

Groton Daily Independent

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Friday, April 12

Senior Menu: Bratwurst on bun, mashed potatoes, sauerkraut, 3 bean salad, chocolate pudding with banana.

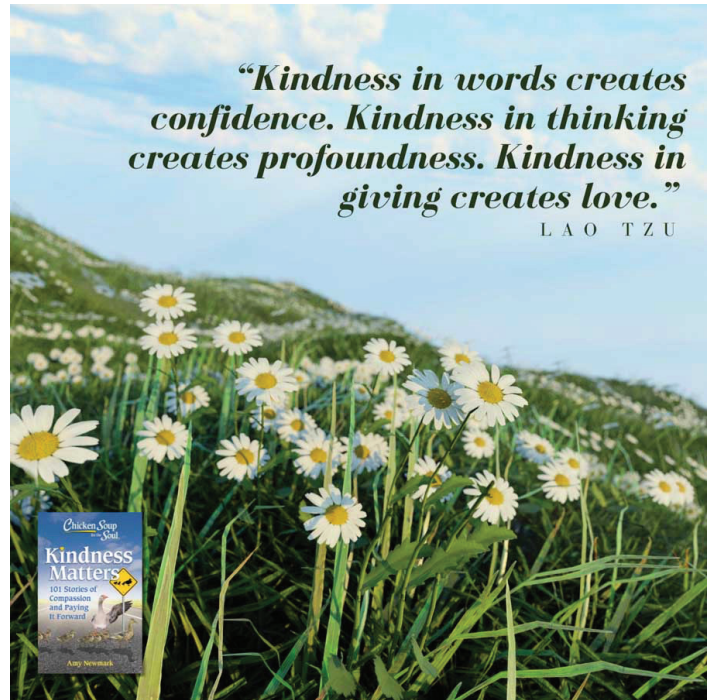
School Breakfast: Biscuits.

School Lunch: Grilled cheese, corn.

Track at Milbank, 3:30 p.m.

All-School Play 7 p.m .

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



“Kindness in words creates confidence. Kindness in thinking creates profoundness. Kindness in giving creates love.”

LAO TZU

Saturday, April 13

ACT Testing at Groton Area

Track at Mobridge 10 a.m.

All School Play 5 p.m.

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: WELCA Spring Gathering, Our Savior's Lutheran in Redfield 9 a.m.

Sunday, April 14

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

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

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with Milestones (4 yr olds and juniors), 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir 6 p.m.

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

High School Baseball in Groton: Varsity: Elkton/Lake Benton at Noon, W-I-N at 4 p.m

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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1440

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Former NFL star OJ Simpson died Wednesday at the age of 76 after a battle with prostate cancer, his family announced. Off the field, Simpson was charged with and acquitted of the double murder of his ex-wife and her friend.

Real estate tycoon Truong My Lan was sentenced to death yesterday for siphoning \$12.5B from Saigon Joint Stock Commercial Bank. It is the largest fraud case in Vietnam's history and comes amid a government-led crackdown on corruption.

The Department of Justice expanded the definition of who counts as a firearms dealer and must conduct background checks in the US yesterday as part of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The legislation was passed in the aftermath of the 2022 Robb Elementary shooting in Uvalde, Texas.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

The 2023-24 NBA regular season wraps up this weekend; see latest standings and playoff picture. US federal investigators accuse MLB star Shohei Ohtani's former interpreter of stealing \$16M from Ohtani.

Taro Akebono, American-born sumo wrestling icon, dies at 54. DJ Mister Cee, longtime radio host and hip-hop pioneer, dies at 57.

The 2024 Cannes Film Festival (May 14-25) lineup announced, headlined by films from Francis Ford Coppola and Paul Schrader; see full festival lineup.

Science & Technology

AI startup Humane releases its widely anticipated Ai Pin, a wearable badge that doubles as an AI-powered smart device. Study suggests some peer reviewers of academic papers may be using chatbots to provide feedback.

Scientists pinpoint how cells untangle overwound strands of DNA, avoiding potential errors in copying and reading its genetic information; applications include treatments for bacterial infections and new anticancer drugs.

Google's DeepMind unveils robots capable of playing soccer after being trained on the rules via a type of machine learning known as deep reinforcement learning.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.7%, Dow -0.0%, Nasdaq +1.7%); Nasdaq closes at record high as technology shares climb, rebounding from earlier concerns over inflation. Apple shares rise 4% in best day since May 2023.

Investment bank Morgan Stanley's shares close down more than 5% on report that multiple federal regulators are investigating its wealth management unit.

Sam Bankman-Fried, former cryptocurrency mogul, appeals fraud conviction for crimes connected to the collapse of his now-defunct trading platform FTX.

Politics & World Affairs

Russian airstrikes destroy major power plant in Kyiv, Ukraine, and damage power infrastructures in Lviv and Odesa. Ukrainian parliament passes military mobilization law; measures include tightening registration rules and introducing penalties for evading service. Alexei Navalny's posthumous memoir to be published in October.

Sen. Bob Menendez's (D-NJ) bribery trial to be separated from his wife's, federal judge rules; Menendez's trial over obstruction, bribery charges to begin May 6, while his wife's trial tentatively pushed to July.

Harvard reinstates standardized test scores for candidates seeking admission to the school, following other Ivy Leagues in rolling back pandemic-era policy.

Gov. Noem and Colleagues Oppose Biden and EPA's Air Quality Standards

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem and 21 of her fellow Republican governors urged the Environmental Protection Agency under the Biden Administration to pause implementation of the PM2.5 rule under the National Ambient Air Quality Standards.

"I joined my colleagues in this letter because this shortsighted ridiculous rule will crush South Dakota farmers, manufacturers and their employees, and it particularly hurts small towns in our state," said Governor Noem.

The letter, written by Governor Noem and her colleagues, outlines the failures of the EPA's one-size-fits-all approach, especially given the geographic diversity of the 50 states, including unique weather patterns. The governors also point out the largest source of PM2.5, carbon monoxide, and volatile organic compounds was wildfires that occurred on federally managed land.

The governors described how this new rule would disproportionately impact rural communities and states, especially states that rely on manufacturing for the health of their economy.

Governor Noem and her colleagues wrote, "Setting aside the legal concerns we have about the final rule, the new standard poses significant challenges for our states and ignores the progress made in reducing particulate matter over the last 20 years." They continued, "We strongly encourage you to pause implementation of this rule so our concerns can be addressed. Your consideration of this matter and its overall impact to all of our states is necessary to find a balanced approach that protects both our environment and the economy."

Governor Noem was joined by Idaho Governor Brad Little, Alabama Governor Kay Ivey, Alaska Governor Mike Dunleavy, Arkansas Governor Sarah Sanders, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, Indiana Governor Eric Holcomb, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds, Louisiana Governor Jeff Landry, Mississippi Governor Tate Reeves, Missouri Governor Mike Parson, Montana Governor Greg Gianforte, Nevada Governor Joe Lombardo, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu, North Dakota Governor Doug Burgum, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee, Texas Governor Greg Abbott, Utah Governor Spencