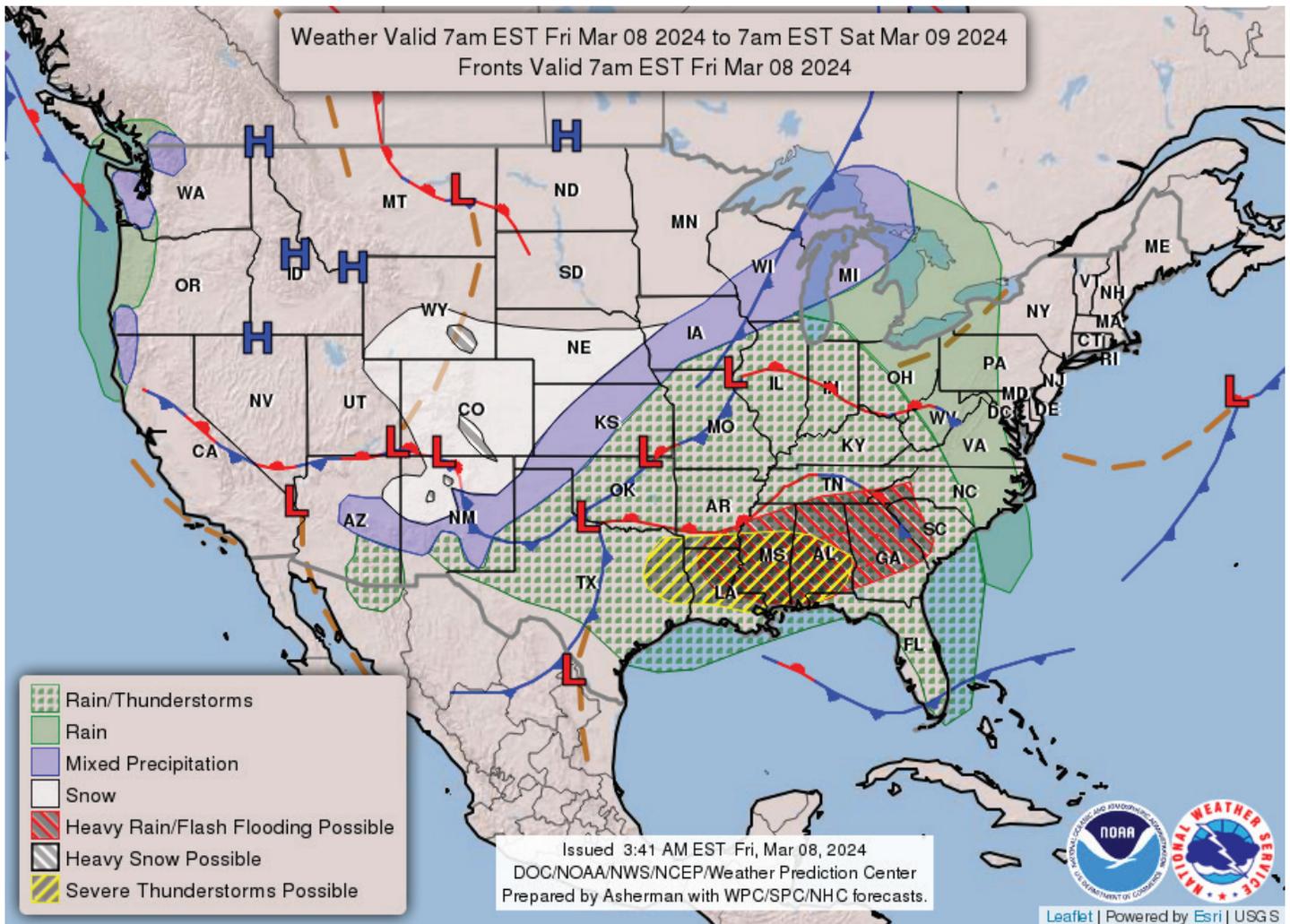
Precip to date in March: 0.01

Average Precip to date: 1.36

Precip Year to Date: 0.08

Sunset Tonight: 6:31:02 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:53:01 am



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Today in Weather History

March 8, 2000: High winds of 30 to 50 mph, combined with 3 to 7 inches of snow, caused widespread blizzard conditions across north-central South Dakota. As a result, many schools were closed early in the day. Travel was also significantly disrupted. Telephone service went down for several hours between Moberg and Selby. Some heavy snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Eagle Butte, Selby, and Hoven and 7 inches southwest of Keldron.

March 8, 2013: An area of low pressure moving across the region brought warm moist air overtop low-level cold air, which resulted in the widespread freezing rain across much of northeast South Dakota during the evening and into the early morning hours of the 8th and 9th. For much of the area, the precipitation changed to all rain before ending as temperatures rose above freezing. Ice accumulations ranged from a tenth of an inch to a half of an inch. Some ice accumulation reports include; 0.25 inches at Garden City, Hayti, Waubay, Clear Lake, Sisseton, and Summit and 0.50 inches near Florence and Clark. Travel became hazardous, with no significant accidents reported. Also, no problems with power outages or tree damage were reported.

1669: The 1669 eruption of Mount Etna is the largest-recorded historical eruption of the volcano on the east coast of Sicily, Italy. After several weeks of increasing seismic activity that damaged the town of Nicolosi and other settlements, an eruption fissure opened on the southeastern flank of Etna during the night of 10-11 March. Several more cracks became active on March 11, erupting pyroclastics and tephra that fell over Sicily and accumulated to form the Monti Rossi scoria cone.

1717 - On Fishers Island in Long Island Sound, 1200 sheep were discovered to have been buried under a snow drift for four weeks. When finally uncovered, one hundred sheep were still alive. (The Weather Channel)

1909 - The town of Brinkley AR was struck by a tornado which killed 49 persons and caused 600,000 dollars damage. The tornado, which was two-thirds of a mile in width, destroyed 860 buildings. Entire families were killed as houses were completely swept away by the tornado. Tornadoes killed 64 persons and injured 671 others in Dallas and Monroe counties during the Arkansas tornado outbreak. (David Ludlum)

1972: A wind gust of 207 mph was recorded on a Bendix-Friez Aerovane anemometer at Phase Shack #7, located six miles east of the Thule Air Force Base in Greenland. Winds were sustained at over 146 mph for three hours during the storm.

1984 - A freak thunder snowstorm produced high winds, vivid lightning, and up to seven inches of snow in the northern suburbs of Washington D.C. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - Thirty-two cities in the eastern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Madison WI with a reading of 71 degrees. Afternoon highs of 68 degrees at Houghton Lake MI and 72 degrees at Flint MI smashed their previous records for the date by fourteen degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - A cold front brought wintry weather to the north central U.S. Snowfall totals in northwestern Minnesota ranged up to eight inches at Roseau and Hallock. Winds in South Dakota gusted to 61 mph at Brookings. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989: While Arctic cold gripped the northeastern U.S., unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the southwestern states. Albany, New York, reported a record low of 2 degrees below zero. Tucson, Arizona, reported a record high of 90 degrees.

1990 - Late afternoon thunderstorms produced severe weather in east central Iowa and west central Illinois. Thunderstorms spawned a tornado south of Augusta IL which traveled 42 miles to Marbleton. Golf ball size hail was reported at Peoria IL and near Vermont IL. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2000: An F1 tornado traveled a short distance across Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during the evening hours. The tornado injured 16 people.

2004 - The California coast warms up. San Francisco broke a 112-year record by reaching 82 degrees. Los Angeles soared to 93 degrees.

2005 - A line of strong to severe thunderstorms affected the eastern portions of North and South Carolina, with wind damage and a few tornadoes reported. Winds gusted over 70 MPH with some of the stronger storms.

2017: Malta's famous Azure Window rock arch has collapsed into the sea after heavy storms.

2018: A horseshoe cloud was seen over Battle Mountain, Nevada.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

FROM FARM TO FAME

Grover Cleveland Alexander is recognized as one of the greatest baseball pitchers of all time. His record of ninety shutouts still stands, and his 373 recorded victories has been achieved by only one other pitcher. In 1938 he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

From his earliest days on the farm, his only desire was to play baseball and be a pitcher. Not many know that he began his career by throwing apples and stones at fence posts between chores to sharpen his throwing skills.

One day he bought a few baseballs and nailed an old catcher's mitt to the chicken coop. He would spend every available moment throwing baseballs at the mitt and finally became successful at hitting the mitt nine times out of ten.

During his pitching career, reporters showered heaps of praise on him as his record grew and fame spread. But none of them were ever aware of the many hours he practiced with no one watching or helping him develop the skills that would eventually bring him world recognition.

Fame never comes unless one is willing to pay the price it requires. Hard work is God's plan for all of us. Those who work diligently are the recipients of many benefits in their own lives and the lives of others. God blesses those who develop the skills He gives them.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to take the gifts You give us with great humility and work with all of our might to develop them. Only then will we bring honor and glory to You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Make it your goal to live a quiet life, minding your own business and working with your hands, just as we instructed you before. Then people who are not believers will respect the way you live, and you will not need to depend on others. 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12

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 DRAW: 16 Hrs 48 Mins 1 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 DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 3 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.07.24

14 17 28 31 39 3

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 18 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

3 9 11 21 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 18 Mins 1 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
03.06.24

30 31 36 52 58 16

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 47 Mins 1 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 DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 47 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

South Dakota Legislature ends session but draws division over upcoming abortion rights initiative

By JACK DURA Associated Press

South Dakota's Republican-led Legislature wrapped up on Thursday after about two months of work in a session that largely aligned with Gov. Kristi Noem's vision and drew division over an abortion rights ballot initiative voters could decide in November.

Lawmakers sent a \$7.3 billion budget for fiscal 2025 to Noem, including 4% increases for the state's "big three" funding priorities of K-12 education, health care providers and state employees. The second-term Republican governor, citing, inflation, had pitched a budget tighter than in recent years that saw federal pandemic aid flow in.

The Legislature also passed bills funding prison construction, defining antisemitism, outlawing xylazine showing up with fentanyl, creating a state office of indigent legal services, ensuring teacher pay raises, and banning foreign entities such as China from owning farmland — all items on Noem's wish list.

"I think she had a good year," Republican House Majority Leader Will Mortenson said.

Lawmakers will be back in Pierre later this month to consider overriding any vetoes and to officially adjourn.

Abortion

Republican lawmakers cemented official opposition to the abortion rights initiative with a resolution against it.

A Republican-led bill to allow signers of initiative petitions to withdraw their signatures drew opposition as a jab at direct democracy and a roadblock on the looming initiative's path.

Lawmakers also approved a video to outline South Dakota's abortion laws. South Dakota outlaws all abortions but to save the life of the mother.

Republicans said a video, done through the state Department of Health with consultation from the attorney general and legal and medical experts, would give clarity to medical providers on the abortion laws. Opponents questioned what all a video would include.

Medicaid expansion work requirement

In November, South Dakota voters will decide whether to allow a work requirement for recipients of Medicaid expansion. Voters approved the expansion of the government health insurance program for low-income people in 2022.

Republicans called the work requirement measure a "clarifying question" for voters. The federal government would eventually have to sign off on a work requirement, if advanced. Opponents said a work requirement would be unnecessary and ineffective and increase paperwork.

Sales tax cut

What didn't get across the finish line was a permanent sales tax cut sought by House Republicans and supported by Noem. The proposal sailed through the House but withered in the Senate, where budget writers took a cautious approach, said Republican Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree.

"I think that's smart, rooted financial management," he said.

Last year, the Legislature approved a four-year sales tax cut of over \$100 million annually, after initially weighing a grocery tax cut Noem campaigned on for reelection in 2022.

Voters could decide whether to repeal the food tax this year through a proposed ballot initiative. If passed, major funding questions would loom for lawmakers.

Leaders see wins, shortcomings

Republican majority leaders counted achievements in bills for landowner protections in regulating carbon dioxide pipelines, prison construction, boosts for K-12 education funding and literacy, and a tuition freeze for tech schools and universities.

"The No. 1 way you improve the future of every blue-collar family in South Dakota is you help their

kids get an education and move up, and we're doing that," Republican Senate President Pro Tempore Lee Schoenbeck told reporters Wednesday. "The tuition freeze, the scholarships we've created — we're creating more opportunities for more families to move up the ladder in South Dakota and stay in South Dakota. That's our No. 1 economic driver."

Democrats highlighted wins in airport funding, setting a minimum teacher's salary and pay increase guidelines, and making it financially easier for people for who are homeless to get birth certificates and IDs.

But they lamented other actions.

"We bought a \$4 million sheep shed instead of feeding hungry kids school meals for a fraction of that price. We made hot pink a legal hunting apparel color, but we couldn't keep guns out of small children's reach through safer storage laws," Democratic Senate Minority Leader Reynold Nesiba told reporters Thursday. "We couldn't even end child marriage with (a) bill to do that."

As their final votes loomed, lawmakers visited at their desks and recognized departing colleagues.

The Latest | Efforts ramp up to deliver aid to Gaza as US and Europe focus on a sea corridor

By The Associated Press undefined

Efforts ramped up on Friday to deliver more desperately needed aid to war-ravaged Gaza, with the United States and Europe focused on opening a sea route, underscoring the West's growing frustration with Israel's conduct in the war.

A top European Union official said a charity ship will head to Gaza as a pilot operation for a new humanitarian sea corridor. Ursula von der Leyen spoke in Cyprus, where she came to inspect preparations to send more aid to Gaza by sea.

Just hours earlier, President Joe Biden announced that the U.S. military will set up a temporary pier on Gaza's Mediterranean coast. He unveiled the plan during his State of the Union address to Congress after last week approving the U.S. military airdropping aid into Gaza.

The plans follow an announcement Thursday by Hamas that negotiations over a cease-fire in Gaza and the release of more Israeli hostages will resume next week, dimming hopes that mediators could broker a truce before the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which is expected to begin at sundown Sunday.

After more than 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.

Israel's near-total blockade of Gaza and the fighting have made it nearly impossible to deliver aid 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 during a temporary cease-fire in November in exchange for 240 Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

The number of Palestinians killed has climbed above 30,800. That's according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants in its figures but says women and children make up around two-thirds of all casualties.

Currently:

- After months of warnings that Israel's siege is causing famine, children begin to die in Gaza.
- President Joe Biden orders U.S. military to set up temporary aid port for Gaza as famine threatens.
- Analysis: First fatal attack on shipping by Yemen's Houthi rebels escalates risk for a reeling Mideast
- Leading NGOs slam Israel's halt in visa renewals for aid workers in Gaza and West Bank
- Violence in the Mideast and rising threats from Islamic State group in Afghanistan put pressure on the U.S. and its allies.
- Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

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Here's the latest:

ISRAELI PROBE SAYS TROOPS SHOT AT SOME PEOPLE AROUND A GAZA AID CONVOY LAST WEEK WHO WERE ADVANCING TOWARD THEM

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military on Friday said a review of the bloodshed surrounding an aid convoy last week that killed 118 Palestinians in northern Gaza showed that Israeli forces shot at some people in the crowd who were advancing toward them.

Israeli officials had initially said only that their troops had fired warning shots toward the crowd.

A large number of people met a pre-dawn convoy of trucks carrying aid to the war-racked region on Feb. 29 and began scrambling to grab the food. Witnesses said Israeli forces opened fire on them.

The military said on Friday that about 12,000 people had gathered around the trucks as they were traveling toward distribution centers and began grabbing the food aid off them.

The military review of the incident showed the troops did not fire on the convoy itself, "but did fire at a number of suspects who approached the nearby forces and posed a threat to them," the military said.

The military said many of the casualties were caused by a stampede over the food and people being run over by the aid trucks.

The United Nations said last week that a U.N. team that visited Shifa Hospital in Gaza City reported that there were "a large number of gunshot wounds" among the more than 200 people being treated for injuries there last week.

The director of Al-Awda Hospital said 80% of the 176 wounded brought there had gunshot wounds. The European Union urged an international investigation into the killings.

The violence surrounding the convoy brought in sharp relief the desperate need to get aid into the largely isolated region of northern Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of people remain despite widespread devastation from the war between Israel and Hamas.

In the wake of the ill-fated convoy, the United States has begun airdrops of food to the region and announced plans to build a pier to bring in aid by sea.

ISRAELI STRIKES ACROSS GAZA KILL 78 PEOPLE IN PAST 24 HOURS, GAZA'S HEALTH MINISTRY SAYS
DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — The Health Ministry in the Gaza Strip said Friday that 78 people were killed and 104 were wounded over the past 24 hours in Israeli strikes on different areas across the territory.

The latest figures raise the total Gaza death toll to 30,878 since the Israel-Hamas war started five months ago, according to the ministry. The overall number of wounded rose to 72,402. The ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its count, but said 72% were women and children.

The U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known by the acronym UNRWA, said that about 9,000 women have been killed in Gaza over the past five months.

Israel launched its air, sea and ground offensive in Gaza in response to Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into Israel, in which militants killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250 others.

UNRWA said in a post on X that on International Women's Day, "the women in Gaza continue to endure the consequences of this brutal war." Many of those killed are mothers who leave families behind, the agency said.

The agency said some of the women are giving birth without basic medical assistance. It said many lack menstrual hygiene products and privacy in exceptionally unsanitary living conditions.

A top EU official says a ship is leaving for Gaza as test of new humanitarian corridor

By MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS Associated Press

NICOSIA, Cyprus (AP) — A ship will head to Gaza on Friday carrying humanitarian aid, the European Commission president said, as international donors launch a sea corridor to supply the territory, which faces widespread hunger and shortages of other essential supplies after nearly five months of war.

A ship belonging to Spain's Open Arms will make a pilot voyage to test the sea corridor, Ursula von der Leyen told reporters in Cyprus, where she's inspecting preparations for the sea corridor. It's been waiting

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at Cyprus's port of Larnaca waiting for permission to deliver food aid from World Central Kitchen, a U.S. charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés.

She said the EU, together with the U.S., the United Arab Emirates and other involved partner countries are launching the sea corridor to deliver large quantities of aid to Gaza to respond to a "humanitarian catastrophe," speaking at a news conference with Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides.

Efforts to dramatically ramp up aid deliveries signaled growing frustration with Israel's conduct in the war in the United States and Europe.

The previous day, U.S. President Joe Biden announced a plan to open an offshore port to help deliver aid, underscoring how the United States is having to go around Israel, its main Mideast ally and the top recipient of U.S. military aid, to get aid into Gaza, including through airdrops that started last week. Israel accuses Hamas of commandeering some aid deliveries.

Efforts to set up a sea route for aid deliveries come amid mounting alarm over the spread of hunger among Gaza's 2.3 million people. Hunger is most acute in northern Gaza, which has been isolated by Israeli forces for months and suffered long cutoffs of food supply deliveries.

After months of warnings over the risk of famine in Gaza under Israel's bombardment, offensives and siege, hospital doctors have reported 20 malnutrition-related deaths at two northern Gaza hospitals.

While reiterating his support for Israel, Biden used his State of the Union speech to reiterate demands that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to allow in more aid to Gaza.

"To the leadership of Israel, I say this: Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip," Biden declared before Congress. He also repeated calls for Israel to do more to protect civilians in the fighting, and to work toward Palestinian statehood as the only long-term solution to Israeli-Palestinian violence.

U.S. officials said it will likely be weeks before the Gaza pier is operational.

Aid groups have said their efforts to deliver desperately needed supplies to Gaza have been hampered 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 isolated north.

Sigrid Kaag, the U.N. senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, told reporters late Thursday that air and sea deliveries cannot make up for a shortage of supply routes on land.

EU Commission spokesman Balazs Ujvari said on Wednesday the bloc would consider air drops, but this would be a last resort and cannot replace ground access to the enclave.

Ujvari said the EU has so far carried out around 40 flights to deliver aid to Gaza, primarily through Egypt.

Meanwhile, efforts to reach a cease-fire before Ramadan appeared stalled. Hamas said Thursday that its delegation had left Cairo, where talks were being held, until next week.

International mediators had hoped to alleviate some of the immediate crisis with a six-week cease-fire, which would have seen Hamas release some of the Israeli hostages it is holding, Israel release some Palestinian prisoners and aid groups be given access to to get a major influx of assistance into Gaza.

Palestinian militants are believed to be holding around 100 hostages and the remains of 30 others captured during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, in which militants killed about 1,200 people in Israel and took some 250 hostages. Several dozen hostages were freed in a weeklong November truce, and about 30 are believed to be dead.

Egyptian officials said Hamas has agreed to 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, while Israel wants to confine the negotiations to the more limited agreement.

The officials 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.

Behind the doors of a Chinese hacking company, a sordid culture fueled by influence, alcohol and sex

By DAKE KANG and ZEN SOO Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The hotel was spacious. It was upscale. It had a karaoke bar. The perfect venue, the CEO of the Chinese hacking company thought, to hold a Lunar New Year banquet currying favor with government officials. There was just one drawback, his top deputy said.

"Who goes there?" the deputy wrote. "The girls are so ugly."

So goes the sordid wheeling and dealing that takes place behind the scenes in China's hacking industry, as revealed in a highly unusual leak last month of internal documents from a private contractor linked to China's government and police. China's hacking industry, the documents reveal, suffers from shady business practices, disgruntlement over pay and work quality, and poor security protocols.

Private hacking contractors are companies that steal data from other countries to sell to the Chinese authorities. Over the past two decades, Chinese state security's demand for overseas intelligence has soared, giving rise to a vast network of these private hackers-for-hire companies that have infiltrated hundreds of systems outside China.

Though the existence of these hacking contractors is an open secret in China, little was known about how they operate. But the leaked documents from a firm called I-Soon have pulled back the curtain, revealing a seedy, sprawling industry where corners are cut and rules are murky and poorly enforced in the quest to make money.

Leaked chat records show I-Soon executives wooing officials over lavish dinners and late night binge drinking. They collude with competitors to rig bidding for government contracts. They pay thousands of dollars in "introduction fees" to contacts who bring them lucrative projects. I-Soon has not commented on the documents.

Mei Danowski, a cybersecurity analyst who wrote about I-Soon on her blog, Natto Thoughts, said the documents show that China's hackers for hire work much like any other industry in China.

"It is profit-driven," Danowski said. "It is subject to China's business culture — who you know, who you dine and wine with, and who you are friends with."

HACKING THAT'S STYLED AS PATRIOTIC

China's hacking industry rose from the country's early hacker culture, first appearing in the 1990s as citizens bought computers and went online.

I-Soon's founder and CEO, Wu Haibo, was among them. Wu was a member of China's first hacktivist group, Green Army — a group known informally as the "Whampoa Academy" after a famed Chinese military school.

Wu and some other hackers distinguished themselves by declaring themselves "red hackers" — patriots who offered their services to the Chinese Communist Party, in contrast to the freewheeling, anarchist and anti-establishment ethos popular among many coders.

In 2010, Wu founded I-Soon in Shanghai. Interviews he gave to Chinese media depict a man determined to bolster his country's hacking capacity to catch up with rivals. In one 2011 interview, Wu lamented that China still lagged far behind the United States: "There are many technology enthusiasts in China, but there are very few enlightened people."

With the spread of the internet, China's hacking-for-hire industry boomed, emphasizing espionage and intellectual property theft.

High-profile hacks by Chinese state agents, including one at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management where personal data on 22 million existing or prospective federal employees was stolen, got so serious that then-President Barack Obama personally complained to Chinese leader Xi Jinping. They agreed in 2015 to cut back on espionage.

For a couple of years, the intrusions subsided. But I-Soon and other private hacking outfits soon grew more active than ever, providing Chinese state security forces cover and deniability. I-Soon is "part of an ecosystem of contractors that has links to the Chinese patriotic hacking scene," said John Hultquist, chief

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analyst of Google's Mandiant cybersecurity unit.

These days, Chinese hackers are a formidable force.

In May 2023, Microsoft disclosed that a Chinese state-sponsored hacking group affiliated with China's People's Liberation Army called "Volt Typhoon" was targeting critical infrastructure such as telecommunications and ports in Guam, Hawaii, and elsewhere and could be laying the groundwork for disruption in the event of conflict.

Today, hackers such as those at I-Soon outnumber FBI cybersecurity staff by "at least 50 to one," FBI director Christopher Wray said January at a conference in Munich.

DOCUMENTS REVEAL A SEEDY STATE-LED INDUSTRY

Though I-Soon boasted about its hacking prowess in slick marketing PowerPoint presentations, the real business took place at hotpot parties, late night drinking sessions and poaching wars with competitors, leaked records show. A picture emerges of a company enmeshed in a seedy, sprawling industry that relies heavily on connections to get things done.

I-Soon leadership discussed buying gifts and which officials liked red wine. They swapped tips on who was a lightweight, and who could handle their liquor.

I-Soon executives paid "introduction fees" for lucrative projects, chat records show, including tens of thousands of RMB (thousands of dollars) to a man who landed them a 285,000 RMB (\$40,000) contract with police in Hebei province. To sweeten the deal, I-Soon's chief operating officer, Chen Cheng, suggested arranging the man a drinking and karaoke session with women.

"He likes to touch girls," Chen wrote.

It wasn't just officials they courted. Competitors, too, were targets of wooing over late night drinking sessions. Some were partners — subcontractors or collaborators on government projects. Others were hated rivals who constantly poached their staff. Often, they were both.

One, Chinese cybersecurity giant Qi Anxin, was especially loathed, despite being one of I-Soon's key investors and business partners.

"Qi Anxin's HR is a green tea bitch who seduces our young men everywhere and has no morals," COO Chen wrote to Wu, the CEO, using a Chinese internet slur that refers to innocent-looking but ambitious young women.

I-Soon also has a complicated relationship with Chengdu 404, a competitor charged by the U.S. Department of Justice for hacking over 100 targets worldwide. They worked with 404 and drank with their executives but lagged on payments to the company and were eventually sued over a software development contract, Chinese court records show.

The source of the I-Soon documents is unclear, and executives and Chinese police are investigating. And though Beijing has repeatedly denied involvement in offensive hacking, the leak illustrates I-Soon and other hacking companies' deep ties with the Chinese state.

For example, chat records show China's Ministry of Public Security gave companies access to proofs of concept of so-called "zero days", the industry term for a previously unknown software security hole. Zero days are prized because they can be exploited until detected. I-Soon company executives debated how to obtain them. They are regularly discovered at an annual Chinese state-sponsored hacking competition.

In other records, executives discussed sponsoring hacking competitions at Chinese universities to scout for new talent.

Many of I-Soon's clients were police in cities across China, a leaked contract list showed. I-Soon scouted for databases they thought would sell well with officers, such as Vietnamese traffic data to the southeast province of Yunnan, or data on exiled Tibetans to the Tibetan regional government.

At times, I-Soon hacked on demand. One chat shows two parties discussing a potential "long-term client" interested in data from several government offices related to an unspecified "prime minister."

A Chinese state body, the Chinese Academy of Sciences, also owns a small stake in I-Soon through a Tibetan investment fund, Chinese corporate records show.

I-Soon proclaimed their patriotism to win new business. Top executives discussed participating in China's poverty alleviation scheme — one of Chinese leader Xi Jinping's signature initiatives — to make connec-

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tions. I-Soon CEO Wu suggested his COO become a member of Chengdu's People's Political Consultative Conference, a government advisory body comprised of scientists, entrepreneurs, and other prominent members of society. And in interviews with state media, Wu quoted Mencius, a Chinese philosopher, casting himself as a scholar concerned with China's national interest.

But despite Wu's professed patriotism, leaked chat records tell a more complicated story. They depict a competitive man motivated to get rich.

"You can't be Lei Feng," Wu wrote in private messages, referring to a long-dead Communist worker held up in propaganda for generations as a paragon of selflessness. "If you don't make money, being famous is useless."

LAX SECURITY, POOR PAY AMONG HACKING WORKERS

China's booming hackers-for-hire industry has been hit by the country's recent economic downturn, leading to thin profits, low pay and an exodus of talent, the leaked documents show.

I-Soon lost money and struggled with cash flow issues, falling behind on payments to subcontractors. In the past few years, the pandemic hit China's economy, causing police to pull back on spending that hurt I-Soon's bottom line. "The government has no money," I-Soon's COO wrote in 2020.

Staff are often poorly paid. In a salary document dated 2022, most staff on I-Soon's safety evaluation and software development teams were paid just 5,600 yuan (\$915) to 9,000 yuan (\$1,267) a month, with only a handful receiving more than that. In the documents, I-Soon officials acknowledged the low pay and worried about the company's reputation.

Low salaries and pay disparities caused employees to complain, chat records show. Leaked employee lists show most I-Soon staff held a degree from a vocational training school, not an undergraduate degree, suggesting lower levels of education and training. Sales staff reported that clients were dissatisfied with the quality of I-Soon data, making it difficult to collect payments.

I-Soon is a fraction of China's hacking ecosystem. The country boasts world-class hackers, many employed by the Chinese military and other state institutions. But the company's troubles reflect broader issues in China's private hacking industry. The country's cratering economy, Beijing's tightening controls and the growing role of the state has led to an exodus of top hacking talent, four cybersecurity analysts and Chinese industry insiders told The Associated Press.

"China is no longer the country we used to know. A lot of highly skilled people have been leaving," said one industry insider, declining to be named to speak on a sensitive topic. Under Xi, the person added, the growing role of the state in China's technology industry has emphasized ideology over competence, impeded pay and made access to officials pivotal.

A major issue, people say, is that most Chinese officials lack the technical literacy to verify contractor claims. So hacking companies prioritize currying favor over delivering excellence.

In recent years, Beijing has heavily promoted China's tech industry and the use of technology in government, part of a broader strategy to facilitate the country's rise. But much of China's data and cybersecurity work has been contracted out to smaller subcontractors with novice programmers, leading to poor digital practices and large leaks of data.

Despite the clandestine nature of I-Soon's work, the company has surprisingly lax security protocols. I-Soon's offices in Chengdu, for example, have minimal security and are open to the public, despite posters on the walls of its offices reminding employees that "to keep the country and the party's secrets is every citizen's required duty." The leaked files show that top I-Soon executives communicated frequently on WeChat, which lacks end-to-end encryption.

The documents do show that staff are screened for political reliability. One metric, for example, shows that I-Soon checks whether staff have any relatives overseas, while another shows that employees are classified according to whether they are members of China's ruling Communist Party.

Still, Danowski, the cybersecurity analyst, says many standards in China are often "just for show." But at the end of the day, she added, it may not matter.

"It's a little sloppy. The tools are not that impressive. But the Ministry of Public Security sees that you

get the job done," she said of I-Soon. "They will hire whoever can get the job done."

France to seal the right to abortion in its constitution as world marks International Women's Day

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's leadership will use a press from the time of Napoleon to seal the right to abortion into the country's constitution in a historic ceremony Friday that's open to the public and is designed to show support to women across the world on International Women's Day.

France is the first country to explicitly guarantee abortion rights in the national charter.

While abortion is a deeply divisive issue in the United States, it's legal in nearly all of Europe and overwhelmingly supported in France, where it's seen more as a question of public health rather than politics. French legislators approved the constitutional amendment on Monday in a 780-72 vote that was backed by many far-right lawmakers.

Friday's ceremony, held on the cobblestones of Vendome Plaza in Paris, is a key event on a day focused on advancing women's rights globally. Marches, protests and conferences are being held from Jakarta, Indonesia, to Mexico City and beyond.

The French constitutional amendment has been hailed by women's rights advocates around the world, including places where women struggle to access birth control or maternal health care. French President Emmanuel Macron called it a direct result of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2022 rescinding long-held abortion rights.

Macron's critics questioned why he pursued the measure in a country with no obvious threat to abortion rights but where women face a multitude of other problems.

While some French women saw the step as a major win, others said that in reality not every French woman has access to abortion.

"It's a smokescreen," Arya Meroni, 32, said of the event.

"The government is destroying our health care system, many family planning clinics have closed," she said at an annual "Feminist Night March" in Paris on the eve of International Women's Day.

France has a persistently high rate of women killed by their partners and challenges remain in prosecuting sexual abuse against women by powerful celebrities and other men. French women also see lower pay and pensions — especially women who are not white.

Macron's government said the abortion amendment was important to avoid a U.S.-like scenario for women in France, as hard-right groups are gaining ground and seeking to turn back the clock on freedoms around Europe.

Macron will preside over the constitutional ceremony. Justice Minister Eric Dupond-Moretti will use a 100-kilogram (220-pound) press from 1810 to imprint the amendment in France's 1958 constitution.

It will include the phrase, "the freedom of women to have recourse to an abortion, which is guaranteed." The ceremony will be held outdoors with the public invited, in another first.

France follows in the footsteps of the former Yugoslavia, whose 1974 constitution included the phrase: "A person is free to decide on having children." Yugoslavia's successor states retained similar language in their constitutions, though they did not spell out guaranteed abortion rights.

In other events Friday:

In Ireland, voters will decide whether to change the constitution to remove passages referring to women's domestic duties and broadening the definition of the family.

In Russia, where the United Nations says human rights have deteriorated since the military's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin saluted Russian women fighting in the war and those waiting at home for their loved ones who had been deployed.

Protesters in Istanbul plan to call attention to violence against women, and rallies are expected in many cities. Protests in Turkey are often political and, at times, violent, rooted in women's efforts to improve their rights as workers. This year's global theme is "Inspire Inclusion."

Indonesian demonstrators demanded adoption of the International Labor Organization's conventions concerning gender equality and eliminating workplace violence and harassment. Labor rights groups in Thailand marched to the Government House to petition for better work conditions, and activists marching against violence in the Philippine capital were stopped by police near the presidential palace, sparking a brief scuffle.

India's government cut the price of cooking gas cylinders by 100 rupees (\$1.20) with Prime Minister Narendra Modi posting on social media that the move was "in line with our commitment to empowering women."

The United Nations children's agency said in a report released on International Women's Day that more than 230 million women and girls around the world have undergone female genital mutilation. The number has increased by 30 million in the past eight years, it said.

"We're also seeing a worrying trend that more girls are subjected to the practice at younger ages, many before their fifth birthday. That further reduces the window to intervene," said UNICEF Executive Director Catherine Russell.

Officially recognized by the United Nations in 1977, International Women's Day is a national holiday in about 20 countries, including Russia, Ukraine and Afghanistan.

Biden uses feisty State of the Union to contrast with Trump, sell voters on a second term

By ZEKE MILLER and SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden delivered a defiant argument for a second term in his State of the Union speech Thursday night, lacing into GOP front-runner Donald Trump for espousing "resentment, revenge and retribution" and for jeopardizing freedom at home and abroad.

Reveling in the political moment, Biden fired multiple broadsides at "my predecessor" without ever mentioning Trump by name — 13 times in all — raising his voice repeatedly as he worked to quell voter concerns about his age and job performance while sharpening the contrast with his all-but-certain November rival.

The scrappy tone from Biden was a sharp break from his often humdrum daily appearances and was intended to banish doubts about whether the 81-year-old president, the country's oldest ever, is still up to the job.

For 68 minutes in the House chamber, Biden goaded Republicans over their policies on immigration, taxes and more, invited call-and-response banter with fellow Democrats and seemed to relish the fight.

"I know I may not look like it, but I've been around a while," Biden deadpanned. "And when you get to my age certain things become clearer than ever before."

Noting he was born during World War II and came of political age during the upheaval of the 1960s, Biden declared: "My lifetime has taught me to embrace freedom and democracy. A future based on the core values that have defined America: honesty, decency, dignity, equality. To respect everyone. To give everyone a fair shot. To give hate no safe harbor. Now some other people my age see a different story: an American story of resentment, revenge, and retribution. That's not me."

The president linked Trump's praise for those who overran the Capitol in an attempt to subvert the 2020 election with antidemocratic threats abroad.

"Freedom and democracy are under attack both at home and overseas at the very same time," Biden said as he appealed for Congress to support Ukraine's efforts to defend itself against Russia's two-year-old invasion. "History is watching."

Biden directly referenced the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol, calling out those who have played it down.

"My predecessor — and some of you here — seek to bury the truth about Jan. 6 — I will not do that," Biden said. "This is a moment to speak the truth and to bury the lies. Here's a simple truth. You can't love your country only when you win."

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The State of the Union address is the 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 — almost certain to be Biden's largest audience of the year. Biden knew he would be watched not just for his message, but for whether he could deliver it with vigor and command.

Aides said Biden was aiming to prove his doubters wrong by flashing his combative side and trying to needle Republicans over positions he believes are out of step with the country, particularly on access to abortion, but also tax policy and healthcare.

Taking a victory lap in selling his legislative accomplishments, including funding to bolster manufacturing of computer chips nationwide, Biden veered from his prepared script to take a dig at Republicans who voted against such policies but nonetheless take credit for them back home.

"If any of you don't want that money in your districts," Biden said, "just let me know."

The president was 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 to support Israel's fight against Hamas.

Johnson urged Republicans in a private meeting Wednesday to show "decorum" during the speech, but he appeared to have limited success. A number of House Republicans began to stand up and leave the chamber as Biden discussed raising taxes on billionaires and corporations. Others remained in their chairs and shook their heads, while Johnson didn't disguise his emotions, raising his eyebrows and occasionally rolling his eyes.

Biden engaged in a loud call and response with lawmakers as he rhetorically questioned whether the tax code was fair and whether billionaires and corporations need "another \$2 trillion in tax breaks," as he charged Republicans want.

Biden also highlighted his efforts to fight "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 hoped to show consumers that Biden is fighting for them.

Congressional Republican leaders showcased one of their newest lawmakers through the State of the Union rebuttal, hoping to make a generational contrast with Biden. Alabama Sen. Katie Britt, the youngest Republican woman elected to the Senate, painted a picture of a nation that "seems to be slipping away" and one where "our families are hurting."

"Right now, our commander-in-chief is not in command. The free world deserves better than a dithering and diminished leader," Britt said, speaking deliberately in an address from her home kitchen. "America deserves leaders who recognize that secure borders, stable prices, safe streets, and a strong defense are the cornerstones of a great nation."

Biden, by contrast, insisted the state of the union was "strong and getting stronger."

Trump responded to the speech in real time on his Truth Social site, defending himself and blasting Biden for what he said "may be the Angriest, Least Compassionate, and Worst State of the Union Speech ever made. It was an Embarrassment to our Country!"

This year, Biden faced heightened emotions — particularly among his base supporters — over his staunch backing for Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza. Biden had initially hoped a short-term cease-fire would be in place by the speech to allow for the release of more hostages and surge sorely needed aid into the territory. The White House blames Hamas for not yet accepting a deal brokered by the U.S. and its allies.

"Israel must allow more aid into Gaza and ensure that humanitarian workers aren't caught in the cross-fire," Biden said, delivering a warning that Israel should not use aid as a "bargaining chip" with Hamas, even as he reaffirmed Israel's right to defend itself from attacks by the militant group.

A slew of Democrats and Republicans wore pins and stickers in honor of the Israeli hostages still being held captive in Gaza. Meanwhile, several House progressives wore Palestinian keffiyehs, the black and white checkered scarfs that have come to symbolize Palestinian solidarity. Heading to the address, Biden's motorcade took a circuitous route to the Capitol, as hundreds of pro-cess-fire demonstrators tried to

disrupt its path from the White House.

Immigration was another flashpoint during the night.

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.

As Biden ran through the endorsements by conservative groups of the legislation, some in the audience appeared to yell and interject, and Biden shot back, "I know you know how to read."

As Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, wearing pro-Trump paraphernalia, continued to shout at Biden, the president held up a white button that the Georgia Republican had handed him earlier bearing the name of the slain Laken Riley. Authorities say the Georgia nursing student was killed by a Venezuelan national who unlawfully crossed into the U.S. in September 2022.

"Laken Riley," Biden said, calling her an "innocent young woman who was killed by an illegal." He expressed condolences to her family, saying his heart goes out to them.

Access to abortion and fertility treatments was also 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.

"To my friends across the aisle, don't keep families waiting any longer," Biden said, recognizing Latorya Beasley, a guest of first lady Jill Biden's whose IVF treatments were cancelled after the Alabama ruling. "Guarantee the right to IVF nationwide!"

Another guest was Kate Cox, who sued Texas, and ultimately left her home state, to obtain an emergency abortion after a severe fetal anomaly was detected, in a case that drew national attention.

After months of warnings that Israel's siege is causing famine, children begin to die in Gaza

By MOHAMED JAHJOUH, JACK JEFFERY and LEE KEATH Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — After months of warnings over the risk of famine in Gaza under Israel's bombardment, offensives and siege, children are starting to die.

Hunger is most acute in northern Gaza, which has been isolated by Israeli forces and has suffered long cutoffs of food supply deliveries. At least 20 people have died from malnutrition and dehydration at the north's Kamal Adwan and Shifa hospitals, according to the Health Ministry. Most of the dead are children — including ones as old as 15 — as well as a 72-year-old man.

Particularly vulnerable children are also beginning to succumb in the south, where access to aid is more regular.

At the Emirati Hospital in Rafah, 16 premature babies have died of malnutrition-related causes over the past five weeks, one of the senior doctors told The Associated Press.

"The child deaths we feared are here," Adele Khodr, UNICEF's Middle East chief, said in a statement earlier this week.

Malnutrition is generally slow to bring death, striking children and the elderly first. Other factors can play a role. Underfed mothers have difficulty breastfeeding children. Diarrheal diseases, rampant in Gaza due to lack of clean water and sanitation, leave many unable to retain any of the calories they ingest, said Anuradha Narayan, a UNICEF child nutrition expert. Malnutrition weakens immune systems, sometimes leading to death from other diseases.

Israel largely shut off entry of food, water, medicine and other supplies after launching its assault on Gaza following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel — allowing only a trickle of aid trucks through two crossings in the south.

Israel has blamed the burgeoning hunger in Gaza on U.N. agencies, saying they fail to distribute supplies piling up at Gaza crossings. UNRWA, the largest U.N. agency in Gaza, says Israel restricts some goods and imposes cumbersome inspections that slow entry. Also, distribution within Gaza has been crippled, U.N.

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officials say convoys are regularly turned back by Israeli forces, the military often refuses safe passage amid fighting, and aid is snatched off trucks by hungry Palestinians on route to drop-off points.

With alarm growing, Israel bent to U.S. and international pressure, saying this week it will open crossings for aid directly into northern Gaza and allow sea shipments.

DESPERATION IN THE NORTH

Conditions in the north, largely under Israeli control for months, have become desperate. Entire districts of Gaza City and surrounding areas have been reduced to rubble by Israeli forces. Still, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians remain.

Meat, milk, vegetables and fruit are nearly impossible to find, according to several residents who spoke to the AP. The few items in shops are random and sold at hugely inflated prices — mainly nuts, snacks and spices. People have taken barrels of chocolate from bakeries and are selling tiny smears of it.

Most people eat a weed that crops up in empty lots, known as "khubaiza." Fatima Shaheen, a 70-year-old who lives with her two sons and their children in northern Gaza, said boiled khubaiza is her main meal, and her family has also ground up food meant for rabbits to use as flour.

"We are dying for a piece of bread," Shaheen said.

Qamar Ahmed said his 18-month-old daughter, Mira, eats mostly boiled weeds. "There is no food that suits her age," said Ahmed, a researcher with Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor and an economic journalist. His 70-year-old father gives his own food to Ahmed's young son, Oleyan. "We try to make him eat and he refuses," Ahmed said of his father.

Mahmoud Shalaby, who lives in the Jabaliya refugee camp, said he saw a man in the market give a bag of potato chips to his two sons and tell them to make it last for breakfast and lunch. "Everyone know I has lost weight," said Shalaby, the senior program manager for the aid group Medical Aid for Palestinians in northern Gaza.

Dr. Husam Abu Safiya, the acting head of Kamal Adwan Hospital, told the AP his staff currently treats 300 to 400 children a day, and that 75% of them are suffering from malnutrition.

Recent airdrops of aid by the U.S. and other countries provide far lower amounts of aid than truck deliveries, which have become rare and sometimes dangerous. UNRWA says Israeli authorities haven't allowed it to deliver supplies to the north since Jan. 23. The World Food Organization, which had paused deliveries because of safety concerns, said the military forced its first convoy to the north in two weeks to turn back Tuesday.

When the Israeli military organized a food delivery to Gaza City last week, troops guarding the convoy opened fire — on a perceived threat, the military says — as thousands of hungry Palestinians mobbed the trucks. Some 120 people were killed in the shooting, as well as by being trampled in the chaos.

WORSENING SOUTH

Yazan al-Kafarna, 10, died Monday after almost a week of unsuccessful treatment in Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah. Photos of the boy showed him extremely emaciated, with twig-like limbs and deep-sunk eyes in a face shriveled to his skull.

Al-Kafarna was born with cerebral palsy, a neurological condition that affects motor skills and can make swallowing and eating difficult. His parents said they struggled to find food he could eat, including soft fruits and eggs, since fleeing their home in the north.

He died due to extreme muscle wastage caused primarily by lack of food, according to Dr. Jabr al-Shair, head of the children's emergency department at Abu Youssef Najjar Hospital.

On a recent day, around 80 malnourished children crowded the hospital's wards. Aya al-Fayoume, a 19-year-old mother displaced to Rafah, had brought her 3-month-old daughter, Nisreen, who has lost vast amounts of weight over the winter months, sick with persistent diarrhea and vomiting. On her diet of mainly canned goods, al-Fayoume said she doesn't produce enough breast milk for Nisreen.

"Everything I need is expensive or unavailable," she said.

Fresh food supplies in Rafah have dwindled, while its population has swelled to more than 1 million with displaced residents. The main thing available are canned goods, often found in aid packages.

At Emirati Hospital, Dr. Ahmed al-Shair, deputy head of the nursery unit, said the recent deaths of pre-

mature babies was rooted in malnutrition among mothers. Malnourishment and extreme stress are both factors causing premature, underweight births, and doctors say anecdotally cases have risen during the war, though the U.N. does not have statistics.

Al-Shair said premature babies are treated for several days to improve their weight. But then they are released home, which is often a tent with not enough heat, with mothers too malnourished to breastfeed and milk difficult to obtain. Parents sometimes give newborns plain water instead, which is often unclean, causing diarrhea.

Within days, the babies "are brought back to us in a terrible state. Some were brought already dead," al-Shair said. He said 14 babies at the hospital died in February and two more so far in March.

Currently, the hospital's wards have 44 babies under 10 days old with weights as low as 2 kilograms (4 pounds), some on life support. Every incubator has at least three premature babies in it, raising the risk of infection. Al-Shair said he fears some will meet the same fate when returned home.

"We treat them now but God knows what the future will be," he said.

Katie Britt calls Biden a 'diminished leader' in GOP response to the State of the Union

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sitting at her kitchen table in Alabama, Sen. Katie Britt called President Joe Biden a "dithering and diminished leader" and warned of a bleak American future under his presidency in the Republican rebuttal to his State of the Union address Thursday evening.

The first-term Alabama Republican, the youngest woman in the Senate, delivered a stinging election-year critique of the president. She argued that "the country we know and love seems to be slipping away" and appealed directly to her fellow mothers, who she said are probably "disgusted" with Washington.

Britt, a 42 year-old former congressional staffer and mother of two, was elected to the Senate in 2022 with former President Donald Trump's endorsement. She promised to come to Washington as a "momma on a mission" and has carved out a unique role in the GOP conference as an adviser to Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and an experienced former aide on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

It's the third year in a row that Republicans have picked a woman to speak to the nation after Biden leaves the podium — and Britt's remarks echo the same dark vision for the future under Biden and Democrats laid out by Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders in 2023 and Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds in 2022.

"For years, the left has coddled criminals and defunded the police — all while letting repeat offenders walk free," Britt said in her response. "The result is tragic but foreseeable — from our small towns to America's most iconic city streets, life is getting more and more dangerous."

She criticized Biden's foreign policy, including his chaotic 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan and talk of a renewed nuclear deal with Iran. She did not directly mention Ukraine's war with Russia, as Biden has aggressively pushed the Republican-led House to take up a Senate-passed aid package.

Britt's rebuttal came as her state has drawn national attention for a state Supreme Court ruling in February that frozen embryos can be considered children under state law. That ruling blocked access to in vitro fertilization at clinics across the state, but some said they would resume services after the state legislature passed legislation Wednesday shielding doctors from legal liability.

Britt has argued in support of the IVF services, calling Trump after the ruling. Trump, the party's front-runner for the GOP nomination, issued a statement hours later saying that he backs IVF.

In his speech, Biden called for nationwide protections for the practice. In her rebuttal, Britt stopped short of calling for new policy but reiterated her support for the practice, saying "we want to help loving moms and dads bring precious life into this world."

Britt, who has made immigration a top issue, also slammed the president on the border, calling his policies a "disgrace" that have led to higher numbers of border crossings during his presidency.

She noted that Biden mentioned slain Georgia nursing student Laken Riley during his speech, but said

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he "refused to take responsibility for his own actions." Police say Riley was killed by an immigrant in the country illegally.

"Mr. President, enough is enough. Innocent Americans are dying and you only have yourself to blame. Fulfill your oath of office," Britt said. "Reverse your policies and this crisis and stop the suffering."

Britt said "the free world deserves better than a dithering and diminished leader. America deserves leaders who recognize that secure borders, stable prices, safe streets and a strong defense are the cornerstones of a great nation."

She did not mention Trump, the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, whom Britt endorsed in December. But she said the country is at a crossroads, and "I know which choice our children deserve – and the choice the Republican Party is fighting for."

What is Ramadan and how do Muslims observe the Islamic holy month?

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Observant Muslims the world over will soon be united in a ritual of daily fasting from dawn to sunset as the Islamic holy month of Ramadan starts. For Muslims, it's a time of increased worship, charity and good deeds. Socially, it often brings families and friends together in festive gatherings around meals to break their fast. Ramadan is followed by the Islamic holiday of Eid al-Fitr.

This year, Ramadan comes as the latest Israel-Hamas war has killed thousands of Palestinians, left much of Gaza in ruins and created a humanitarian catastrophe, with many Palestinians there, especially in the devastated northern region, scrambling for food to survive. Some Muslims have been brainstorming how to remain mindful of the Palestinians' plight during Ramadan, including through making donations, saying prayers or incorporating Palestinian traditional symbols in how they mark the holy month.

WHEN IS RAMADAN?

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar; the month cycles through the seasons.

The start of the month traditionally depends on the sighting of the crescent moon; this year, the first day is expected to be on or around March 11.

Muslim communities may start Ramadan on different days, due to declarations by multiple Islamic authorities around the globe on whether the crescent has been sighted or different methodologies used to determine the start of the month.

WHY AND HOW DO MUSLIMS FAST?

Fasting is one of the Five Pillars of Islam, along with the profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, and pilgrimage.

Muslims see various meanings and lessons in observing the fast.

It's regarded as an act of worship to attain God-conscious piety and one of submission to God. The devout see benefits including practicing self-restraint, cultivating gratitude, growing closer to God, and feeling for the poor and hungry.

The daily fast in Ramadan includes abstaining from all food and drink; not even a sip of water is allowed from dawn to sunset before breaking the fast in a meal known as "iftar" in Arabic. Those fasting are expected to also refrain from bad deeds, such as gossiping, and increase good deeds.

Muslims typically stream into mosques for congregational prayers and dedicate more time for religious contemplation and the reading of the Quran, the Muslim holy book.

Charity is a hallmark of Ramadan. Among other ways of giving, many seek to provide iftar for the needy, distributing Ramadan boxes filled with pantry staples, handing out warm meals alongside such things as dates and juice or helping hold free communal meals.

Muslims eat a pre-dawn meal, called "suhoor," to hydrate and nurture their bodies ahead of the daily fast.

ARE THERE EXEMPTIONS FROM FASTING?

Yes. There are certain exemptions from fasting, such as for those who are unable to because of illness or travel. Those unable to fast due to being temporarily ill or traveling need to make up for the missed days of fasting later.

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WHAT ARE SOME CULTURAL AND SOCIAL TRADITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH RAMADAN?

Muslims are ethnically and racially diverse and not all Ramadan traditions are rooted in religion. Some customs may transcend borders, while others can differ across cultures.

Many social rituals center on gathering and socializing after the daily fast. Some Muslims decorate their homes, put out Ramadan-themed tableware and centerpieces or throng to markets and Ramadan bazaars.

In Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country, Ramadan is typically a festive time.

Colorful lanterns, in different shapes and sizes, dangle from children's hands and adorn homes or the entrances of buildings and stores. Ramadan songs may be played to welcome the month. So-called Ramadan tents, featuring food and entertainment, pop up to cater to gatherings.

Ramadan's soundscape in Egypt has traditionally included the pre-dawn banging on drums by a "me-saharati" who roams neighborhoods, calling out to the faithful, sometimes by name, to awake them for the suhoor meal.

NEW TV SHOWS, COMMUNAL MEALS

A line-up of new television shows is another fixture of the month in some countries, and advertisers compete for the attention of viewers.

In various regions, some Muslims worry that the month is being commercialized, and that an emphasis on decorations, TV shows, outings or lavish iftar banquets, especially in the social media era, can detract from Ramadan's religious essence. Others feel that a balance can be struck and that, done in moderation, such rituals are part of the month's festive spirit.

In Indonesia, the most populous Muslim-majority country, Ramadan rituals vary across regions, with some influenced by local cultures or other faith traditions.

Thousands of villagers who live on the slopes of Mount Merapi in Central Java welcome Ramadan with Nyadran, a Javanese ritual influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism that includes visiting, cleaning and decorating ancestors' graves.

People in Indonesia's deeply conservative Aceh province slaughter animals during Meugang festivities. The meat is cooked and shared in a communal feast with family, friends, the poor and orphans.

Hundreds of residents in Tangerang, a city just outside the capital of Jakarta, flock to the Cisadane River to wash their hair with rice straw shampoo and welcome the fasting month with a symbolic spiritual cleansing.

After evening prayers, many boys and girls across Sumatra island parade through the streets. They carry torches and play Islamic songs.

In India, home to more than 200 million Muslims making up a large minority group in the country, stalls lining many streets sell such things as dates, sweets and freshly cooked food. At night, some New Delhi neighborhoods become lively as Muslims head to mosques to attend prayers.

Some Indian Muslims also visit holy shrines dedicated to Sufi saints, which are decorated with lights and colorful flowers.

In the United States, home to a diverse, small but growing Muslim population, gathering at mosques and Islamic centers when possible for iftar meals and prayers provides many Muslim families with a sense of community. Some Muslims also organize or attend interfaith iftar meals.

Some big U.S. retailers have started catering to Ramadan shoppers, selling such things as Ramadan-themed decor.

How springing forward to daylight saving time could affect your health -- and how to prepare

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Most of America "springs forward" Sunday for daylight saving time and losing that hour of sleep can do more than leave you tired and cranky the next day. It also could harm your health.

Darker mornings and more evening light together knock your body clock out of whack — which means daylight saving time can usher in sleep trouble for weeks or longer. Studies have even found an uptick in

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heart attacks and strokes right after the March time change.

There are ways to ease the adjustment, including getting more sunshine to help reset your circadian rhythm for healthful sleep.

"Not unlike when one travels across many time zones, how long it can take is very different for different people," said Dr. Eduardo Sanchez of the American Heart Association. "Understand that your body is transitioning."

When does daylight saving time start?

Daylight saving time begins Sunday at 2 a.m., an hour of sleep vanishing in most of the U.S. The ritual will reverse on Nov. 3 when clocks "fall back" as daylight saving time ends.

Hawaii and most of Arizona don't make the spring switch, sticking to standard time year-round along with Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Worldwide, dozens of countries also observe daylight saving time, starting and ending at different dates.

Some people try to prepare for daylight saving time's sleep jolt by going to bed a little earlier two or three nights ahead. With a third of American adults already not getting the recommended seven hours of nightly shut-eye, catching up can be difficult.

What happens to your brain when it's lighter later?

The brain has a master clock that is set by exposure to sunlight and darkness. This circadian rhythm is a roughly 24-hour cycle that determines when we become sleepy and when we're more alert. The patterns change with age, one reason that early-to-rise youngsters evolve into hard-to-wake teens.

Morning light resets the rhythm. By evening, levels of a hormone called melatonin begin to surge, triggering drowsiness. Too much light in the evening — that extra hour from daylight saving time — delays that surge and the cycle gets out of sync.

Sleep deprivation is linked to heart disease, cognitive decline, obesity and numerous other problems. And that circadian clock affects more than sleep, also influencing things like heart rate, blood pressure, stress hormones and metabolism.

How does the time change affect your health?

Fatal car crashes temporarily jump the first few days after the spring time change, according to a study of U.S. traffic fatalities. The risk was highest in the morning, and researchers attributed it to sleep deprivation.

Then there's the cardiac connection. The American Heart Association points to studies that suggest an uptick in heart attacks on the Monday after daylight saving time begins, and in strokes for two days afterward.

Doctors already know that heart attacks, especially severe ones, are a bit more common on Mondays generally — and in the morning, when blood is more clot-prone.

It's not clear why the time change would add to the Monday connection, Sanchez said, although probably something about the abrupt circadian disruption exacerbates factors such as high blood pressure in people already at risk.

How to prepare for daylight saving time

Go to bed a little earlier Friday and Saturday nights, and try to get more morning light. Moving up daily routines, like dinner time or when you exercise, also may help cue your body to start adapting, sleep experts advise.

Afternoon naps and caffeine as well as evening light from phones and other electronic devices can make adjusting to an earlier bedtime even harder.

Stay tuned: Some health groups, including the American Medical Association and American Academy of Sleep Medicine, have said it's time to do away with time switches and that sticking with standard time year-round aligns better with the sun — and human biology.

Maine mass shooter had a brain injury. Experts say that doesn't explain his violence.

By HOLLY RAMER and MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Brain injury experts are cautioning against drawing conclusions from newly released and limited information about evidence of a brain injury in an Army reservist who killed 18 people last year in Maine's deadliest mass shooting.

Boston University researchers who analyzed a sample of Robert Card's brain tissue said Wednesday they found evidence of traumatic brain injury. The analysis, requested by the Maine medical examiner, found degeneration in the nerve fibers allowing communication between different areas of the brain, inflammation and small blood vessel injury, according to Dr. Ann McKee of the university's Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) Center.

Card had been an instructor at an Army hand grenade training range, where it is believed he was exposed to repeated low-level blasts. It is unknown if that caused Card's brain injury and what role the injury may have played in his declining mental health before he opened fire at a bowling alley and bar in Lewiston on Oct. 25.

McKee made no connection between the injury and Card's violent actions.

"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 a statement released by the Card family.

Dr. Alexandra Filippakis, a neurologist who has treated members of the military and others for traumatic brain injuries, said Thursday she would not conclude brain injury played a role in Card's behavior based on McKee's description of her findings.

"TBI is a very broad diagnosis, and it looks different in different people. Not everybody has the same symptoms. Not everybody has the same severity of symptoms," Filippakis said. "There's no way that you could, with certainty, link that to a particular action."

Filippakis, who works at Wentworth-Douglass Hospital in Dover, New Hampshire, said the connectivity damage McKee described is common and can have many causes, including aging, high blood pressure and smoking.

"That could mean so many different things," she said. "You certainly can't draw any conclusions from that piece of information."

But James Stone, a University of Virginia radiologist who has studied repeated low-level blast exposure in the military, said changes to Card's brain "seemed pretty profound."

Such injuries can affect impulse control and emotional regulation, he said, and though he doesn't know if those parts of Card's brain were affected, "it's certainly hard to imagine that the level of brain changes that we're seeing in some way did not contribute to his behavior."

Chris Dulla, a professor and interim chair of neuroscience at Tufts School of Medicine, said he was surprised that researchers found no evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy, which has plagued many professional football players.

"It doesn't seem to be as cut and dry," he said. "What that speaks to is how varied traumatic brain injuries are, and how difficult they can be to diagnose, even in the postmortem brain sample, when you can study every detail."

The findings highlight the connection between brain injuries and underlying psychological conditions, Dulla said.

"If you're already struggling with some kind of psychiatric condition or at risk for some kind of psychiatric problem, brain injuries might be something that can kind of push you over the edge and have that change really come front and center when it might have been sort of a minor underlying thing before," he said.

Experts say traumatic brain injury can lead to headaches, mood changes, memory loss and sleep issues. Stone said his research has shown repeated exposure to even low-level blasts can result in changes to the brain. The Department of Defense has been "very engaged" in studying the issue, Stone said, and a panel

on which he serves is expected to release new guidelines in May for both the U.S. military and NATO allies. "They've been very proactive about this," he said.

An Army spokesperson on Thursday called the lab findings regarding Card "concerning" and said they "underscore the Army's need to do all it can to protect Soldiers against blast-induced injury."

In addition to updating the guidance on risk mitigation, the Army plans to launch a public safety campaign and will begin requiring documentation of training environments and tracking of exposed personnel.

Sean Hodgson, Card's close friend and a fellow reservist, said Thursday that safety was a top priority at their training range and the blast exercises were well controlled.

"You feel it through you, but it's mild," he said.

"I never heard him complain about the blasts," Hodgson said. "In my opinion it's one of the safest ranges to be on. I never heard him complain about the blasts."

Six weeks before the shooting, Hodgson texted an Army supervisor about his growing concerns about Card, saying, "I believe he's going to snap and do a mass shooting."

That Sept. 15 message came months after relatives warned police that Card had grown paranoid and said they were concerned about his access to guns.

Card was hospitalized in a psychiatric unit for two weeks in July after shoving a fellow reservist and locking himself in a motel room. In August, the Army barred him from handling weapons while on duty and declared him nondeployable.

In their first public comments since the shooting, Card's family members apologized Wednesday for the attack, saying they are heartbroken for the victims, survivors and their loved ones.

"We are hurting for you and with you, and it is hard to put into words how badly we wish we could undo what happened," they said in a statement. "While we cannot go back, we are releasing the findings of Robert's brain study with the goal of supporting ongoing efforts to learn from this tragedy to ensure it never happens again."

With dissent stifled, some Russians help political prisoners by writing them letters of support

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — For Margarita, a 33-year-old event planner in St. Petersburg, the prison death of opposition leader Alexei Navalny was devastating news that left her dispirited and longing to take some sort of action.

But she said she had "no courage or strength" to stage a protest in Russia's increasingly repressive climate, where even the most innocuous expression of dissent can land people in jail.

Then she saw a call by activists urging people to write letters to female political prisoners for International Women's Day on March 8. She bought postcards for herself and several acquaintances to sign in what she saw as a safe and simple expression of support for the growing number of those imprisoned for their beliefs.

It's an activity that has gained significant interest, not just from those who are too intimidated to take to the streets at home but also from those Russians who fled the country as President Vladimir Putin intensified his crackdown on dissent. He is seeking another six years in office in an election this month that he is all but certain to win.

"It's a huge movement," journalist and prisoner rights activist Zoya Svetova told The Associated Press. "It is, in a sense, resistance in its own way."

Memorial, Russia's oldest and most prominent rights group, says the number of political prisoners in the country has grown from 40 in 2014 to nearly 680 this year. OVD-Info, another prominent rights group, estimates there are 1,143 people behind bars on politically motivated charges.

The number of prosecutions grew rapidly after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 and public criticism of the war was outlawed.

"I can easily imagine myself in the shoes of someone who was detained and prosecuted on politically

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motivated charges," said Margarita, who asked not to be identified by her surname for fear of retribution. Receiving "words of support even from people I don't know" would be encouraging, she added.

Some take part quietly, like Margarita, with a small group of friends who mail their letters and postcards.

Others opt for online services used by many penal colonies and detention centers. These work like regular email, in which greetings to inmates are printed by prison officials. Handwritten replies from prisoners are scanned and emailed back to the original senders.

Despite efforts to isolate some political prisoners — Navalny repeatedly complained about failing to receive letters from his wife — and the general secrecy of the penal system, these services have operated unimpaired so far.

Multiple grassroots groups host regular letter-writing events, providing guidance to those who haven't done it before.

One such organization, "Letters of Freedom," hosts regular evening sessions in the capitals of Armenia and Georgia, and helps others in Russia and abroad hold similar events. Activists keep a detailed, up-to-date database of prisoners, their addresses and even interests. Founder Ivan Lyubimov said the group keeps in touch with 80 political prisoners, and 105 responded to activists at least once.

It's a personal mission for Lyubimov, a graphics designer from Yekaterinburg who left Russia for Armenia in late 2022. He spent a month in jail for anti-war protests and knows how important it is to receive support from the outside.

The group provides a list of prisoners and addresses, tips on how to write a letter to someone you haven't met, and other advice, including prison censorship rules.

It ships handwritten letters to Russia, where volunteers mail them to prisons and relay any responses. The mail can take about two months, Lyubimov said, but it's cheaper to use than the online services.

The group posts some of the responses from prisoners on social media, along with announcements of thematic letter-writing campaigns, like marking New Year's and International Women's Day holidays, or what prisoners might want to read in the letters.

The letters must be written in Russian, without profane language and avoiding topics that might not make it past the censors or put both prisoners and senders at risk, including criticism of authorities. The group urges caution about references to the war in Ukraine.

Prisoners "live in an information vacuum," so any news or current events are of interest, said Alexander Mishuk of Letters of Freedom.

"In general, we try to focus on more human, simple things, talking about life, things that happen to us, something positive. We try to focus on things that we can have in common with the person," he said.

Organizers often ask participants simply to sign postcards of birthday greetings to political prisoners, said Konstantin, an organizer in Berlin who spoke on condition that his last name not be used for fear of retribution.

They try to hold an event at least once a month, he said.

Daria Gorchakova, a Letters of Freedom activist in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, said the number of participants and organizers has been rising.

"As repressions grow harsher, it remains one of the few safe ways to support people who fell victim to these repressions and generally influence the situation somehow," she said, adding that while it won't stop the crackdown, it helps prisoners and also gives a sense of purpose to those writing the letters or organizing the campaigns.

Russia's liberal political party Yabloko hosts monthly letter-writing evenings in cities across Russia and gets positive feedback from inmates.

"Russian prison is a peculiar place, and for many, attention from the outside, from beyond the prison walls ... increases the level of safety," party chairman Nikolai Rybakov said.

On Feb. 29, Yabloko's Moscow office was crowded with people hunched over several desks, signing postcards and writing letters.

"We express our support, wish them health, wish them to take care," said David Davtyan, a Muscovite who attended. "They're the future of Russia, the free future of Russia that we all talk about, hope for and

that will inevitably come.”

Who sits behind the president? For Biden, it's a new face every year

WASHINGTON (AP) — During the State of the Union address, the House speaker and vice president sit behind the president. But there has been a new speaker every year under President Joe Biden. Former leader Nancy Pelosi lost the spot when Republicans secured a narrow lead in the chamber in during the 2022 midterm elections.

Then it was Kevin McCarthy, who was ousted last year after he backed a deal to keep the government funded.

Now, it's Mike Johnson in the seat. He was elected to the job in October after a stunning 21 days with no leader. It was the longest Congress was rudderless since 1962. That time it took 55 days to elect a new speaker.

Fake images made to show Trump with Black supporters highlight concerns around AI and elections

By MATT BROWN and DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — At first glance, images circulating online showing former President Donald Trump surrounded by groups of Black people smiling and laughing seem nothing out of the ordinary, but a look closer is telling.

Odd lighting and too-perfect details provide clues to the fact they were all generated using artificial intelligence. The photos, which have not been linked to the Trump campaign, emerged as Trump seeks to win over Black voters who polls show remain loyal to President Joe Biden.

The fabricated images, highlighted in a recent BBC investigation, provide further evidence to support warnings that the use of AI-generated imagery will only increase as the November general election approaches. Experts said they highlight the danger that any group — Latinos, women, older male voters — could be targeted with lifelike images meant to mislead and confuse as well as demonstrate the need for regulation around the technology.

In a report published this week, researchers at the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate used several popular AI programs to show how easy it is to create realistic deepfakes that can fool voters. The researchers were able to generate images of Trump meeting with Russian operatives, Biden stuffing a ballot box and armed militia members at polling places, even though many of these AI programs say they have rules to prohibit this kind of content.

The center analyzed some of the recent deepfakes of Trump and Black voters and determined that at least one was originally created as satire but was now being shared by Trump supporters as evidence of his support among Blacks.

Social media platforms and AI companies must do more to protect users from AI's harmful effects, said Imran Ahmed, the center's CEO and founder.

“If a picture is worth a thousand words, then these dangerously susceptible image generators, coupled with the dismal content moderation efforts of mainstream social media, represent as powerful a tool for bad actors to mislead voters as we've ever seen,” Ahmed said. “This is a wake-up call for AI companies, social media platforms and lawmakers — act now or put American democracy at risk.”

The images prompted alarm on both the right and left that they could mislead people about the former president's support among African Americans. Some in Trump's orbit have expressed frustration at the circulation of the fake images, believing that the manufactured scenes undermine Republican outreach to Black voters.

“If you see a photo of Trump with Black folks and you don't see it posted on an official campaign or surrogate page, it didn't happen,” said Diante Johnson, president of the Black Conservative Federation. “It's nonsensical to think that the Trump campaign would have to use AI to show his Black support.”

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Experts expect additional efforts to use AI-generated deepfakes to target specific voter blocs in key swing states, such as Latinos, women, Asian Americans and older conservatives, or any other demographic that a campaign hopes to attract, mislead or frighten. With dozens of countries holding elections this year, the challenges posed by deepfakes are a global issue.

In January, voters in New Hampshire received a robocall that mimicked Biden's voice telling them, falsely, that if they cast a ballot in that state's primary they would be ineligible to vote in the general election. A political consultant later acknowledged creating the robocall, which may be the first known attempt to use AI to interfere with a U.S. election.

Such content can have a corrosive effect even when it's not believed, according to a February study by researchers at Stanford University examining the potential impacts of AI on Black communities. When people realize they can't trust images they see online, they may start to discount legitimate sources of information.

"As AI-generated content becomes more prevalent and difficult to distinguish from human-generated content, individuals may become more skeptical and distrustful of the information they receive," the researchers wrote.

Even if it doesn't succeed in fooling a large number of voters, AI-generated content about voting, candidates and elections can make it harder for anyone to distinguish fact from fiction, causing them to discount legitimate sources of information and fueling a loss of trust that's undermining faith in democracy while widening political polarization.

While false claims about candidates and elections are nothing new, AI makes it faster, cheaper and easier than ever to craft lifelike images, video and audio. When released onto social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook or X, AI deepfakes can reach millions before tech companies, government officials or legitimate news outlets are even aware of their existence.

"AI simply accelerated and pressed fast forward on misinformation," said Joe Paul, a business executive and advocate who has worked to increase digital access among communities of color. Paul noted that Black communities often have "this history of mistrust" with major institutions, including in politics and media, that both make Black communities more skeptical of public narratives about them as well as fact-checking meant to inform the community.

Digital literacy and critical thinking skills are one defense against AI-generated misinformation, Paul said. "The goal is to empower folks to critically evaluate the information that they encounter online. The ability to think critically is a lost art among all communities, not just Black communities."

US jobs report for February is likely to show that hiring remains solid but slower

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's economy likely produced another month of healthy hiring in February, once again brushing aside the effects of high interest rates with unexpected ease.

When the Labor Department issues the monthly jobs report Friday, economists predict it will show that employers added a solid 200,000 jobs in February, according to a survey of economists by the data firm FactSet. Though that would be down from the blockbuster gains in December (333,000) and January (353,000), it would still be plenty high enough to outpace population growth and keep the unemployment rate near a half-century low.

Economists have projected that the jobless rate stayed at 3.7% in February. If so, it would mark the 25th straight month in which the unemployment rate has remained below 4% — the longest such streak since the 1960s.

The job market's health over the past three years, as the economy accelerated out of the pandemic recession, has been remarkably steady and strong. Now, though, there are signs it is cooling. Employers added 3.1 million jobs in 2023, a solid gain but down from 4.5 million in 2022 and a record 7.2 million in 2021. Job openings, while still relatively plentiful, are well below their peak.

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The deceleration in hiring, though, is being welcomed by the Federal Reserve, which might otherwise worry that a too-hot job market would force companies to sharply raise wages and prices and re-ignite inflation. When the Fed began aggressively raising rates in March 2022 to fight the worst bout of inflation in four decades, a painful recession was widely predicted, with waves of layoffs and high unemployment. The Fed boosted its benchmark rate 11 times in 2022 and 2023, to the highest level in more than two decades.

Inflation has eased, more or less steadily, in response: Consumer prices in January were up just 3.1% from a year earlier — way down from a year-over-year peak of 9.1% in 2022 and edging closer to the Fed's 2% target.

Despite sharply lower inflation, a consistently healthy job market and a record-high stock market, many Americans say they are unhappy with the state of the economy — a sentiment that is sure to weigh on President Joe Biden's bid for re-election. Many voters blame Biden for the surge in consumer prices that began in 2021. Even after inflationary pressures have significantly cooled, average prices remain about 17% above where they stood three years ago.

Yet the progress so far against inflation has been striking, and many Americans are exhibiting confidence in the economy through their actions: Consumers, whose average wages have outpaced inflation over the past year and who socked away money during the pandemic, have continued to spend and drive economic growth. The economy's gross domestic product — the total output of goods and services — grew by a solid 2.5% last year, up from 1.9% in 2022. And employers keep hiring.

"The labor market, although cooling, is holding up remarkably well despite tighter monetary policy," said Satyam Panday, chief U.S. economist at S&P Global Ratings.

Immigration has helped invigorate the job market since the end of pandemic-related travel bans. Last year, foreign-born individuals accounted for 62%, or 1.5 million, of the 2.4 million people who either obtained a job or began looking for one. The economy's growth depends on a steady influx of job seekers.

"Barring significant changes in immigration policy, the foreign-born population will likely continue to grow strongly this year and next, supporting growth in employment," economists at BNP Paribas wrote in a report this week.

In the meantime, the job market's modest slowdown is happening so far in perhaps the most painless way possible: Companies are posting slightly fewer job openings rather than laying people off. The number of Americans filing for weekly unemployment benefits — a rough proxy for the number of layoffs — has remained low, suggesting that most workers enjoy solid job security.

Wage growth still remains slightly high from the Fed's perspective because it can contribute to inflation pressures. Forecasters expect that average hourly wages rose 4.5% last month from February 2023, according to FactSet. That would exceed the 3.5% year-over-year increase that is widely seen as consistent with the Fed's 2% inflation target.

"The Fed does not want to see the job market collapse but would like to see the demand for labor soften enough to be confident wage growth will continue to slow," said Nancy Vanden Houten, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. "Monthly trend job growth of less than 200,000 is probably more consistent with that objective."

Some economists argue, though, that pay increases don't need to drop so much: A surge in productivity that started last year — as companies invested in machines and used their workers more efficiently — means that employers can pay more and still reap profits without raising prices.

Ireland's constitution says a woman's place is in the home. Voters are being asked to change that

By MICHAEL KEALY and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

DUBLIN (AP) — According to Ireland's constitution, a woman's place is in the home.

Irish voters will decide Friday — International Women's Day — whether to change the 87-year-old document to remove passages the government says are outdated and sexist. The twin referendums are on

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deleting a reference to women's domestic duties and broadening the definition of the family.

WHAT ARE THE REFERENDUMS ABOUT?

The first vote deals with a part of the constitution that pledges to protect the family as the primary unit of society. Voters are being asked to remove a reference to marriage as the basis "on which the family is founded" and replace it with a clause that says families can be founded "on marriage or on other durable relationships." If passed, it will be the 39th amendment to Ireland's constitution.

The second change — a proposed 40th amendment — would remove a reference to women's role in the home as a key support to the state, and delete a statement that "mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labor to the neglect of their duties in the home." It would add a clause saying the state will strive to support "the provision of care by members of a family to one another."

WHY ARE THEY HAPPENING NOW?

Ireland's constitution dates from 1937, when the country became a republic. Ireland has changed enormously since then, transforming from a conservative, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country in which divorce and abortion were illegal, to an increasingly diverse and socially liberal society. The proportion of residents who are Catholic fell from 94.9% in 1961 to 69% in 2022, according to the Central Statistics Office.

The social transformation has been reflected in a series of constitutional changes. Irish voters legalized divorce in a 1995 referendum, backed same-sex marriage in a 2015 vote and repealed a ban on abortions in 2018.

Prime Minister Leo Varadkar announced a year ago, on International Women's Day 2023, that the government would hold a referendum to enshrine gender equality and remove discriminatory language from the constitution. The new votes are about removing "very old-fashioned language" and recognizing the realities of modern family life, said Varadkar, Ireland's first ethnic minority leader, who is in a same-sex relationship but not married.

DO THE CHANGES HAVE WIDESPREAD SUPPORT?

Opinion polls suggest support for the "yes" side on both votes, but many voters remain undecided, and turnout may be low.

The current debate is much less charged than the arguments over abortion and gay marriage. Ireland's main political parties all support the changes, including centrist government coalition partners Fianna Fail and Fine Gael and the biggest opposition party, Sinn Fein.

Many women support the change. Tracy Carroll from County Meath in central Ireland, who cares full-time for her two children, said women had long been told "our place in society is in the home and looking after our children and our husbands."

"We've moved from that, but the constitution hasn't moved from that, and a women's place is anywhere she wants it to be," she told Sky News.

One political party calling for "no" votes is Aontú, a traditionalist group that split from Sinn Fein over the larger party's backing for legal abortion.

Aontú leader Peadar Tóibín said the government's wording is so vague it will lead to legal wrangles and most people "do not know what the meaning of a durable relationship is."

The Free Legal Advice Centers, a legal charity, has expressed concern the change to the section on care contains "harmful stereotypes such as the concept that the provision of care ... is the private responsibility of unpaid family members without any guarantee of state support." Some disability rights campaigners argue the emphasis on care treats disabled people as a burden, rather than as individuals with rights that should be guaranteed by the state.

Varadkar said that when it comes to care, "people have responsibilities and the state has responsibilities too."

He said rejecting the changes "would be a setback for the country."

"If there's a 'no' vote, on Saturday morning hundreds of thousands of children in Ireland will wake up to hear that Irish society has decided that their family isn't a constitutional family, isn't an equal family, just because their parents aren't married," Varadkar said this week. "If there's a 'yes' vote, we'll be saying as a society that all families are equal."

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WHEN WILL THE RESULT BE KNOWN?

Polling stations are open from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday. Counting of the ballots from each of Ireland's 39 constituencies starts at 9 a.m. Saturday morning, with results likely to be known Saturday afternoon or evening.

Irish citizens who are 18 or older – some 3.3 million people -- are eligible to vote.

Kyoto's picturesque geisha district fights back against over-tourism with keep-out signs

By YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto, long a popular destination for tourists, is closing off some private-property alleys in its famous geisha district because of complaints about misbehaving visitors.

Tourists crowd the narrow, quaint streets of the area called Gion, often following tour guides who show people around and lecture for long hours, local district official Isokazu Ota said Friday.

"We are going to put up signs in April that tell tourists to stay out of our private streets," he told The Associated Press.

A sign will say in both Japanese and English: "This is a private road, so you are not allowed to drive through it," although the keep-out warning is aimed mainly at pedestrians, not cars, as the Japanese wording refers to generically "passing through."

"There will be a fine of 10,000 yen," the sign adds, which comes to about \$70 under recent currency conversion rates.

The ban covers just several blocks of Gion. The district's public streets will remain open to tourists, so the area and the rest of Kyoto will still be teeming with visitors, both from Japan and around the world.

Gion's outrage highlights brewing resentment at what many people feel is "over-tourism," even though the Japanese economy depends more than ever on tourism revenue to sustain growth.

The district of winding alleyways is known for picturesque teahouses, where geisha and their maiko apprentices, wearing fancy kimono and hair ornaments, perform in dance and music.

In a city known for gorgeous temples and gardens, Gion is one of its most scenic and historical spots. Tourists, armed with cameras, like to wander around Gion, hoping to catch the women on their way to dance class or a fancy dinner party.

Complaints about over-zealous tourists began bubbling years ago, though the discontent cooled when the coronavirus pandemic brought a lull in tourism. Now, visitors are back with a frenzy.

Overseas tourist traffic to Japan is rebounding to pre-pandemic levels.

More than 22 million visitors came to Japan last year, eager to take in sushi, electronic gadgetry and the splendors of nature like Mount Fuji and the beaches of Okinawa. In 2019, incoming travel totaled more than 31 million people, and this year's number could approach or even overtake that, experts say.

It's been too much for many residents of Gion. Their local council summarized the less than eager sentiments a few months ago by proclaiming: "Kyoto is not a theme park."

Transcript of the Republican response to the State of the Union address

WASHINGTON (AP) — A transcript of the Republican response to the State of the Union address, as delivered by Sen. Katie Britt, R-Ala., on March 7, 2024:

Good evening, America.

My name is Katie Britt, and I have the honor of serving the people of the great state of Alabama in the United States Senate.

However, that's not the job that matters most.

I'm a proud wife and mom of two school-aged kids. My daughter, Bennett, and my son, Ridgeway, are why I ran for the Senate.

I am worried about their future — and the future of children in every corner of our nation. That's why

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I invited you into our home tonight.

Like so many families across America, my husband, Wesley, and I just watched President Biden's State of the Union Address from our living room. What we saw was the performance of a permanent politician who has actually been in office for longer than I've even been alive.

One thing was clear: President Biden just doesn't get it. He's out of touch. Under his administration, families are worse off. Our communities are less safe, and our country is less secure.

I wish he understood what real families are facing around kitchen tables just like this.

This is where our family has tough conversations and where we make hard decisions. It's where we share the good, the bad, and the ugly of our days. It's where we laugh together. It's where we hold each other's hands and pray for God's guidance. And, many nights, it's where Wesley and I worry.

I know we're not alone. Tonight, the American family needs to have a tough conversation, because the truth is, we're all worried about the future of our nation.

The country we know and love seems to be slipping away. It feels like the next generation will have fewer opportunities — and less freedom — than we did. I worry my own children may not even get a shot at living their American Dreams.

My American Dream allowed me, the daughter of two small business owners from rural Enterprise, Alabama, to be elected to the U.S. Senate at the age of 40.

Growing up sweeping the floor at my dad's hardware store and cleaning the bathroom at my mom's dance studio, I never could have imagined what my story would entail.

To think what the American Dream can do across just one generation, in just one lifetime, is truly breathtaking.

But right now, the American Dream has turned into a nightmare for so many families.

The true, unvarnished State of our Union begins and ends with this: Our families are hurting. Our country can do better.

And you don't have to look any further than the crisis at our southern border to see it. President Biden inherited the most secure border of all-time. But minutes after taking office, he suspended all deportations, halted construction of the border wall, and announced a plan to give amnesty to millions.

We know that President Biden didn't just create this border crisis. He invited it with 94 executive actions in his first 100 days.

When I first took office, I did something different. I traveled to the Del Rio sector of Texas, where I spoke to a woman who shared her story with me. She had been sex trafficked by the cartels starting at age 12. She told me not just that she was raped every day, but how many times a day she was raped.

The cartels put her on a mattress in a shoebox of a room, and they sent men through that door, over and over again, for hours and hours on end.

We wouldn't be OK with this happening in a third-world country. This is the United States of America, and it's past time we start acting like it.

President Biden's border crisis is a disgrace. It's despicable. And it's almost entirely preventable.

From fentanyl poisonings to horrific murders ... there are empty chairs tonight at kitchen tables just like this one because of President Biden's senseless border policies.

Just think about Laken Riley. In my neighboring state of Georgia, this beautiful, 22-year-old nursing student went out on a jog one morning. But she never got the opportunity to return home. She was brutally murdered by one of the millions of illegal border crossers President Biden chose to release into our homeland.

That could've been my daughter. It could've been yours.

Tonight, President Biden finally said her name. But he refused to take responsibility for his own actions.

Mr. President, enough is enough. Innocent Americans are dying. And you only have yourself to blame. Fulfill your oath of office. Reverse your policies. End this crisis. And stop the suffering.

Sadly, we know President Biden's failures don't stop there.

His reckless spending dug our economy into a hole and sent the cost-of-living through the roof.

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The worst inflation in 40 years. The highest credit card debt in history.

Hardworking families are struggling to make ends meet today. And with soaring mortgage rates and sky-high childcare costs, they're also struggling to plan for tomorrow.

The American people are scraping by while the President proudly proclaims Bidenomics is working!

Bless his heart. We know better.

I'll never forget stopping at a gas station in Chilton County one evening. The gentleman working the counter told me that after retiring, he had to pick up that job in his 70s so he didn't have to choose between going hungry or going without his medication. He said, "I did everything right, everything I was told to do — I worked hard, I saved, I was responsible."

He's not alone. I hear similar concerns from fellow parents when I'm walking with my friends or at one my kids' games.

But let's be honest — it's been a minute since Joe Biden pumped gas, ran carpool, or pushed a grocery cart. Meanwhile, the rest of us see every day that our dollar doesn't go as far.

And despite what he tells you, our communities are not safer.

For years, the left has coddled criminals and defunded the police — all while letting repeat offenders walk free.

The result is tragic but foreseeable — from our small towns to America's most iconic city streets, life is getting more and more dangerous.

Unfortunately, President Biden's weakness isn't just hurting families here at home. He's making us a punchline on the world stage.

Where I'm from, your word is your bond. But for three years, this President has demonstrated that America's word doesn't mean what it used to.

From abandoning allies in his disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan to desperately pushing another dangerous deal with Iran, President Biden has failed.

We've become a nation in retreat. And the enemies of freedom see an opportunity.

Putin's brutal aggression in Europe has put our allies on the brink.

Iran's terrorist proxies have slaughtered Israeli Jews and American citizens. They've targeted commercial shipping. And they've attacked our troops nearly 200 times since October, killing three U.S. soldiers and two Navy SEALs.

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party is undercutting America's workers. China is buying up our farmland, spying on our military installations, and spreading propaganda through the likes of TikTok.

The CCP knows that if it conquers the minds of our next generation, it conquers America.

And what does President Biden do? He bans TikTok for government employees, but creates an account for his own campaign. You can't make this stuff up!

Look, we all recall when Presidents faced national security threats with strength and resolve.

That seems like ancient history. Right now, our Commander in Chief is not in command.

The free world deserves better than a dithering and diminished leader.

America deserves leaders who recognize that secure borders, stable prices, safe streets, and a strong defense are the cornerstones of a great nation.

Just ask yourself, are you better off now than you were three years ago?

There is no doubt we're at a crossroads. We all feel it.

But here's the good news: we the People are still in the driver's seat. We get to decide whether our future will grow brighter, or whether we settle for an America in decline.

Well, I know which choice our children deserve — and the choice the Republican Party is fighting for.

We are the Party of hardworking parents and families. We want to give you and your children the opportunities to thrive — and we want families to grow. It's why we strongly support continued nationwide access to invitro fertilization. We want to help loving moms and dads bring precious life into this world. Wesley and I believe there is no greater blessing in life than our children.

And that's why tonight, I want to make a direct appeal to the parents out there — and in particular, to my fellow moms.

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Many of whom will be tossing and turning at 2 a.m. wondering how they are going to be three places at once tomorrow and somehow still get dinner on the table.

First of all, we see you, we hear you, and we stand with you.

I know you're frustrated. I know you're probably disgusted by most of what you see going on in Washington. And I'll be really honest with you — you're not wrong for feeling that way.

Look, I get it. The task in front of us isn't an easy one. But I can promise you one thing: it is worth it. So, I am asking you, for the sake of your kids and your grandkids, get into the arena.

Every generation has been called to do hard things. American greatness rests in the fact that we always answer that call.

It's who we are.

Never forget, we're steeped in the blood of patriots who overthrew the most powerful empire in the world.

We walk in the footsteps of pioneers who tamed the wild.

We now carry forward the same flame of freedom as the liberators of an oppressed Europe.

We draw courage from those who bent the moral arc of the universe.

And when we gaze upon the heavens, never forget that our DNA contains the same ingenuity that put man on the Moon.

America has been tested before, and every single time, we've emerged unbowed and unbroken.

Our history has been written with the grit of men and women who got knocked down. But we know their stories because they did not stay down. We are here because they stood back up.

So now it's our turn -- our moment to stand up and prove ourselves worthy of protecting the American Dream.

Together, we can reawaken the heroic spirit of a great nation.

Because Americans don't just have a rendezvous with destiny — we take destiny's hand, and we lead it.

Our future starts around kitchen tables just like this. With moms and dads just like you.

And you are why I believe with every fiber of my being that despite the current State of our Union, our best days are still ahead.

May God bless you, and may God continue to bless these United States of America.

Takeaways from Biden's State of the Union address: Combative attacks on a foe with no name

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The State of the Union address is one of the durable set pieces of the presidency, a forum that almost always favors the speaker in a one-way conversation with millions of Americans.

Most of the speeches are instantly dissected, and almost as quickly forgotten. But this is a most unusual year, with President Joe Biden needing to make the case not simply that his policies warrant a second term, but that he has the personal capacity at age 81 to do the job.

He laid out the clear contours of the campaign ahead, criticizing former President Donald Trump over the Jan. 6 insurrection and going after the Supreme Court, with justices present, over its ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

Also, the shrinking size of a Snickers bar.

Here are some key takeaways from the speech.

HE WHO WON'T BE NAMED

Biden opened the speech with fiery denunciations of the rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, then singled out Republicans in the chamber and GOP foe Trump. But he refused to utter Trump's name, saying that "my predecessor and some of you here seek to bury the truth about Jan. 6."

He wrapped that into a larger theme that democracy is threatened like no time since the Civil War, signaling a clear line of attack he will use against the man he would not name.

He also criticized "my predecessor" for Trump's assertion that Russian President Vladimir Putin can "do whatever the hell he wants" with respect to NATO allies, and he implored Congress to pass additional aid

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for Ukraine.

Speaking with a vigor that his supporters have said has been lacking, he set up a contrast between his internationalist view of the world and the more isolationist leaning of his "predecessor."

Biden used almost the entirety of the speech to find ways to try to persuade Americans of the contrast.

THE OLD AGE QUESTION

When asked about his age and how it affects his ability to be president, Biden's stock answer is: Watch me.

On Thursday night, he delivered what a lot of his own supporters had found wanting. It was a high energy, forceful speech, and at times he taunted Republicans with ad-libs. When they heckled his support for bipartisan border security legislation, Biden said, "Look at the facts, I know you know how to read."

Biden stumbled over a few words, and in the Republican response, Sen. Katie Britt of Alabama called him "dithering and diminished" but it was a more vigorous performance than other speeches where his remarks can be meandering or hard to hear. It was also a rejoinder to criticisms that Biden is too old to keep serving as president. He would be 86 at the end of a second term, and Republicans — though Trump is only four years younger — have relished slicing and dicing videos of the president to make him look as feeble as possible on social media.

Biden leaned into his age, mentioning he was born during World War II, but defended his vision for the country as fresh. "You can't lead America with ancient ideas that only take us back."

ABORTION ON THE BALLOT

The president said efforts to restrict abortion were an "assault on freedom," and he derided the Supreme Court ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade, with members of the Supreme Court who were in the majority in that decision, seated just feet away.

He also welcomed Kate Cox, a Dallas mother whose fetus had a fatal condition that put her own health at risk. She had to leave the state in order to get an abortion. "My God," Biden said, "what freedoms will you take away next?"

Through much of his career, Biden has not emphasized abortion rights. In his speech, he showed how much he believes that issue could be a key to a second term.

HEALTH CARE, STILL A BFD

Back to "my predecessor." Biden playfully said that the Obama-era health care law is still a "big deal," paying homage to the moment as vice president he used more colorful language to describe the landmark policy win for President Barack Obama. And he vowed to work to make a tax credit tied to the law permanent.

"Over 100 million of you can no longer be denied health insurance because of a pre-existing condition," Biden said. "Well, my predecessor, many in this chamber, want to take the prescription drug benefit away by repealing the Affordable Care Act. I'm not going to let that happen."

Biden appeared to slip in a riff about pharmaceutical companies selling their drugs at cheaper prices around the globe, telling the audience that he'd like to take them on Air Force One to several major global cities including Moscow to see how much they would save on the same drugs.

Biden quickly caught himself, saying it was "probably" the case even in Russia, and pressed ahead. "Bring your prescription with you. And I promise you I'll get it for you for 40%. The cost you pay now."

WAR IN GAZA GETS ITS MOMENT

The bloody conflict between Israel and Hamas was an unavoidable backdrop to Biden's speech. His motorcade took a different route to the U.S. Capitol after protesters blocked part of Pennsylvania Avenue. Inside the House chamber, some lawmakers wore keffiyehs, the black and white checkered scarves that have symbolized solidarity with Palestinians.

Biden announced plans for the U.S. military to help establish a temporary pier on the coast of Gaza, an effort that the administration says should significantly boost the flow of aid into the besieged territory.

The unveiling of the plan was perhaps the most substantive element of his address that touched on the war. It allowed Biden to demonstrate that he's taking action in the face of anger and defiance from some Democrats over his strong support for Israel even as the Palestinian death toll mounts. It also comes after Biden last week approved the U.S. military airdropping aid into Gaza.

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The temporary pier, Biden said, "will enable a massive increase in humanitarian assistance getting into Gaza."

But at the same time he called on the Israelis to do more to alleviate the suffering even as they try to eliminate Hamas. "To Israel, I say this humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip," Biden said.

MIDDLE CLASS JOE

Biden outlined an economic vision that went big and small. He touted a post-pandemic economic recovery that didn't sacrifice job creation in order to tame inflation. With housing prices still high, he proposed a tax credit that would reduce mortgage costs.

He also hammered Republicans for tax policies that favor the wealthy. "Check the numbers. Folks at home, does anybody really think the tax code is fair?"

Biden said there should be a minimum tax rate of 25% on billionaires, saying "no billionaire should pay a lower federal tax rate than a teacher, a sanitation worker or a nurse."

The president talked about cracking down on junk fees that can chip away at Americans' budgets and he criticized snack companies for "shrinkflation," which means getting less product for the same price.

"You get charged the same amount and you got about 10% fewer Snickers in it."

MUST-SEE, BUT NOT NECESSARILY ON TV

When Biden was elected to the Senate in 1972, the State of the Union address was appointment television for tens of millions of Americans who watched on three major networks.

Now it is so much more than a television event. The traditional ways of measuring viewers has shown a steady decline. Biden's address last year drew the second smallest audience for the annual event in at least 30 years, according to the Nielsen company.

The audience is so fragmented that Biden's campaign was prepared with targeted segments to pump out to specific audiences on social media. Guests whose stories were highlighted in the speech will make the rounds on local television markets to talk about the real-life impact of Biden's policies. And look for Biden and his surrogates to find creative ways to get bits of his message to Americans that didn't tune in on Thursday evening.

Hours before delivering the address, Biden posted on his X account a video of him getting advice on delivering the big speech from actors, including Morgan Freeman, Michael Douglas, and Geena Davis, who have played president in the movies and TV.

Biden orders US military to set up temporary aid port for Gaza as famine threatens

By SAMY MAGDY, ABBY SEWELL, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden ordered the U.S. military Thursday to set up a temporary port off the coast of Gaza, joining international partners in trying to carve out a sea route to deliver food and other aid to desperate Palestinian civilians cut off by the Hamas-Israel war and by Israeli restrictions on humanitarian access by land.

While reiterating his support for Israel, Biden used the announcement and the bright spotlight of his State of the Union speech to renew months of U.S. calls to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to change how he conducts the war, including by allowing in more aid to Gaza and doing more to protect humanitarian workers there.

"To the leadership of Israel I say this: Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip," Biden declared before Congress. He repeated calls as well for Israel to do more to protect civilians in the fighting, and to work toward Palestinian statehood as the only long-term solution to Israeli-Palestinian violence.

The U.S. announcement, signaling deepening U.S. involvement in the war and the escalating fighting in the region, comes as Biden faces pressure to act more forcefully to ease what the U.N. says are near-famine conditions for many of Gaza's 2.3 million people.

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It also shows the administration resorting to an unusual workaround after months of appealing to Israel, the U.S.'s close ally and top recipient of military aid, to step up access and protection for trucks bearing humanitarian goods for Gaza.

Meanwhile Thursday, efforts to reach a cease-fire before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which starts within days, appeared stalled. Hamas said its delegation had left Cairo, where talks were being held. The outline for the cease-fire included a wide infusion of aid into Gaza.

A widening humanitarian crisis across Gaza and tight Israeli control of aid trucks has left virtually the entire population desperately short of food, the U.N. says. Medical workers in northern Gaza this past week reported 15 children dead of starvation there. In a meeting pressing Israel Ambassador Michael Herzog to provide access and security for more aid trucks, the U.S. international development director, Samantha Power, warned that blockaded Gaza "faced a real risk of famine," her office said Thursday.

Israel accuses Hamas of commandeering some aid deliveries.

The U.S. officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview Biden's announcement before his State of the Union speech, said the planned operation will not require American troops on the ground to build the pier that is intended to allow more shipments of food, medicine and other essential items from a port in the Mediterranean island country of Cyprus.

The U.S. officials said it would likely take weeks before the pier was operational. They gave few other immediate details.

One of the options under consideration is for the military to provide a floating pier called a JLOTS, or Joint Logistics-Over-the-Shore, another U.S. official said on the condition of anonymity to discuss the options before a decision has been made. The large floating pier allows supplies to be delivered without having a fixed port in place, alleviating the need to have troops on a dock on shore. Ships can sail to the pier, which is secured by anchors, and dock there.

Defense Department spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said in a statement Thursday that U.S. officials and international partners were looking at options, including using commercial companies and contractors to aid in the delivery.

Officials from the U.S., Europe, Israel and the Middle East have already been deep in discussions and preparations on the possibility of opening a maritime sea route.

Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides in November offered use of his country's port in Larnaca for aid deliveries to the Palestinian enclave, a 230-mile (370-kilometer) journey from Cyprus.

European Union Commission Chief Ursula von der Leyen planned to visit Larnaca on Friday to inspect installations.

Cyprus early on invited authorities from Israel, the U.S. and other European countries to join Cypriot agents in vetting all shipments so nothing could be used by Hamas against Israel.

Aid groups have said their efforts to deliver desperately needed supplies to Gaza have been badly hampered 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 isolated north.

The United Arab Emirates also says it is working with its partners, including chef and humanitarian Jose Andres and his World Central Kitchen, to launch deliveries by sea, and is finishing details and timing.

While land routes could be the most efficient way to get aid into Gaza, one of the senior U.S. administration officials said, Biden has directed that "we not wait for the Israelis" to get more humanitarian help in, more quickly.

Sigrid Kaag, the U.N. senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, told reporters late Thursday after briefing the U.N. Security Council behind closed doors that air and sea deliveries cannot substitute for expanding and diversifying supply routes on land, which remains "the optimal solution."

The Biden administration's latest move provides one more layer to the extraordinary dynamic that's emerged as the United States has had to go around Israel, its main Mideast ally, and find ways to get aid into Gaza, including through airdrops that started last week.

Biden has been a crucial partner to Netanyahu's military offensive following Hamas's Oct. 7 attacks in Israel. That includes providing bombs and other weapons to Israel and fending off efforts to censure Israel

in the United Nations for the growing deaths among Gaza civilians.

But administration officials have grown frustrated at Netanyahu for seeming to shrug off much of the U.S. pressure for Israel to do more to reduce civilian deaths and to allow in humanitarian aid.

The World Food Program says an average of 99 aid trucks a day entered Gaza in February, one-fifth of what is needed.

"This is an expensive, inefficient workaround to a problem that has other ready solutions," Brian Finucane, a former State Department official now with the International Crisis Group, said of the U.S. announcement on a temporary port and wartime sea route.

"It's another symptom of the pathology of the overall approach to the war in Gaza ... which is that the Biden administration is unwilling to use U.S. leverage either unilaterally or multilaterally" to try to influence conduct of the war by Netanyahu, Finucane said.

Pressure on the Biden administration surged last week after Gaza health officials reported more than 100 people killed at an attempted aid delivery to the isolated north. Israel said its forces fired warning shots when members of the crowd began moving toward them. Witnesses and medical workers told The Associated Press that most of those injured were shot when Israeli forces fired into the crowds of hungry people.

International mediators had hoped to alleviate some of the immediate crisis with a six-week cease-fire, which would have seen Hamas release some of the Israeli hostages it is holding, Israel release some Palestinian prisoners and aid groups be given access to to get a major influx of assistance into Gaza.

Palestinian militants are believed to be holding around 100 hostages and the remains of 30 others captured during Hamas' Oct. 7 attack.

Egyptian officials said Hamas has agreed to 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. They say Israel wants to confine the negotiations to the more limited agreement.

The officials 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.

Hamas spokesman Jihad Taha said Israel "refuses to commit to and give guarantees regarding the cease-fire, the return of the displaced, and withdrawal from the areas of its incursion." But he said the talks were still ongoing and would resume next week. There was no immediate comment from Israel.

Mediators had looked to Ramadan, which is expected to begin on Sunday, as an informal deadline for a deal because the month of dawn-to-dusk fasting often sees Israeli-Palestinian violence linked to access to a major Jerusalem holy site. The war already has the wider region on edge, with Iran-backed groups trading fire with Israel and the United States.

Netanyahu has publicly ruled out Hamas' demands for an end to the war, saying Israel intends to resume the offensive after any cease-fire, expand it to the crowded southern city of Rafah and battle on until "total victory." He has said military pressure will help bring about the release of the hostages.

Karol G becomes first Latina named woman of the year at Billboard ceremony honoring global musicians

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — Karol G made history at Wednesday night's Billboard Women in Music awards ceremony.

"This is the first time, ever, a Latina is named woman of the year," Karol G began her acceptance speech after a fiery performance of her reggaetón hit, "Amargura." And so, in honor of that incredible feat, she delivered the rest of her speech in Spanish.

The global superstar received the award at the YouTube Theater in Inglewood, California, after a lively introduction from her "Griselda" co-star Sofia Vergara.

Of course, Karol G is used to making history at this point. Last month, she became the first woman to win in the best música urbana category at the Grammys, a moment that may reflect changing perceptions

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of reggaetón and Latin hip-hop as exclusively “men’s music.” Last year, her album “Mañana Será Bonito,” one of The Associated Press’ picks for best of the year, became the first ever Spanish-language album by a female artist to hit No. 1 on the Billboard 200. (Not only that, but “Mañana Será Bonito” is the first Latin album — by a Latina — to reach No. 1 on the albums chart since Selena Quintanilla’s posthumous “Dreaming of You,” did in 1995 following her high-profile murder.)

When Karol G embarked on a stadium tour in support of the release, she became the first Latina to headline at many of the venues where she performed. To call Karol G’s rise meteoric wouldn’t be hyperbole.

In the crowds above the stage at the YouTube Theater, fans wielded glowing light sticks — official merchandise for the K-pop girl group NewJeans, who attended, performed an animated medley of their viral hits “Super Shy” and “ETA,” and were awarded the title of group of the year.

Later, the audience lead chants of “Bichota” — an affectionate nickname for Karol G, derived from Puerto Rican slang “bichote,” which refers to a drug dealer, but transformed into a term of empowerment with the feminine “a.” It might’ve temporarily confused host Tracee Ellis Ross, who otherwise masterfully guided the crowd throughout the evening, but it certainly underscored a major theme of the evening: to celebrate women in the music business is to celebrate women globally.

A new award category heralding performers who are “global forces” were given to women from around the world for their needle-moving contributions to their home countries, including Annalisa representing Italy, Sarah Geronimo from the Philippines and Luísa Sonza from Brazil, who performed and was joined by Demi Lovato for “Penhasco2,” their Portuguese power ballad.

The second annual producer of the year award was given to PinkPantheress, known for her jungle and UK garage beats woven into songs that avoid easy classification.

“As a woman of color in electronic music — specifically 2-step, drum and bass, it’s taken a lot for the genre to be recognized on a wider scale — a lot of people don’t expect me to look the way I did, making the music I was making,” she said in her speech. “Even now, people don’t want to take my music seriously. But I’m just happy that I have the opportunity to be recognized in a specific field by the Billboard Women in Music Award.”

Performers at the ceremony included Maren Morris, Young Miko, Tems, Victoria Monét — all of whom received awards. Charli XCX debuted a new song titled “So I,” about “a person who is no longer with us,” as she explained in her introduction.

Monét led the night — with a brassy performance of her massive hit “On My Mama.” Immediately afterward, her mother presented her with the rising star award. “She didn’t tell me she was coming, y’all!” Monét exclaimed, clutching Mama Monét, as she attempted to read from a teleprompter. In her acceptance speech, Monét shouted out “women doing the thankless jobs” in addition to those “behind the scenes and in front of the curtain.”

Across two and a half hours, Ice Spice and Kylie Minogue were some of the other music artists who were recognized at the event, which celebrated the achievements of top female performers and executives in the music industry.

Presenters included Katy Perry, Coco Jones, Andra Day, Saweetie, Ellie Goulding, GloRilla, Bebe Rexha and Lainey Wilson.

Michelle Jubelirer, chair and CEO of Capitol Music Group, was awarded executive of the year. She resigned last month, following the ongoing reorganization of Capitol parent Universal Music Group. In some ways, it was an effective reminder that a seat at the table is not guaranteed for women in this industry, but fighting for those positions is crucial to making progress.

Transcript of President Joe Biden’s State of the Union address

WASHINGTON (AP) — A transcript of President Joe Biden’s State of the Union address on March 7, 2024, as prepared for delivery and provided by the White House:

Good evening.

Mr. Speaker. Madam Vice President. Members of Congress. My Fellow Americans.

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In January 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt came to this chamber to speak to the nation. He said, "I address you at a moment unprecedented in the history of the Union." Hitler was on the march. War was raging in Europe. President Roosevelt's purpose was to wake up the Congress and alert the American people that this was no ordinary moment. Freedom and democracy were under assault in the world. Tonight I come to the same chamber to address the nation. Now it is we who face an unprecedented moment in the history of the Union. And yes, my purpose tonight is to both wake up this Congress, and alert the American people that this is no ordinary moment either. Not since President Lincoln and the Civil War have freedom and democracy been under assault here at home as they are today. What makes our moment rare is that freedom and democracy are under attack, both at home and overseas, at the very same time. Overseas, Putin of Russia is on the march, invading Ukraine and sowing chaos throughout Europe and beyond. If anybody in this room thinks Putin will stop at Ukraine, I assure you, he will not. But Ukraine can stop Putin if we stand with Ukraine and provide the weapons it needs to defend itself. That is all Ukraine is asking. They are not asking for American soldiers. In fact, there are no American soldiers at war in Ukraine. And I am determined to keep it that way. But now assistance for Ukraine is being blocked by those who want us to walk away from our leadership in the world. It wasn't that long ago when a Republican President, Ronald Reagan, thundered, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Now, my predecessor, a former Republican President, tells Putin, "Do whatever the hell you want." A former American President actually said that, bowing down to a Russian leader. It's outrageous. It's dangerous. It's unacceptable. America is a founding member of NATO the military alliance of democratic nations created after World War II to prevent war and keep the peace. Today, we've made NATO stronger than ever. We welcomed Finland to the Alliance last year, and just this morning, Sweden officially joined NATO, and their Prime Minister is here tonight. Mr. Prime Minister, welcome to NATO, the strongest military alliance the world has ever known. I say this to Congress: we must stand up to Putin. Send me the Bipartisan National Security Bill. History is watching. If the United States walks away now, it will put Ukraine at risk. Europe at risk. The free world at risk, emboldening others who wish to do us harm. My message to President Putin is simple. We will not walk away. We will not bow down. I will not bow down. History is watching, just like history watched three years ago on January 6th. Insurrectionists stormed this very Capitol and placed a dagger at the throat of American democracy. Many of you were here on that darkest of days. We all saw with our own eyes these insurrectionists were not patriots. They had come to stop the peaceful transfer of power and to overturn the will of the people. January 6th and the lies about the 2020 election, and the plots to steal the election, posed the gravest threat to our democracy since the Civil War. But they failed. America stood strong and democracy prevailed. But we must be honest the threat remains and democracy must be defended. My predecessor and some of you here seek to bury the truth of January 6th.

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I will not do that.

This is a moment to speak the truth and bury the lies.

And here's the simplest truth. You can't love your country only when you win.

As I've done ever since being elected to office, I ask you all, without regard to party, to join together and defend our democracy!

Remember your oath of office to defend against all threats foreign and domestic.

Respect free and fair elections! Restore trust in our institutions! And make clear –political violence has absolutely no place in America! History is watching.

And history is watching another assault on freedom.

Joining us tonight is Latorya Beasley, a social worker from Birmingham, Alabama. 14 months ago tonight, she and her husband welcomed a baby girl thanks to the miracle of IVF.

She scheduled treatments to have a second child, but the Alabama Supreme Court shut down IVF treatments across the state, unleashed by the Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade.

She was told her dream would have to wait.

What her family has gone through should never have happened. And unless Congress acts, it could happen again.

So tonight, let's stand up for families like hers!

To my friends across the aisle, don't keep families waiting any longer. Guarantee the right to IVF nationwide!

Like most Americans, I believe Roe v. Wade got it right. And I thank Vice President Harris for being an incredible leader, defending reproductive freedom and so much more.

But my predecessor came to office determined to see Roe v. Wade overturned.

He's the reason it was overturned. In fact, he brags about it. Look at the chaos that has resulted. Joining us tonight is Kate Cox, a wife and mother from Dallas.

When she became pregnant again, the fetus had a fatal condition. Her doctors told Kate that her own life and her ability to have children in the future were at risk if she didn't act.

Because Texas law banned abortion, Kate and her husband had to leave the state to get the care she needed.

What her family has gone through should never have happened as well. But it is happening to so many others.

There are state laws banning the right to choose, criminalizing doctors, and forcing survivors of rape and incest to leave their states as well to get the care they need.

Many of you in this Chamber and my predecessor are promising to pass a national ban on reproductive freedom.

My God, what freedoms will you take away next?

In its decision to overturn Roe v. Wade the Supreme Court majority wrote, "Women are not without –electoral or political power."

No kidding.

Clearly, those bragging about overturning Roe v. Wade have no clue about the power of women in America.

They found out though when reproductive freedom

was on the ballot and won in 2022, 2023, and they will find out again, in 2024.

If Americans send me a Congress that supports the right to choose, I promise you, I will restore Roe v. Wade as the law of the land again!

America cannot go back. I am here tonight to show the way forward. Because I know how far we've come.

Four years ago next week, before I came to office, our country was hit by the worst pandemic and the worst economic crisis in a century.

Remember the fear. Record job losses. Remember the spike in crime. And the murder rate.

A raging virus that would take more than 1 million American lives and leave millions of loved ones behind.

A mental health crisis of isolation and loneliness.

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A president, my predecessor, who failed the most basic duty. Any President owes the American people the duty to care.

That is unforgivable.

I came to office determined to get us through one of the toughest periods in our nation's history.

And we have. It doesn't make the news but in thousands of cities and towns the American people are writing the greatest comeback story never told.

So let's tell that story here and now.

America's comeback is building a future of American possibilities, building an economy from the middle out and the bottom up, not the top down, investing in all of America, in all Americans to make sure everyone has a fair shot and we leave no one behind!

The pandemic no longer controls our lives. The vaccines that saved us from COVID are now being used to help beat cancer.

Turning setback into comeback.

That's America!

I inherited an economy that was on the brink. Now our economy is the envy of the world!

15 million new jobs in just three years - that's a record!

Unemployment at 50-year lows.

A record 16 million Americans are starting small businesses and each one is an act of hope.

With historic job growth and small business growth for Black, Hispanic, and Asian-Americans. 800,000 new manufacturing jobs in America and counting. More people have health insurance today than ever before.

The racial wealth gap is the smallest it's been in 20 years.

Wages keep going up and inflation keeps coming down!

Inflation has dropped from 9% to 3% - the lowest in the world!

And trending lower.

And now instead of importing foreign products and exporting American jobs, we're exporting American products and creating American jobs - right here in America where they belong!

And the American people are beginning to feel it.

Consumer studies show consumer confidence is soaring.

Buy American has been the law of the land since the 1930s.

Past administrations including my predecessor failed to Buy American.

Not any more.

On my watch, federal projects like helping to build American roads bridges and highways will be made with American products built by American workers creating good-paying American jobs!

Thanks to my Chips and Science Act the United States is investing more in research and development than ever before.

During the pandemic a shortage of semiconductor chips drove up prices for everything from cell phones to automobiles.

Well instead of having to import semiconductor chips, which America invented I might add, private companies are now investing billions of dollars to build new chip factories here in America!

Creating tens of thousands of jobs many of them paying over \$100,000 a year and don't require a college degree.

In fact my policies have attracted \$650 Billion of private sector investments in clean energy and advanced manufacturing creating tens of thousands of jobs here in America!

Thanks to our Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, 46,000 new projects have been announced across your communities - modernizing our roads and bridges, ports and airports, and public transit systems.

Removing poisonous lead pipes so every child can drink clean water without risk of getting brain damage.

Providing affordable high speed internet for every American no matter where you live.

Urban, suburban, and rural communities -- in red states and blue.

Record investments in tribal communities.

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Because of my investments, family farms are better be able to stay in the family and children and grand-children won't have to leave home to make a living.

It's transformative.

A great comeback story is Belvidere, Illinois. Home to an auto plant for nearly 60 years.

Before I came to office the plant was on its way to shutting down.

Thousands of workers feared for their livelihoods. Hope was fading.

Then I was elected to office and we raised Belvidere repeatedly with the auto company knowing unions make all the difference.

The UAW worked like hell to keep the plant open and get those jobs back. And together, we succeeded!

Instead of an auto factory shutting down an auto factory is re-opening and a new state-of-the art battery factory is being built to power those cars.

Instead of a town being left behind it's a community moving forward again!

Because instead of watching auto jobs of the future go overseas 4,000 union workers with higher wages will be building that future, in Belvidere, here in America!

Here tonight is UAW President, Shawn Fain, a great friend, and a great labor leader.

And Dawn Simms, a third generation UAW worker in Belvidere.

Shawn, I was proud to be the first President in American history to walk a picket line.

And today Dawn has a job in her hometown providing stability for her family and pride and dignity.

Showing once again, Wall Street didn't build this country!

The middle class built this country! And unions built the middle class!

When Americans get knocked down, we get back up!

We keep going!

That's America! That's you, the American people!

It's because of you America is coming back!

It's because of you, our future is brighter!

And it's because of you that tonight we can proudly say the State of our Union is strong and getting stronger!

Tonight I want to talk about the future of possibilities that we can build together.

A future where the days of trickle-down economics are over and the wealthy and biggest corporations no longer get all the breaks.

I grew up in a home where not a lot trickled down on my Dad's kitchen table.

That's why I'm determined to turn things around so the middle class does well the poor have a way up and the wealthy still does well.

We all do well.

And there's more to do to make sure you're feeling the benefits of all we're doing.

Americans pay more for prescription drugs than anywhere else.

It's wrong and I'm ending it.

With a law I proposed and signed and not one Republican voted for we finally beat Big Pharma!

Instead of paying \$400 a month for insulin seniors with diabetes only have to pay \$35 a month!

And now I want to cap the cost of insulin at \$35 a month for every American who needs it!

For years people have talked about it but I finally got it done and gave Medicare the power to negotiate lower prices for prescription drugs just like the VA does for our veterans.

That's not just saving seniors money.

It's saving taxpayers money cutting the federal deficit by \$160 Billion because Medicare will no longer have to pay exorbitant prices to Big Pharma.

This year Medicare is negotiating lower prices for some of the costliest drugs on the market that treat everything from heart disease to arthritis.

Now it's time to go further and give Medicare the power to negotiate lower prices for 500 drugs over the next decade.

That will not only save lives it will save taxpayers another \$200 Billion!

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Starting next year that same law caps total prescription drug costs for seniors on Medicare at \$2,000 a year even for expensive cancer drugs that can cost \$10,000, \$12,000, \$15,000 a year.

Now I want to cap prescription drug costs at \$2,000 a year for everyone!

Folks Obamacare, known as the Affordable Care Act is still a very big deal.

Over one hundred million of you can no longer be denied health insurance because of pre-existing conditions.

But my predecessor and many in this chamber want to take that protection away by repealing the Affordable Care Act I won't let that happen!

We stopped you 50 times before and we will stop you again!

In fact I am protecting it and expanding it.

I enacted tax credits that save \$800 per person per year reducing health care premiums for millions of working families.

Those tax credits expire next year.

I want to make those savings permanent!

Women are more than half of our population but research on women's health has always been underfunded.

That's why we're launching the first-ever White House Initiative on Women's Health Research, led by Jill who is doing an incredible job as First Lady.

Pass my plan for \$12 Billion to transform women's health research and benefit millions of lives across America!

I know the cost of housing is so important to you.

If inflation keeps coming down mortgage rates will come down as well.

But I'm not waiting.

I want to provide an annual tax credit that will give Americans \$400 a month for the next two years as mortgage rates come down to put toward their mortgage when they buy a first home or trade up for a little more space.

My Administration is also eliminating title insurance fees for federally backed mortgages.

When you refinance your home this can save you \$1,000 or more.

For millions of renters, we're cracking down on big landlords who break antitrust laws by price-fixing and driving up rents.

I've cut red tape so more builders can get federal financing, which is already helping build a record 1.7 million housing units nationwide.

Now pass my plan to build and renovate 2 million affordable homes and bring those rents down!

To remain the strongest economy in the world we need the best education system in the world.

I want to give every child a good start by providing access to pre-school for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Studies show that children who go to pre-school are nearly 50% more likely to finish high school and go on to earn a 2- or 4-year degree no matter their background.

I want to expand high-quality tutoring and summer learning time and see to it that every child learns to read by third grade.

I'm also connecting businesses and high schools so students get hands-on experience and a path to a good-paying job whether or not they go to college.

And I want to make college more affordable.

Let's continue increasing Pell Grants for working- and middle-class families and increase our record investments in HBCUs and Hispanic and Minority-serving Institutions

I fixed student loan programs to reduce the burden of student debt for nearly 4 Million Americans including nurses firefighters and others in public service like Keenan Jones a public-school educator in Minnesota who's here with us tonight.

He's educated hundreds of students so they can go to college now he can help his own daughter pay for college.

Such relief is good for the economy because folks are now able to buy a home start a business even

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start a family.

While we're at it I want to give public school teachers a raise!

Now let me speak to a question of fundamental fairness for all Americans.

I've been delivering real results in a fiscally responsible way.

I've already cut the federal deficit by over one trillion dollars.

I signed a bipartisan budget deal that will cut another trillion dollars over the next decade.

And now it's my goal to cut the federal deficit \$3 trillion more by making big corporations and the very wealthy finally pay their fair share.

Look, I'm a capitalist.

If you want to make a million bucks – great!

Just pay your fair share in taxes.

A fair tax code is how we invest in the things –

that make a country great, health care, education, defense, and more.

But here's the deal.

The last administration enacted a \$2 Trillion tax cut that overwhelmingly benefits the very wealthy and the biggest corporations and exploded the federal deficit.

They added more to the national debt than in any presidential term in American history.

For folks at home does anybody really think the tax code is fair?

Do you really think the wealthy and big corporations need another \$2 trillion in tax breaks?

I sure don't. I'm going to keep fighting like hell to make it fair!

Under my plan nobody earning less than \$400,000 will pay an additional penny in federal taxes.

Nobody. Not one penny.

In fact the Child Tax Credit I passed during the pandemic cut taxes for millions of working families and cut child poverty in HALF.

Restore the Child Tax Credit because no child should go hungry in this country!

The way to make the tax code fair is to make big corporations and the very wealthy finally pay their share.

In 2020 55 of the biggest companies in America made \$40 Billion in profits and paid zero in federal income taxes.

Not any more!

Thanks to the law I wrote and signed big companies now have to pay a minimum of 15%.

But that's still less than working people pay in federal taxes.

It's time to raise the corporate minimum tax to at least 21% so every big corporation finally begins to pay their fair share.

I also want to end the tax breaks for Big Pharma, Big Oil, private jets, and massive executive pay!

End it now!

There are 1,000 billionaires in America.

You know what the average federal tax rate for these billionaires is? 8.2 percent!

That's far less than the vast majority of Americans pay.

No billionaire should pay a lower tax rate than a teacher, a sanitation worker, a nurse!

That's why I've proposed a minimum tax of 25% for billionaires. Just 25%.

That would raise \$500 Billion over the next 10 years.

Imagine what that could do for America. Imagine a future with affordable child care so millions of families can get the care they need and still go to work and help grow the economy.

Imagine a future with paid leave because no one should have to choose between working and taking care of yourself or a sick family member.

Imagine a future with home care and elder care so seniors and people living with disabilities can stay in their homes and family caregivers get paid what they deserve!

Tonight, let's all agree once again to stand up for seniors!

Many of my Republican friends want to put Social Security on the chopping block.

If anyone here tries to cut Social Security or Medicare or raise the retirement age I will stop them!

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Working people who built this country pay more into Social Security than millionaires and billionaires do. It's not fair.

We have two ways to go on Social Security.

Republicans will cut Social Security and give more tax cuts to the wealthy.

I will protect and strengthen Social Security and make the wealthy pay their fair share!

Too many corporations raise their prices to pad their profits charging you more and more for less and less.

That's why we're cracking down on corporations that engage in price gouging or deceptive pricing from food to health care to housing.

In fact, snack companies think you won't notice when they charge you just as much for the same size bag but with fewer chips in it.

Pass Senator Bob Casey's bill to put a stop to shrinkflation!

I'm also getting rid of junk fees those hidden fees added at the end of your bills without your knowledge.

My administration just announced we're cutting credit card late fees from \$32 to just \$8.

The banks and credit card companies don't like it.

Why?

I'm saving American families \$20 billion a year with all of the junk fees I'm eliminating.

And I'm not stopping there.

My Administration has proposed rules to make cable travel utilities and online ticket sellers tell you the total price upfront so there are no surprises.

It matters.

And so does this.

In November, my team began serious negotiations with a bipartisan group of Senators.

The result was a bipartisan bill with the toughest set of border security reforms we've ever seen in this country.

That bipartisan deal would hire 1,500 more border security agents and officers.

100 more immigration judges to help tackle a backlog of 2 million cases.

4,300 more asylum officers and new policies so they can resolve cases in 6 months instead of 6 years.

100 more high-tech drug detection machines to significantly increase the ability to screen and stop vehicles from smuggling fentanyl into America.

This bill would save lives and bring order to the border.

It would also give me as President new emergency authority to temporarily shut down the border when the number of migrants at the border is overwhelming.

The Border Patrol Union endorsed the bill.

The Chamber of Commerce endorsed the bill.

I believe that given the opportunity a majority of the House and Senate would endorse it as well.

But unfortunately, politics have derailed it so far.

I'm told my predecessor called Republicans in Congress and demanded they block the bill. He feels it would be a political win for me and a political loser for him.

It's not about him or me.

It'd be a winner for America!

My Republican friends you owe it to the American people to get this bill done.

We need to act.

And if my predecessor is watching instead of playing politics and pressuring members of Congress to block this bill, join me in telling Congress to pass it!

We can do it together. But here's what I will not do.

I will not demonize immigrants saying they "poison the blood of our country" as he said in his own words.

I will not separate families.

I will not ban people from America because of their faith.

Unlike my predecessor, on my first day in office I introduced a comprehensive plan to fix our immigration system, secure the border, and provide a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers and so much more

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Because unlike my predecessor, I know who we are as Americans.
We are the only nation in the world with a heart and soul that draws from old and new.
Home to Native Americans whose ancestors have been here for thousands of years. Home to people from every place on Earth.
Some came freely.
Some chained by force.
Some when famine struck, like my ancestral family in Ireland.
Some to flee persecution.
Some to chase dreams that are impossible anywhere but here in America.
That's America, where we all come from somewhere, but we are all Americans.
We can fight about the border, or we can fix it. I'm ready to fix it.
Send me the border bill now!
A transformational moment in our history happened 59 years ago today in Selma, Alabama.
Hundreds of foot soldiers for justice marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, named after a Grand Dragon of the KKK, to claim their fundamental right to vote.
They were beaten bloodied and left for dead.
Our late friend and former colleague John Lewis was at the march.
We miss him.
Joining us tonight are other marchers who were there including Betty May Fikes, known as the "Voice of Selma".
A daughter of gospel singers and preachers, she sang songs of prayer and protest on that Bloody Sunday, to help shake the nation's conscience. Five months later, the Voting Rights Act was signed into law.
But 59 years later, there are forces taking us back in time.
Voter suppression. Election subversion. Unlimited dark money. Extreme gerrymandering.
John Lewis was a great friend to many of us here. But if you truly want to honor him and all the heroes who marched with him, then it's time for more than just talk.
Pass and send me the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act!
And stop denying another core value of America our diversity across American life.
Banning books.
It's wrong!
Instead of erasing history, let's make history!
I want to protect other fundamental rights!
Pass the Equality Act, and my message to transgender Americans: I have your back!
Pass the PRO Act for workers rights! And raise the federal minimum wage because every worker has the right to earn a decent living!
We are also making history by confronting the climate crisis, not denying it.
I'm taking the most significant action on climate ever in the history of the world.
I am cutting our carbon emissions in half by 2030.
Creating tens of thousands of clean-energy jobs, like the IBEW workers building and installing 500,000 electric vehicle charging stations.
Conserving 30% of America's lands and waters by 2030.
Taking historic action on environmental justice for fence-line communities smothered by the legacy of pollution. And patterned after the Peace Corps and Ameri Corps, I've launched a Climate Corps to put 20,000 young people to work at the forefront of our clean energy future.
I'll triple that number this decade.
All Americans deserve the freedom to be safe, and America is safer today than when I took office.
The year before I took office, murders went up 30% nationwide the biggest increase in history.
That was then.
Now, through my American Rescue Plan, which every Republican voted against, I've made the largest investment in public safety ever.

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Last year, the murder rate saw the sharpest decrease in history, and violent crime fell to one of the lowest levels in more than 50 years.

But we have more to do.

Help cities and towns invest in more community police officers, more mental health workers, and more community violence intervention.

Give communities the tools to crack down on gun crime, retail crime, and carjacking.

Keep building public trust, as I've been doing by taking executive action on police reform, and calling for it to be the law of the land, directing my Cabinet to review the federal classification of marijuana, and expunging thousands of convictions for mere possession, because no one should be jailed for using or possessing marijuana!

To take on crimes of domestic violence, I am ramping up federal enforcement of the Violence Against Women Act, that I proudly wrote, so we can finally end the scourge of violence against women in America!

And there's another kind of violence I want to stop.

With us tonight is Jasmine, whose 9-year-old sister Jackie was murdered with 21 classmates and teachers at her elementary school in Uvalde, Texas.

Soon after it happened, Jill and I went to Uvalde and spent hours with the families.

We heard their message, and so should everyone in this chamber do something.

I did do something by establishing the first-ever Office of Gun Violence Prevention in the White House that Vice President Harris is leading.

Meanwhile, my predecessor told the NRA he's proud he did nothing on guns when he was President.

After another school shooting in Iowa he said we should just "get over it."

I say we must stop it.

I'm proud we beat the NRA when I signed the most significant gun safety law in nearly 30 years!

Now we must beat the NRA again!

I'm demanding a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines!

Pass universal background checks!

None of this violates the Second Amendment or vilifies responsible gun owners.

As we manage challenges at home, we're also managing crises abroad including in the Middle East.

I know the last five months have been gut-wrenching for so many people, for the Israeli people, the Palestinian people, and so many here in America.

This crisis began on October 7th with a massacre by the terrorist group Hamas.

1,200 innocent people women and girls men and boys slaughtered, many enduring sexual violence.

The deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust.

250 hostages taken.

Here in the chamber tonight are American families whose loved ones are still being held by Hamas.

I pledge to all the families that we will not rest until we bring their loved ones home.

We will also work around the clock to bring home Evan and Paul, Americans being unjustly detained all around the world.

Israel has a right to go after Hamas.

Hamas could end this conflict today by releasing the hostages, laying down arms, and surrendering those responsible for October 7th.

Israel has an added burden because Hamas hides and operates among the civilian population. But Israel also has a fundamental responsibility to protect innocent civilians in Gaza.

This war has taken a greater toll on innocent civilians than all previous wars in Gaza combined.

More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed.

Most of whom are not Hamas.

Thousands and thousands are innocent women and children.

Girls and boys also orphaned.

Nearly 2 million more Palestinians under bombardment or displaced.

Homes destroyed, neighborhoods in rubble, cities in ruin.

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Families without food, water, medicine.

It's heartbreaking.

We've been working non-stop to establish an immediate ceasefire that would last for at least six weeks.

It would get the hostages home, ease the intolerable humanitarian crisis, and build toward something more enduring.

The United States has been leading international efforts to get more humanitarian assistance into Gaza.

Tonight, I'm directing the U.S. military to lead an emergency mission to establish a temporary pier in the Mediterranean on the Gaza coast that can receive large ships carrying food, water, medicine and temporary shelters.

No U.S. boots will be on the ground.

This temporary pier would enable a massive increase in the amount of humanitarian assistance getting into Gaza every day.

But Israel must also do its part.

Israel must allow more aid into Gaza and ensure that humanitarian workers aren't caught in the cross fire.

To the leadership of Israel I say this.

Humanitarian assistance cannot be a secondary consideration or a bargaining chip.

Protecting and saving innocent lives has to be a priority.

As we look to the future, the only real solution is a two-state solution.

I say this as a lifelong supporter of Israel and the only American president to visit Israel in wartime.

There is no other path that guarantees Israel's security and democracy.

There is no other path that guarantees Palestinians can live with peace and dignity.

There is no other path that guarantees peace between Israel and all of its Arab neighbors, including Saudi Arabia.

Creating stability in the Middle East also means containing the threat posed by Iran.

That's why I built a coalition of more than a dozen countries to defend international shipping and freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.

I've ordered strikes to degrade Houthi capabilities and defend U.S. Forces in the region.

As Commander in Chief, I will not hesitate to direct further measures to protect our people and military personnel.

For years, all I've heard from my Republican friends and so many others is China's on the rise and America is falling behind.

They've got it backward.

America is rising.

We have the best economy in the world.

Since I've come to office, our GDP is up.

And our trade deficit with China is down to the lowest point in over a decade.

We're standing up against China's unfair economic practices.

And standing up for peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait.

I've revitalized our partnerships and alliances in the Pacific.

I've made sure that the most advanced American technologies can't be used in China's weapons.

Frankly for all his tough talk on China, it never occurred to my predecessor to do that.

We want competition with China, but not conflict.

And we're in a stronger position to win the competition for the 21st Century against China or anyone else for that matter.

Here at home I've signed over 400 bipartisan bills.

But there's more to do to pass my Unity Agenda.

Strengthen penalties on fentanyl trafficking.

Pass bipartisan privacy legislation to protect our children online.

Harness the promise of A.I. and protect us from its peril.

Ban A.I. voice impersonation and more!

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And keep our one truly sacred obligation, to train and equip those we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they come home, and when they don't.

That's why I signed the PACT Act, one of the most significant laws ever, helping millions of veterans who were exposed to toxins and who now are battling more than 100 cancers.

Many of them didn't come home.

We owe them and their families.

And we owe it to ourselves to keep supporting our new health research agency called ARPA-H and remind us that we can do big things like end cancer as we know it!

Let me close with this.

I know I may not look like it, but I've been around a while.

And when you get to my age certain things become clearer than ever before.

I know the American story.

Again and again I've seen the contest between competing forces in the battle for the soul of our nation. Between those who want to pull America back to the past and those who want to move America into the future.

My lifetime has taught me to embrace freedom and democracy.

A future based on the core values that have defined America.

Honesty. Decency. Dignity. Equality.

To respect everyone. To give everyone a fair shot. To give hate no safe harbor.

Now some other people my age see a different story.

An American story of resentment, revenge, and retribution.

That's not me.

I was born amid World War II when America stood for freedom in the world.

I grew up in Scranton, Pennsylvania and Claymont, Delaware among working people who built this country.

I watched in horror as two of my heroes, Dr. King and Bobby Kennedy, were assassinated and their legacies inspired me to pursue a career in service.

A public defender, county councilman, elected United States Senator at 29, then Vice President, to our first Black President, now President, with our first woman Vice President.

In my career I've been told I'm too young and I'm too old.

Whether young or old, I've always known what endures.

Our North Star.

The very idea of America, that we are all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives.

We've never fully lived up to that idea, but we've never walked away from it either.

And I won't walk away from it now.

My fellow Americans the issue facing our nation isn't how old we are it's how old our ideas are?

Hate, anger, revenge, retribution are among the oldest of ideas.

But you can't lead America with ancient ideas that only take us back.

To lead America, the land of possibilities, you need a vision for the future of what America can and should be.

Tonight you've heard mine.

I see a future where we defend democracy not diminish it.

I see a future where we restore the right to choose and protect other freedoms not take them away.

I see a future where the middle class finally has a fair shot and the wealthy finally have to pay their fair share in taxes.

I see a future where we save the planet from the climate crisis and our country from gun violence.

Above all, I see a future for all Americans!

I see a country for all Americans!

And I will always be a president for all Americans!

Because I believe in America!

I believe in you the American people.
You're the reason I've never been more optimistic about our future!
So let's build that future together!
Let's remember who we are!
We are the United States of America.
There is nothing beyond our capacity when we act together!
May God bless you all.
May God protect our troops.

Transit crime is back as a top concern in some US cities, and political leaders have taken notice

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Fear of crime on subways and buses is back as a top concern in some U.S. cities, and so are efforts to persuade public officials to take the issue seriously.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said Wednesday she would task 750 members of the National Guard with helping patrol the nation's busiest subway system, saying she felt New York City police need reinforcements after a shooting on a train platform and a conductor getting slashed in the neck.

Pennsylvania legislators created a special prosecutor to go after crimes committed in the transit system that serves the southeast of the state. In Philadelphia, where a spate of transit-related shootings left three dead and 12 wounded, many of them high schoolers, Mayor Cherrille Parker also promised Thursday to beef up police patrols.

"Enough is enough," she said on WURD radio.

It remains to be seen whether such moves will have any effect on reducing crime in these massive public transit systems.

Hochul acknowledged that calling in the National Guard was as much about soothing fears and making a political statement as it was about making mass transit safer. The city's subways were already safe, the Democrat reasoned, but a show of force might help dispel anxieties more than any statistic.

"If you feel better walking past someone in a uniform to make sure that someone doesn't bring a knife or a gun on the subway, then that's exactly why I did it," Hochul said Thursday on MSNBC. "I want to change the psychology around crime in New York City."

"I'm also going to demonstrate that Democrats fight crime as well," she added. "So this narrative that Republicans have said that we're soft on crime, that we defund the police? No."

Major crimes in the New York City transit system dropped nearly 3% from 2022 to 2023, with five killings last year, down from 10 the year prior, according to police. Overall, violent crime in the subway system is rare, with train cars and stations being generally as safe as any other public place.

In Pennsylvania, overall crime has declined in recent years on the regional transit system, though there were six killings in 2023, up from a total of seven during the previous three years.

Still, the issue of safety on buses and trains is one that keeps resonating with voters — particularly as some systems recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, when passengers stayed away.

"Recently it's been a little unsafe. So I think they should control it before it gets out of hand," said Alan Uloa, a 43-year-old New York resident. "The other day they slashed the conductor, and that's not cool."

New York Republicans hammered Democrats on crime during the 2022 midterms, a message that helped the GOP capture suburban congressional seats.

But heightened law enforcement presence can be a double-edged sword, said Alex Piquero, a criminology professor at the University of Miami and the former director of the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics.

"For some people, they'd like to see the added security," he said. "And for other people, they'll say we're overreacting."

The political tough talk can also gloss over the reality that transit crime accounts for just a tiny percentage of all crime, said Vincent Del Castillo, a professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice and a former

chief of New York City's transit police.

"You can have 10 to 12 murders in the system when there are literally hundreds across the city," he said. "But because it's so rare, it gets a lot of attention."

The four shootings linked to Philadelphia's bus system began Sunday, when a man was killed by another passenger shortly after they got off a bus.

Two more bus-related shootings in the next two days left two more dead and four injured. Then on Wednesday eight teenagers waiting to take a city bus home after school were shot, leaving a bus riddled with bullet holes.

Charles Lawson, chief of the city's transit police, vowed that officers will take an aggressive approach, using "every criminal code on the book" to crack down on crime.

"We're going to target individuals concealing their identity," he said. "We're going to target fare evasion. We're going to target open drug use."

The Guard troops in New York won't be that active. Instead they have been tasked with helping police conduct random searches of bags, a practice in place for nearly two decades. Passengers have the right to refuse such searches, though if they do they are asked to leave the subway system.

Guard troops can't make arrests, but if they witness a crime, they can detain someone until police arrive, just as any civilian can do.

The troops were deployed Thursday, but transit riders might not have noticed as they weren't widely visible at stations or in trains. Some were seen patrolling major hubs, including Grand Central Terminal and Penn Station, where they have been a regular presence since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Riders have long been split over bag checks, which are infrequent but can hold people up as they race for a train. Searches have also long been a subject of concerns over racial profiling, though the NYPD says it takes steps to avoid that.

"Sometimes when I'm in a hurry and I have a bag, I don't like to be stopped," said Jerome Brooks Jr., a 44-year-old actor and musician. "So then I try to see, do they stop me if they're going to stop somebody else that doesn't look like me?"

Cheryl Ann Harper, 46, said she welcomed the precaution.

"We need it," she said, noting that similar checks are common at theaters. "I do it all the time. Not a big deal. If you don't have anything to hide, why you can't open up your bag?"

Uvalde parents angered by new report that clears city police of missteps during Texas school attack

By ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

UVALDE, Texas (AP) — An investigation Uvalde city leaders ordered into the Robb Elementary School shooting that killed 19 students and two teachers defended the actions of local police in a report released Thursday, prompting shouts of "cowards" during a City Council meeting and causing several family members of the victims to angrily walk out.

The report acknowledged wide failures by police during the 2022 attack and reiterated rippling missteps that the Justice Department and state lawmakers have previously laid bare. Nearly 400 law enforcement agents, including Uvalde Police Department officers, rushed to the scene of the shooting but waited more than an hour to confront a teenage gunman armed with an AR-style rifle.

But an investigator hired by Uvalde officials found that the city's officers did not violate policies, and in some cases, praised their actions during one of the deadliest classroom shootings in U.S. history. The presentation prompted an eruption of anger among some of the victims' family members, who also scolded the investigator for leaving the room before they had a chance to address him.

"You said they did it in good faith. You call that good faith? They stood there 77 minutes," said Kimberly Mata-Rubio, whose daughter was among those killed in the attack, after the presentation ended.

Jesse Prado, an Austin-based investigator and former police detective who made the report for the Uvalde

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City Council, began his presentation by describing the failures by responding local, state and federal officers at the scene that day: communication problems, poor training for live shooter situations, lack of available equipment and delays on breaching the classroom.

"There were problems all day long with communication and lack of it. The officers had no way of knowing what was being planned, what was being said," Prado said. "If they would have had a ballistic shield, it would have been enough to get them to the door."

The city's report is just one of several probes into the massacre, including the Justice Department report in January that criticized the "cascading failures" of responding law enforcement.

Law enforcement took more than an hour to get inside the classroom and kill the gunman, even as children inside the classrooms called 911, begging police to rescue them.

But Prado said his review showed that officers showed "immeasurable strength" and "level-headed thinking" as they faced fire from the shooter and refrained from shooting into a darkened classroom.

"They were being shot at from eight feet away from the door," Prado said.

Prado also said the families who rushed to the school hampered efforts to set up a chain of command as they had to conduct crowd control with parents trying to get in the building or pleading with officers to go inside.

"At times they were difficult to control," Prado said. "They were wanting to break through police barriers."

Family members erupted when Prado briefly left after his presentation.

"Bring him back!" several of them shouted.

Prado returned and sat and listened when victims' families cried and criticized the report, the council and the responding officers.

"My daughter was left for dead," Ruben Zamorra said. "These police officers signed up to do a job. They didn't do it."

A criminal investigation by Uvalde District Attorney Christina Mitchell's office into the law enforcement response in 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.

Uvalde City Council member Hector Luevano said he was "embarrassed" and "insulted" by the city's report.

"These families deserve more. This community deserves more," Luevano said. "I don't accept this report."

The city report comes after a nearly 600-page report by the Department of Justice in January 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.

"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 survived," U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland said when the federal report was released.

The DOJ reported that 48 minutes after the shooter entered the school, UPD Acting Chief Mariano Pargas "continued to provide no direction, command or control to personnel."

The city report notes the agency's SWAT team had not trained consistently since before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Three UPD officers who were present in the hallway during the shooting "were the leadership of the SWAT team and had the most experience with Uvalde PD."

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.

Steve Lawrence, singer, entertainer and half of popular stage duo Steve & Eydie, dies at 88

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Steve Lawrence, a singer and top stage act who as a solo performer and in tandem with his wife Eydie Gorme kept Tin Pan Alley alive during the rock era, died Thursday. He was 88.

Lawrence, whose hits included "Go Away Little Girl," died from complications due to Alzheimer's disease, said Susan DuBow, a spokesperson for the family.

Lawrence and Gorme — or Steve & Eydie — were known for their frequent appearances on talk shows, in night clubs and on the stages of Las Vegas. The duo took inspiration from George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and other songwriters.

Soon after Elvis Presley and other rock music pioneers began to dominate radio and records, Lawrence and his wife were approached about changing their style.

"We had a chance to get in on the ground floor of rock 'n' roll," he recalled in a 1989 interview. "It was 1957 and everything was changing, but I wanted to be Sinatra, not Rick Nelson.

"Our audience knows we're not going to load up on heavy metal or set fire to the drummer — although on some nights we've talked about it," he joked.

Although Lawrence and Gorme were best known as a team, both also had huge solo hits just months apart in the early 1960s.

Dionne Warwick, a longtime friend, said in a statement that Lawrence was "resting with comfort in the arms of the Heavenly Father. My heartfelt condolences go out." Carol Burnett, in a statement, called Lawrence one of her favorite guests on her variety show. "He was also my very close friend," she said. "He will always be in my heart."

Lawrence scored first in 1962 with the achingly romantic ballad "Go Away Little Girl," written by the Brill Building songwriting team of Gerry Goffin and Carole King. Gorme matched his success the following year with "Blame It on the Bossa Nova," a bouncy tune about a dance craze of the time that was written by Brill hitmakers Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil.

By the 1970s, Lawrence and his wife were a top draw in Las Vegas casinos and nightclubs across the country. They also appeared regularly on television, making specials and guesting on various shows.

In the 1980s, when Vegas cut down on headline acts and nightclubs became scarcer, the pair switched to auditoriums and drew large audiences.

"People come with a general idea of what they're going to get with us," Lawrence said in 1989. "It's like a product. They buy a certain cereal and they know what to expect from that package."

Lawrence launched his professional singing career at age 15. After two failed auditions for "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts" TV show, he was accepted on the third try, going on to win the competition and the prize of appearing on Godfrey's popular daytime radio show for a week.

King Records, impressed by the teenager's strong, two-octave voice, signed him to a contract. His first record, "Poinciana," sold more than 100,000 copies, and his high school allowed him to skip classes to promote it with out-of-town singing dates.

After several guest appearances on Steve Allen's television show, Lawrence was hired as a regular. When the program became NBC's "Tonight" in 1954, he went with it, singing and exchanging quips with Allen. The series set the pattern for the long-running "The Tonight Show."

"I think Steve Allen was the biggest thing that happened to me," said Lawrence, who stayed with the show's host for five years, honing his comedic skills and attracting a wide audience with his singing. "Every night I was called upon to do something different. In its own way it was better than vaudeville."

Early in the series' run, a young singer named Eydie Gorme joined the cast. After singing together for

four years, she and Lawrence were married in 1957.

Until Gorme's death, in 2013, they remained popular, whether working together in concert or making separate TV appearances.

His reasoning: "If we did television together all the time, why should anyone go see us in a club?"

He appeared in such shows as "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation," "Gilmore Girls," "Diagnosis Murder" and "The Nanny."

He and his wife did star together in "The Steve Lawrence-Eydie Gorme Show" in 1958 and Lawrence had his own series, "The Steve Lawrence Show," in 1965.

He also made stage appearances without Gorme, including a starring role in a 1962 summer stock version of "Pal Joey." He made it to Broadway in 1964 — and earned a Tony Award nomination — in the musical "What Makes Sammy Run?" based on Budd Schulberg's classic novel about a New York hustler who claws his way to the top of the entertainment world.

Critics praised Lawrence but gave the play bad reviews. Still, it turned a profit, and insiders attributed its success to his performance.

Lawrence also had a few character roles in movies, most notably "Stand Up and Be Counted," "Blues Brothers 2000," "The Lonely Guy" and "The Yards."

Native-born New Yorkers, Lawrence and Gorme lived in a Manhattan apartment during their early years together. When the center of TV entertainment shifted to Hollywood, they moved to Beverly Hills.

Born Sidney Liebowitz in New York City's borough of Brooklyn, Lawrence was the son of a Jewish cantor who worked as a house painter. He began singing in his father's synagogue choir at 8, moving on to bars and clubs by his mid-teens. He took his name from the first names of two nephews.

He and Gorme had two sons, David, a composer, and Michael. Long troubled with heart problems, Michael died of heart failure in 1986 at age 23.

"My dad was an inspiration to so many people," his son David said in a statement. "But, to me, he was just this charming, handsome, hysterically funny guy who sang a lot. Sometimes alone and sometimes with his insanely talented wife. I am so lucky to have had him as a father and so proud to be his son."

Floridians can 'stand their ground' and kill threatening bears under bill going to DeSantis

By BRENDAN FARRINGTON Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — So long as they don't eat them, stuff them or turn them into hats for the British royal guard, Florida residents will be allowed to kill black bears threatening them on their property with no consequences under a bill sent to Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis on Thursday.

The once-threatened Florida black bear population has increasingly wandered into neighborhoods and private property, especially in more rural areas of north and central Florida. The legislation is similar to the "stand your ground" law that allows people to use deadly force against other people threatening them.

Supporters say Floridians have the right to defend themselves, their families, pets and property against bears coming around looking for food. But opponents fear people will become trigger happy and not take other precautions against bears.

"I'm not in favor of enabling the mass murder of bears," said Democratic Rep. Katherine Waldron. "This bill is based on fear and not facts. Make no mistake, this bill was created by and for people looking for any excuse to be able to hunt and kill a bear."

She noted that the bill gives bear killers 24 hours to notify the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission of their action, enough time to come up with a self-defense excuse. She argued that they won't need much evidence.

"Bears will not bother you if you behave responsibly," she said. "Zero people have been murdered by black bears in our state. You are 60,000 times more likely to be murdered by another human."

But Republican Rep. Jason Shoaf said wildlife officials have assured him they will investigate every bear

killing thoroughly and won't tolerate people shooting bears out of trees or after luring them with food.

"They will be watching diligently once this bill is passed to make an example of the first person who tries to use this as some type of defense, and I'll be there at the trial to make sure they get the justice they deserve," Shoaf said.

People who kill a bear wouldn't be allowed to keep or sell any meat or parts of the bear. That means no bear rugs or selling them to the company that makes the famous, black bearskin hats worn by guards outside London's Buckingham Palace.

Florida's bear population has rebounded after declining to about 300 in the 1970s and is now estimated to exceed 4,000. The state allowed a limited bear hunt in 2015, when the population was estimated at 3,500. More than 3,200 hunters purchased permits to participate, including 1970s rocker Ted Nugent.

The hunt was supposed to last up to a month, but ended after 304 bears were killed in two days. The state backed off the idea of holding more.

The state does give advice on what people should do if they have a close encounter with a bear.

"Remain standing upright, back up slowly and speak to the bear in a calm, assertive voice," the conservation commission says on its website. "Make sure that you are in a safe area and that the bear has a clear escape route. Then, make noise or bang pots and pans to scare the bear away. Do NOT turn your back, play dead, climb a tree or run."

Judge denies Trump relief from \$83.3 million defamation judgment

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The federal judge who oversaw a New York defamation trial that resulted in an \$83.3 million award to a longtime magazine columnist who says Donald Trump raped her in the 1990s refused Thursday to relieve the ex-president from the verdict's financial pinch.

Judge Lewis A. Kaplan told Trump's attorney in a written order that he won't delay deadlines for posting a bond that would ensure 80-year-old writer E. Jean Carroll can be paid the award if the judgment survives appeals.

The judge said any financial harm to the Republican front-runner for the presidency results from his slow response to the late-January verdict in the defamation case resulting from statements Trump made about Carroll while he was president in 2019 after she revealed her claims against him in a memoir.

At the time, Trump accused her of making up claims that he raped her in the dressing room of a luxury Manhattan department store in spring 1996. A jury last May at a trial Trump did not attend awarded Carroll \$5 million in damages, finding that Trump sexually abused her but did not rape her as rape was defined under New York state law. It also concluded that he defamed her in statements in October 2022.

Trump attended the January trial and briefly testified, though his remarks were severely limited by the judge, who had ruled that the jury had to accept the May verdict and was only to decide how much in damages, if any, Carroll was owed for Trump's 2019 statements. In the statements, Trump claimed he didn't know Carroll and accused her of making up lies to sell books and harm him politically.

Trump's lawyers have challenged the judgment, which included a \$65 million punitive award, saying there was a "strong probability" it will be reduced or eliminated on appeal.

In his order Thursday, Kaplan noted that Trump's lawyers waited 25 days to seek to delay when a bond must be posted. The judgment becomes final Monday.

"Mr. Trump's current situation is a result of his own dilatory actions," Kaplan wrote.

The judge noted that Trump's lawyers seek to delay execution of the jury award until three days after Kaplan rules on their request to suspend the jury award pending consideration of their challenges to the judgment because preparations to post a bond could "impose irreparable injury in the form of substantial costs."

Kaplan, though, said the expense of ongoing litigation does not constitute irreparable injury.

"Nor has Mr. Trump made any showing of what expenses he might incur if required to post a bond or other security, on what terms (if any) he could obtain a conventional bond, or post cash or other assets

to secure payment of the judgment, or any other circumstances relevant to the situation," the judge said. Trump's attorney, Alina Habba, did not immediately comment.

Since the January verdict, a state court judge in New York in a separate case has ordered Trump and his companies to pay \$355 million in penalties for a yearslong scheme to dupe banks and others with financial statements that inflated his wealth. With interest, he owes the state nearly \$454 million.

'They messed it up': Biden's backing for Haiti's unpopular leader digs US into deeper policy hole

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — When Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry filled the void left by the assassination of the country's president in 2021, he did so over the protest of wide segments of the population but with the full-throated support of the Biden administration.

Now, almost three years later, Henry's grip on power is hanging by a thread, and Washington is confronted by even worse choices as it scrambles to prevent the country's descent into anarchy.

"They messed it up deeply," James Foley, a retired career diplomat and former U.S. ambassador to Haiti, said in an interview about the Biden administration's support for Henry. "They rode this horse to their doom. It's the fruit of the choices we made."

The embattled prime minister left Haiti 10 days ago and has since crisscrossed the world — from South America to Africa to New York and now Puerto Rico — all while staying silent as he tries to negotiate a return home that seems increasingly unlikely.

The power vacuum has been exacerbated by the almost complete withdrawal of police from key state institutions and a mass escape of hundreds of murderers, kidnappers and other violent offenders from the country's two biggest prisons over the weekend.

Haiti remained paralyzed Thursday after another night of attacks on police stations and other targets by armed groups that have vowed to force Henry's resignation. The country's acting prime minister, filling in for Henry while he is abroad, extended a poorly enforced nighttime curfew through Sunday.

Stubborn U.S. support for Henry is largely to blame for the deteriorating situation, said Monique Clesca, a Haitian writer and member of the Montana Group, a coalition of civil, business and political leaders that came together in the wake of Jovenel Moïse's murder to promote a "Haitian-led solution" to the protracted crisis.

The group's main objective is to replace Henry with an oversight committee made up of nonpolitical technocrats to restore order and pave the way for elections. But so far, Henry, who has repeatedly promised to hold elections, has shown no willingness to yield power.

While in Guyana last week for a meeting of Caribbean leaders, he delayed what would be Haiti's first vote in a decade yet again, until mid-2025.

"He's been a magician in terms of his incompetence and inaction," said Clesca. "And despite it all, the U.S. has stayed with him. They've been his biggest enabler."

By any measure, Haiti's perennially tenuous governance has gotten far worse since Henry has been in office.

Last year, more than 8,400 people were reported killed, injured or kidnapped, more than double the number reported in 2022. The United Nations estimates that nearly half of Haiti's 11 million people need humanitarian assistance.

But even as Haiti has plunged deeper into chaos, the U.S. has stood firmly by Henry.

"He is taking difficult steps," Brian Nichols, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, said in October 2022, as Haitians poured into the streets to protest the end of fuel subsidies. "Those are actions that we have wanted to see in Haiti for quite some time."

When demonstrations resumed last month demanding Henry's resignation, the top U.S. diplomat in Haiti again rushed to his defense.

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"Ariel Henry will leave after the elections," U.S. chargé d'affaires Eric Stromayer told a local radio station. But the Biden administration isn't the only U.S. administration that failed to get Haiti right.

The country has been on a downward spiral for decades as rampant poverty, corruption, lawlessness and natural disasters overwhelm any effort to rebuild the economy and democratic institutions. Factionalism among political elites, some with ties to the flourishing criminal underworld, has also taken its toll, making it especially hard for the U.S. to find partners it can trust.

"It's an occupational hazard with Haiti," Foley said. "It's just too hard, too complicated, too insoluble."

The Biden administration has defended its approach to Haiti. White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre, without specifically endorsing Henry, said the U.S. long term goal of stabilizing the country so Haitians can hold elections hasn't changed.

But in what may be a telling slip that speaks to the neglect Haiti has suffered in Washington of late, Jean-Pierre confused the Haitian president, the country's top elected official, with the prime minister, who is picked by the president and subject to parliamentary approval.

"It's the Haitian people — they need to have an opportunity to democratically elect their prime minister," Jean-Pierre, whose parents fled Haiti, said Wednesday. "That's what we're encouraging. But we've been having these conversations for some time."

Nichols said he and Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Henry on Thursday and urged him to broaden his political coalition. He said the U.S. would work to speed up the deployment of a multinational security mission to combat the gangs led by Haiti under the auspices of the United Nations but that other countries needed to step up their support in the way the world is working together to address humanitarian needs in Ukraine and Gaza.

"We've got to do more, we've got to do more urgently," Nichols said at an event hosted by the Council of the Americas in Washington. "The crisis in Haiti has the humanitarian proportions that demand a global response."

The U.S. bears much of the blame for the country's ills. After French colonizers were violently banished in 1791, the U.S. worked to isolate the country diplomatically and strangle it economically. American leaders feared a newly independent and free Haiti would inspire slave revolts back home. The U.S. did not even officially recognize Haiti until 1862, during the Civil War that abolished American slavery.

Meanwhile, U.S. troops have been an on-and-off presence on the island, dating from the era of "gunboat diplomacy" in the early 20th century when President Woodrow Wilson sent an expeditionary force that would occupy the country for two decades to collect unpaid debts to foreign powers.

The last intervention took place in 2004, when the administration of George W. Bush diverted resources from the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and Iraq to calm the streets following a coup that removed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Foley said he sees many parallels between the Aristide crisis he had to navigate as ambassador and the one confronting the Biden administration. Then, as now, Haitian political leaders have proven incapable of consensus and state authority has collapsed, even if the magnitude of the security and economic free fall is far deeper. Re-engineering democracy will take years of painstaking work.

Neither the White House nor the Pentagon wants to send troops into Haiti with a proxy war taking place in Ukraine against Russia, the Israel-Hamas conflict at risk of spreading and the growing rivalry with China in the Indo-Pacific.

Politically, any such move just months from the U.S. presidential election would be seized on by Biden's likely opponent, Donald J. Trump, as another example of futile nation building by the U.S.

But Foley said the situation is deteriorating so fast that the Biden administration may have no choice. He's pushing for a limited troop presence, like the one that in 2004 handed off to U.N. peacekeepers after only six months. Unlike the U.N. peacekeeping mission, which was hastily organized, Kenya has been working for months on a multinational force to combat the gangs.

"I completely understand the deep reluctance in Washington to have U.S. forces on the ground," Foley said. "But it may prove impossible to prevent a criminal takeover of the state unless a small U.S. security

contingent is sent on a temporary basis to create the conditions for international forces to take over.”

But whether yet another U.S. intervention helps stabilize a desperate Haiti, or just adds more fuel to the raging fire, remains an open question. And given the recent American track record, many are doubtful.

“The U.S. for too long has been too present, too meddling,” said Clesca. “It’s time for them to step back.”

State of the Union guests spotlight divide on abortion and immigration but offer some rare unity

By The Associated Press undefined

The invitation list for President Joe Biden’s State of the Union address on Thursday speaks volumes about what Democrats and Republicans want to focus on as the 2024 election season heats up.

Biden and Democratic lawmakers have invited several health care providers and women whose lives have been impacted by stricter abortion laws in states with Republican-controlled legislatures following the landmark 2022 Supreme Court ruling that stripped away constitutional protections for abortion. First lady Jill Biden has also invited union leaders, a gun control advocate, and others that she and her husband have met as they traveled the country promoting his agenda.

Republican lawmakers are inviting guests who place heavy focus on the nation’s broken immigration system, an issue that voters say is a central concern ahead of the November election.

The guests invited to sit in the galleries for Biden’s speech also include at least a few people whom nearly everyone in hyper-partisan Washington should be able to cheer.

A look at some of those expected to be in attendance for Biden’s address and the issues they bring into focus:

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

— Kate Cox is a Texas woman who was denied an emergency abortion by the state’s Supreme Court late last year even though her health was in danger and her fetus had a fatal condition. The mother of two eventually had to go out of state for the procedure. She is a guest of Jill Biden.

—Dr. Caitlin Bernard is an Indianapolis OBGYN who came under attack in 2022 for providing an abortion to a 10-year-old rape victim. She will be the guest of Rep. Judy Chu of California.

— Elizabeth Carr, 42, is the first person born in the U.S. via in vitro fertilization. She will be a guest of Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. He said he invited Carr to spotlight concerns after the Alabama Supreme Court’s ruling last month that frozen embryos can be considered children led the state’s three major IVF providers to pause services.

—Roshni Kamta, a native of Jersey City, New Jersey, was diagnosed with breast cancer at 22 and decided to freeze her eggs before undergoing treatment. The experience inspired her to advocate for wider access to fertility treatments for breast cancer patients. She’s a guest of Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J.

—Tammi Kromenaker spent nearly 25 years in Fargo, North Dakota, helping operate the Red River Women’s Clinic, the state’s sole abortion provider. After the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, North Dakota enacted some of the country’s strictest abortion laws. Kromenaker moved the clinic to the neighboring city of Moorhead, Minnesota. She’s a guest of Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn.

IMMIGRATION

-- Tammy Nobles is the mother of a young woman, Kayla Hamilton, who was killed in 2022. The suspect was an MS-13 gang member who had entered the U.S. illegally. Nobles was invited by House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La..

— Border patrol agent Brandon Budlong, president of the National Border Patrol Council Local 2724, will be the guest of Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., the chair of the House Republican Caucus.

— Two New York Police Department officers, Ben Kurian and Zunxu Tian, who were attacked by migrants in a January incident near Times Square that drew national attention will be the guests of Reps. Anthony D’Esposito and Nicole Malliotakis, both New York Republicans, as well as Johnson.

— Valeria Delgado, a student at Chapman University in California who has benefitted from the policy created to protect young migrants brought to the U.S. as children, will be the guest of Rep. Lou Correa,

D-Calif.

RUSSIA, ISRAEL and NATO

— Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson will be in the first lady's box as Sweden on Thursday completed the formal process of joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Sweden along with Finland moved to join NATO after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

— Ella Milman and Mikhail Gershkovich, the parents of detained Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, will attend as guests of Johnson. The Louisiana Republican said he invited them to spotlight "unjust" detention of their son, who has been jailed in Russia since last March on espionage charges. Gershkovich and the U.S. government dispute the charges against him.

— Lawmakers also are hosting victims and relatives of people killed or held hostage by Hamas in the Oct. 7 attack on Israel. Among those expected to attend are Mia Schem, who was abducted by Hamas and released as part of a temporary cease-fire between Hamas and Israel after spending more than 50 days in captivity.

LABOR

United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain will be among those in the first lady's box. Other union representatives joining her will be Samantha Ervin-Upsher, a United Brotherhood of Carpenters apprentice, and Dawn Simms, a third-generation union autoworker. The UAW announced in January it was endorsing Biden.

VOTING RIGHTS, GUN CONTROL and BEYOND

— Jazmin Cazares, a gun control advocate, spent her senior year of high school traveling the country telling the story of her sister Jackie, who was among the 19 students and two teachers fatally shot during a May 2022 shooting at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas. She is a guest of the first lady.

— Dawn Chapman for years has advocated for the cleanup of nuclear radiation around St. Louis. She'll be the guest of Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Missouri, who has pressed the federal government to compensate victims of radioactive waste in the St. Louis and St. Charles region of Missouri.

— Minnesota state Rep. Cedrick Frazier is the author of legislation that restored voting rights to more than 55,000 Minnesotans who have completed felony sentences but remain on parole, probation, or supervised release. Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., invited Frazier to put the spotlight on voting rights efforts in her home state as she presses for similar legislation on the federal level.

6 dead after mass stabbing at Ottawa home, student who lived with family arrested

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — A 19-year-old student from Sri Lanka is accused of stabbing and killing six people he lived with, including a 2 1/2-month-old baby girl and three other kids from a Sri Lankan family, Ottawa police said Thursday.

Ottawa police chief Eric Stubbs said an "edged weapon" or "knife-like object" was used by the suspect, who was identified as Febrio De-Zoysa. He has been charged with six counts of first-degree murder and one count of attempted murder. Mass killings are rare in Canada.

Stubbs said the deceased are Sri Lankan nationals who recently came to Canada. He said they include a 35-year-old mother, a 7-year-old son, a 4-year-old daughter, a 2-year-old daughter and the 2 1/2-month-old baby girl as well as a 40-year-old acquaintance of the family.

The police chief said when the first officers arrived at the home the family's father was outside and screaming for someone to call 911. Police received two emergency calls at 10:52 p.m. Wednesday.

The father is in hospital with serious, but non-life-threatening, injuries.

"This was a senseless act of violence perpetrated on purely innocent people," Stubbs said.

Sri Lanka's high commission said that it is in touch with relatives in the country's capital, Colombo.

De-Zoysa made a brief appearance in court Thursday and mumbled his assent as the justice of the peace ordered him not to speak to the father who survived the attack or to four other witnesses who provided statements to the police.

His case was adjourned until March 13 to give him time to find a lawyer.

Police were called to the home in the Barrhaven area just before 11 p.m. Wednesday night. The suspect was arrested quickly after that, and police said there was no continuing threat to public safety.

Don Perera, a neighbor, said he met the family that lived in the home last fall at a Halloween party at the nearby Catholic elementary school. He said the father was from Sri Lanka.

Shanti Ramesh, who lives across the street, was alerted to a commotion late Wednesday. From her balcony, she saw a man sitting on the driveway of the home and yelling before two police officers arrived and carried him away.

On Thursday morning, five marked police cars were parked on the street and in driveways near the home, which is a middle unit of a row of brick townhouses.

Several people in white jumpsuits were going in and out of the home throughout the early morning, while parents and kids walked and biked by on their way to a nearby elementary school.

"Our first reactions are all ones of shock and horror at this terrible violence," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said.

Ottawa Mayor Mark Sutcliffe called the news distressing for all the city's residents.

"It's hard to believe," he said. "It's devastating and heartbreaking."

Police have identified the victims as Darshani Banbaranayake Gama Walwwe Darshani Dilanthika Ekanyake, the 35-year-old mother; Inuka Wickramasinghe, a 7-year-old boy; Ashwini Wickramasinghe, a 4-year-old daughter, Rinyana Wickramasinghe, a 2-year-old daughter and Kelly Wickramasinghe, a 2 1/2-month-old baby girl.

A sixth victim, Amarakoonmubiayansela Ge Gamini Amarakoon, 40, was also found deceased.

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 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.

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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

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."

Power lines ignited the largest wildfire in Texas history and one nearby, officials say

By JAMIE STENGLE Associated Press

Power lines ignited massive wildfires across the Texas Panhandle that killed at least two people, destroyed homes and livestock, and left a charred landscape, officials said Thursday, including the largest blaze in state history.

The Texas A&M Forest Service said its investigators concluded that power lines ignited both the historic Smokehouse Creek fire, which has burned nearly 1,700 square miles (4,400 square kilometers) and spilled into neighboring Oklahoma, and the nearby Windy Deuce fire, which has burned about 225 square miles (582 square kilometers). The statement did not elaborate on what led to the power lines igniting the blazes.

Utility provider Xcel Energy said its equipment appeared to have sparked the Smokehouse Creek fire. The Minnesota-based company said in the news release that it did not believe its equipment caused the ignition of the Windy Deuce fire, nor was it aware of any allegations that it had. A company spokesman said in an email that there are power lines owned and operated by various companies in that area.

The wildfires that ignited last week in the windswept rural area prompted evacuations in a handful of small communities, destroyed as many as 500 structures and killed thousands of cattle. When the blazes began on Feb. 26, winds in the area were reaching upwards of 60 miles per hour (97 kilometers per hour). Those strong winds, along with dry grass and temperatures reaching into the 70s and 80s fed the flames.

Containment levels have been increasing. The Smokehouse Creek fire was 74% contained Thursday, while the Windy Deuce fire was 89%. But the Forest Service warned that high winds were expected to be moving across the dry landscape, increasing fire danger.

Downed power lines and other utility equipment have led to other major wildfires, including the deadly blaze in Maui last year and a massive California wildfire in 2019.

A lawsuit filed last week in Hemphill County alleged that a downed power line near the town of Stinnett on Feb. 26 sparked the Smokehouse Creek fire. The lawsuit, filed on behalf of a Stinnett homeowner against Xcel Energy, alleged the blaze started "when a wooden pole defendants failed to properly inspect, maintain and replace, splintered and snapped off at its base."

In its Thursday news release, Xcel Energy disputed claims of negligence in maintaining and operating infrastructure.

In a statement that followed Xcel Energy's news release, Mikal Watts, the attorney who filed the lawsuit on behalf of the homeowner, said that an inspection Wednesday of the downed utility pole found "a heavily degraded wooden pole that should have been removed from service long ago." He said the company that conducts pole inspections for Xcel Energy previously found the pole's condition to be so degraded that it put a red tag on it to signify that it wasn't safe to be climbed and needed to be replaced immediately.

Xcel did not immediately respond to those comments from Watts.

Two women were confirmed killed by the wildfires last week, one who was overtaken by flames south of Canadian after getting out of her truck and another whose remains were found in her burned home in Stinnett. On Tuesday, the fire chief in one of the hardest hit towns died while responding to a house fire. An official said that while the blaze wasn't caused by a wildfire, Fritch Fire Chief Zeb Smith had been tirelessly fighting wildfires for over a week. An autopsy will determine Smith's cause of death.

The small town of Fritch, which lost hundreds of homes in a 2014 wildfire, saw dozens more destroyed last week. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott this week ordered that flags in Fritch be lowered to half-staff to honor Smith.

The Associated Press has requested the full reports from the Forest Service on the causes of the Smokehouse Creek and Windy Deuce fires.

Dale Smith, who operates a large ranch east of Stinnett, worked last week to tally up the number of cattle he lost in the wildfires. He said then that he believed a faulty power line was likely to blame, and that he had been concerned about their maintenance.

"These fires are becoming a regular occurrence," he said. "Lives are being lost. Livestock are being lost."

Livelihoods are being lost. It's a sad story that repeats itself again and again."

House Republicans push bill to detain migrants accused of theft after Georgia student killed

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House on Thursday passed a bill that would require federal authorities to detain unauthorized immigrants who have been accused of theft, as Republicans seized on the recent death of a nursing student in Georgia to rebuke President Joe Biden's border policies just hours ahead of his State of the Union address.

After 22-year-old Laken Riley, an Augusta University nursing student, was killed late last month while on a morning run, Republicans rushed the "Laken Riley Act" to the House floor to coincide with Biden's annual address.

The legislation easily passed 251-170 with all Republicans and 37 Democrats voting for it. But the nine-page bill was designed more to deliver a political point than to enact law and had little chance of being taken up in the Democratic-controlled Senate.

As immigration becomes a top issue in the presidential election, Republicans are using nearly every tool at their disposal — including impeaching Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas — to condemn how the president has handled immigration. But Biden is also hammering GOP lawmakers for rejecting a bipartisan bill last month that sought to tamp down the number of illegal crossings at the U.S. border with Mexico.

"Republicans will not stand for the release of dangerous criminals into our communities, and that's exactly what the Biden administration has done," Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson told Fox News.

Riley's death has become a rallying point for Donald Trump, the likely GOP presidential nominee, after authorities arrested on murder and assault charges Jose Ibarra, a Venezuelan man who entered the U.S. illegally and was allowed to stay to pursue his immigration case. He has not yet entered a plea to the charges.

U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement said Ibarra was arrested by New York police in August and charged with acting in a manner to injure a child less than 17 and a motor vehicle license violation. Ibarra was released before ICE could ask New York officials to hold him until immigration authorities could take him into custody, ICE said. New York officials have said they have no record of the arrest.

The legislation would also allow states to sue the federal government if they can demonstrate harm caused by immigrants who enter the country illegally. It was part of a broader push by Republicans to deride immigrants who enter the U.S. illegally and tie them to violent crimes.

Rep. Mike Collins, the Georgia Republican who sponsored the bill, posted on social media this week that he had invited Riley's parents to the State of the Union address, but they had "chosen to stay home as they grieve the loss of their daughter."

Per Johnson, "Laken is just one of the tragic examples of innocent American citizens who have lost their lives, been brutally and violently attacked by illegal criminals who are roaming our streets."

The speaker said his guests for the State of the Union would also include New York City police officers who brawled with migrants in Time Square.

On the whole, however, there is no evidence that immigrants are more prone to violent crime. Several studies have found immigrants commit lower rates of crime than those born in the U.S., though groups that advocate for restrictive immigration policies dispute or dismiss those findings.

One study published by the National Academy of Sciences, based on Texas Department of Public Safety data from 2012 to 2018, reported native-born U.S. residents were more than twice as likely to be arrested for violent crimes than people in the country illegally.

Democrats argued Republicans have shown they are not serious about enacting border policy changes because they rejected a bipartisan proposal from the Senate that would have overhauled the U.S. asylum

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system with faster and tougher enforcement. Republicans mostly criticized that bill as insufficient.

Rep. Jim McGovern, a Massachusetts Democrat, accused GOP lawmakers of using Riley's death for political purposes.

"The idea that you would bring a bill like this to the floor to exploit a terrible tragedy, a bill that will do nothing, a bill that you know is going nowhere, is really, really sad," McGovern said.

And the Oscar goes to ... a movie most people have seen

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Oscars are poised to do something on Sunday that they haven't done in a very long time: Hand its top award to a blockbuster.

After years of favoring smaller movies like "The Shape of Water" and "Nomadland," the clear best-picture favorite "Oppenheimer" — with just shy of \$1 billion in tickets sold — is steam rolling toward the kind of big-movie dominance the Academy Awards hasn't seen in two decades.

You have to go back to Ben Affleck's "Argo" (2012) to find a best-picture winner that's grossed more than \$100 million domestically. Academy voters' tastes have instead largely favored smaller independently produced films like "Moonlight," "Nomadland" and "CODA," an Apple release with zero reported box office in North America. Last year, the scrappy, distinctly un-Oscar-like indie "Everything Everywhere All at Once" played the role of awards-season underdog until it became an unlikely Academy Awards heavyweight.

But even "Argo," which walked away with three Oscars after grossing \$232.3 million worldwide on a \$44.5 million budget, isn't much of a corollary to "Oppenheimer." For that, you need to rewind to the 2004 Oscars, where Peter Jackson's "The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King" — a \$1.16 billion smash — took home 11 Oscars. That's more the kind of wall-to-wall sweep expected Sunday for Christopher Nolan's J. Robert Oppenheimer biopic.

It's a reversal all the more striking because the 20 years since "Return of the King" have belonged, overwhelmingly, to the blockbuster. It's a period that's included "Avatar," "Black Panther," "Top Gun: Maverick," "The Dark Knight" and the entire run of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It's a film culture shift that not everyone in Hollywood — including, most famously, this year's best director nominee Martin Scorsese — has loved. That's surely been a factor in Oscar voters embracing less traditional choices in recent years, like the 2020 best-picture champ "Parasite," the first non-English language winner.

For years, big has been bad at the Academy Awards — a trend the film academy has watched unfold with sporadic panic. After Nolan's "The Dark Knight" failed to be nominated for best picture in 2009, the academy expanded the best-picture category beyond five films. (It's now 10.) In 2018, the academy proposed a new "popular film" award, but within weeks that was nixed when Oscar voters rebelled against it.

Such schisms are as old as the Oscars. The first Academy Awards, in 1929, split its top award in two: Outstanding Picture (which went to William Wellman's dazzling WWI fighter plane action film "Wings") and Best Unique and Artistic Picture (which went to F. W. Murnau's silent masterpiece "Sunrise").

When more widely seen movies are in contention at the Oscars, more people have historically tuned in. The most-watched Academy Awards ever was when "Titanic" ruled the 1998 Oscars, winning 11 trophies. Some 57.3 million viewers watched James Cameron declare "I'm the king of the world!"

This year, there are not one but two billion-dollar blockbusters in the Oscar mix, in "Oppenheimer" and "Barbie," raising hopes for a telecast that has in recent years hovered closer to a third of the "Titanic"-year viewership. Last year's ceremony was watched by 18.7 million viewers.

"It makes it 10 times easier," host Jimmy Kimmel said in a recent interview. "When nobody has seen the movies — and that has happened, including years when I've hosted — you have no point of reference to go from."

It can sometimes be overstated how much having a blockbuster to root for impacts Oscar ratings. The more significant factors tend to be long-term ones, like the decline of linear television and the overall splintering of pop culture. Year-to-year fluctuations are usually less drastic. Nearly as many tuned in to see Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby" win best picture in 2005 (42.1 million) as they did the year prior

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for "Return of the King" (43.5 million).

"Barbenheimer," though, was a rare phenomenon, and one the Oscars — which lavished a combined 21 nominations on the two films — was eager to embrace. That's especially because the success of the two films stood in such stark contrast to what the majority in the film industry is currently experiencing.

Both films launched just as actors walked out in a strike that consumed the industry in a protracted battle over streaming, artificial intelligence and the future of the business. Labor strife isn't over, either; this week, craft workers with IATSE and Teamsters Local 399 began negotiations with studios, talks that much of the industry will be closely watching even as it celebrates at the Oscars.

More than that, "Oppenheimer" stands for a kind of filmmaking that many fear is increasingly obsolete in a Hollywood that's struggling to find its way forward amid widespread contraction. Streaming revenues have lagged for all but Netflix. Production delays brought on by the strike has led to a downturn in moviegoing in 2024. The sheer, spectacular accomplishment of "Oppenheimer" — a talky three-hour drama that outperformed "Ant-Man" and "Aquaman," combined — is a bright, shining exception.

"It certainly confirms our faith in what studio filmmaking can be," Nolan said the morning of Oscar nominations.

The Oscars are always where Hollywood celebrates an idea of itself. Last year, Hollywood told itself with "Everything Everywhere All at Once" that, yes, it could still be boldly original. When "Parasite" triumphed, it was a chest-thump for Hollywood's expanding internationalism.

This year, Hollywood will hang its hat on an old-fashioned kind of winner — a studio epic

Biden will announce a plan for a temporary port on Gaza's coast to increase flow of humanitarian aid

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will announce a plan in his State of the Union address Thursday for the U.S. military to help establish a temporary port on the Gaza coast, increasing the flow of humanitarian aid for the beleaguered territory during the Israel-Hamas war, according to administration officials.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement, said the operation will not require that American troops be on the ground to build the pier that is intended to allow more shipments of food, medicine and other essential items.

The officials did not provide details about how the pier would be built. One noted that the U.S. military has "unique capabilities" and can do things from "just offshore."

The move provides one more layer to the extraordinary dynamic that's emerged as the United States has had to go around Israel, its main Mideast ally, and find ways to get aid into Gaza, including through airdrops.

Biden last week first raised the idea of establishing a "marine corridor," saying the U.S. was working with allies on how it might provide assistance from the sea to those in Gaza.

Gen. Erik Kurilla, head of U.S. Central Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee, that he had briefed officials on such a maritime option.

Also Thursday, the U.S. conducted a third airdrop in the northern part of Gaza, where there is no Israeli presence. Kurilla said Central Command has provided options for increasing the number of trucks taking aid to those areas.

Five months of fighting between Israel and Hamas have left much of Hamas-run Gaza in ruins and led to a worsening humanitarian catastrophe. Many Palestinians, especially in the devastated north, are scrambling for food to survive.

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.

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.

Candy companies pitch gum as a stress reliever and concentration aid to revive stale US sales

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Candy companies want to know: What will make Americans start chewing gum again?

Gum's bubble burst during the COVID-19 pandemic, when masks and social distancing made bad breath less of a worry and fewer people spent on impulse buys. The number of packages of gum sold dropped by nearly a third in the United States in 2020, according to Circana, a market research firm.

Consumer demand has picked up only slightly since then. Last year, U.S. chewing gum sales rose less than 1% to 1.2 billion units, which was still 32% fewer than in 2018. Although sales in dollars are back to pre-pandemic levels, that's mostly due to inflation; the average pack of gum cost \$2.71 last year, \$1.01 more than it did in 2018, Circana said.

It's a similar story globally. Worldwide gum sales rose 5% last year to more than \$16 billion, according to market researcher Euromonitor. That still was 10% below the 2018 sales figure.

Some manufacturers are responding to the bland demand by leaving the market altogether. In 2022, Mondelez International sold its U.S., Canadian and European gum business, including brands like Trident, Bubblicious, Dentyne and Chiclets, to Amsterdam-based Perfetti Van Melle.

Chicago-based Mondelez, which makes Oreos and Cadbury chocolates, said it wanted to shift resources to brands with higher growth opportunities.

Other American confectioners are cutting slow-selling brands. Ferrera Candy Co., which is headquartered in Forest Park, Illinois, quietly ended production of Fruit Stripe and Super Bubble gums in 2022 after more than 50 years.

Chewing gum is fighting more than a virus, however, when it comes to regaining its flavor. Lynn Dornblaser, the director of innovation and insight at market research firm Mintel, said a growing number of consumers are trying to limit sugar in their diets and to eat foods with more natural ingredients. That limits the appeal of gum, since even sugar-free varieties often contain artificial sweeteners.

U.S. consumers, like those in Europe and Asia, also may be increasingly concerned about the stubborn litter from used gum, Dornblaser said. Singapore famously banned the sale, import and manufacturing of chewing gum in 1992, blaming the careless disposal of the substance on subways for gumming up service. More recently, the U.K. government persuaded gum manufacturers to pay for a street-cleaning program to help remove gum and gum stains.

Dan Sadler, a principal for client insights at Circana, has noticed generational differences in gum chewing.

Generation X, the cohort born between 1965 and 1980, tends to chew gum more than other age groups, he said. Millennials generally show less interest in gum and candy, while Generation Z consumers are more interested in novelty candies like sour gummies. Nielsen says U.S. unit sales of gummies rose 2.5% over

the last year and 4% the year before.

Mars Inc., which owns the 133-year-old Wrigley brand, thinks it may have an answer: repositioning gum as an instant stress reliever rather than an occasional breath freshener. In January, the company launched a global ad campaign promoting its top-selling Orbit, Extra, Freedent and Yida brands as tools for mental well-being.

Alyona Fedorchenko, vice president for global gum and mints in Mars' snacking division, said the idea stuck in the summer of 2020, when the company was frantically researching ways to revive sales.

Fedorchenko remembered talking to a nurse in a hospital COVID-19 ward who chewed gum to calm herself even though she always wore a mask. The nurse's habit meshed with studies by Mars that showed half of chewers reached for gum to relieve stress or boost concentration.

"That, for us, was the big 'Aha!'" Fedorchenko said. "We've had a century of legacy of fresh breath, and that is still very important. Don't get me wrong. But there is so much more this category can be."

Emphasizing wellness is part of a multi-year effort to attract 10 million new U.S. chewers by 2030, she said. Mars also is introducing new products like Respawn by 5 gum, which is aimed at gamers. The gum contains green tea and vitamin B, and the company promotes those ingredients as a way to help improve focus. Sold in three flavors, Respawn by 5 could lure customers from smaller brands like Rev Energy Gum, which contains caffeine.

Megan Schwichtenberg, a public relations account director from Minneapolis, buys into the idea of gum as a quick respite. She often chews a piece of fruit-flavored Mentos gum when she's driving or at the gym, and finds that chewing gum stops her from clenching her jaw during the workday.

"If I'm sitting at a desk all day managing a team, I can't get up and go punch a punching bag," Schwichtenberg said. "It's a way to contain some of that in the space you're in."

But not everyone finds gum enhances well-being. Kylie Faildo, a pelvic floor physical therapist in Denver, thinks artificial sweeteners and swallowing air while chewing made her bloating symptoms worse. She gave up gum two years ago and doesn't plan to go back, even though she misses the ease of popping a piece into her mouth before meeting a client.

"I use mouthwash a lot more now," Faildo said.

Caron Proschan, the founder and CEO of the natural gum brand Simply, said she thinks U.S. gum sales slowed due to a shortage of innovation. Young customers have little disposable income and many distractions, she said, so gum needs to be compelling.

Simply – which makes gum from a type of tree sap called chicle instead of synthetic ingredients – has seen its sales double every year since 2021 without raising prices, Proschan said.

"Consumers today care about ingredients. They care about quality. The chewing gum category was not evolving to meet the needs of this consumer," she said.

Sadler and Dornblaser say they still see growth ahead for gum, but it needs to adapt to customers' changing tastes and buying habits, including a shift from impulse sales to online shopping.

Some brands, like the U.K.'s Nuud Gum, are offering subscription plans, for example. Other gum makers are experimenting with pop-up ads that remind customers to add gum to their food delivery orders.

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. has already 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.

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However, a wider economic, humanitarian and political impact is 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.

"We demand the relevant sides stop immediately armed activities for the safety and freedom of navigation on international maritime routes according to international law," Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Pham Thu Hang said Thursday.

The Iranian-backed Houthis have 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, full of grain from Argentina, 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 over dozens of attacks.

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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.

Seven states and events miles apart: How the Trump and Biden campaigns approach a rematch

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 reprise of their bitter 2020 campaign all but officially set after Super Tuesday, the two campaigns are unveiling their strategies for a 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.

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."

Many Christian voters in US see immigration as a crisis. How to address it is where they differ.

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Christian voters and faith leaders have long been in the frontlines of providing assistance to migrants — but when it comes to support for immigration policies, from border security to legalization options for migrants already in the U.S., priorities diverge broadly.

Both President Joe Biden and GOP challenger Donald Trump traveled to the border in Texas last Thursday to present their vision of how to fix what most agree is a broken system — immigration has risen to a top concern for Americans in this presidential election year.

At the border with Mexico in El Paso, Texas, Catholic Bishop Mark Seitz believes that a nation has the right to a secure and orderly border, and to vet those who want to cross it, but he emphasizes the Church's social teaching of caring for the poorest and most vulnerable.

"Here in El Paso ... we don't say, 'Show me your papers.' As Christians we say, 'How can I help you in your suffering?'" Seitz said, who leads the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' migration committee. "This is not a political issue in the first instance, it's about putting into practice what Jesus Christ taught through the Church."

Still in Texas, a flashpoint not only in crossings but in an escalating battle between the federal and state governments over border management, a prominent megachurch pastor and Trump supporter said his church welcomes everyone — but the faithful also have an obligation to obey the law.

"At First Baptist Church in Dallas we do not check for green cards — that's government's responsibility," the Rev. Robert Jeffress said in an email. "The Bible teaches that God created the institution of government to protect its citizens. ... Christians have a duty to obey the laws government establishes which would include immigration laws."

Whether a humanitarian or a security emphasis resonates the most varies among and within Christian denominations — like the white evangelicals who overwhelmingly supported Trump in the 2020 election or the Catholics who were split almost evenly between him and Biden.

According to a survey released this week by the Pew Research Center, majorities of white Catholics and Protestants, both evangelical and nonevangelical, consider that the big influx at the U.S.-Mexican border is a crisis for the United States — a definition that many migrant advocates and Democrats have long disputed.

Only about 3 in 10 Black Protestants and the religiously unaffiliated (or "nones") say the large number of migrants seeking to enter the U.S. is a "crisis," although in each group, about 4 in 10 say it's a "major problem." Those saying it is not a problem are minorities in the single digits across denominations.

More revealing to policy options is the reason for the influx that Christians cited in the survey.

When asked why they think large numbers of migrants are trying to cross the border, about 7 in 10 white Catholics and evangelicals said that the belief that U.S. immigration policies will make it easy to stay in the country once they arrive is a "major reason," compared to 44% of the "nones" and 52% of Black

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Protestants. Both groups were more likely to cite violence in their home countries as a major reason why migrants are seeking to enter the U.S. At least 65% of all religious groups cited good economic opportunities in the U.S. as a "major reason."

Among evangelicals, there is nuance in views about specific issues under the broader umbrella of migration, said Matthew Soerens, national coordinator for the Evangelical Immigration Table, an immigrant advocacy organization.

Most want more border security and respect for the rule of law, and there's growing concern that immigration is an economic burden to the U.S., Soerens said. Yet he noted that even many evangelicals who voted for Trump in 2020 favor permanent legal status for Afghans and support refugee resettlement and a path for citizenship for those in the U.S. illegally.

"I think many Americans (and probably some Members of Congress) read evangelicals' broad support for former President Trump in the primaries thus far as an unqualified affirmation of his immigration policy positions," Soerens said via email.

But he said his organization's research and his experience with local churches suggests that evangelicals "actually have more nuanced views — absolutely wanting something done about the border ... but also very open to more comprehensive immigration solutions including for the undocumented."

Similarly, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's public policy wing — the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission — said that increased enforcement and border security should be paired with more accessible legal pathways.

"But far too often, our toxic politics pit security and reform against one another, ensuring no action is taken while citizens, migrants, officers, border facilities, ministries, and local communities are all overwhelmed," said ERLC leader Brent Leatherwood. "Too many leaders have made the calculation that this cost is acceptable so that partisan trench warfare can be waged. That's not just a failure of leadership; it's a failure to be humane."

From tiny evangelical churches in Tucson, Arizona, or in Hialeah, Florida, to major faith-based aid organizations like Global Refuge, which was known until this year as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Christian groups across the country often take the lead in helping migrants with shelter, food, and legal as well as schooling assistance.

In Miami, a major destination city for migrants across the Caribbean and Latin America, many travel first to La Ermita, a shrine to the Virgin Mary built five decades ago by Cuban exiles — a growing community where Trump remains widely popular. Its rector has chosen migration as the meditation theme for this Lent, and two large crosses now flank the entrance, with reproductions of passports and clothes worn by migrants hanging on their arms.

Behind them, in English and Spanish, is an exhortation to pray for migrants and the Biblical verse "You shall love the stranger, for you were strangers."

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:

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 re-

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sponse 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 2012, the Indianapolis Colts released injured quarterback Peyton Manning, who went on to play for the Denver Broncos.

In 2016, Peyton Manning announced his retirement after 18 seasons in the National Football League.

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.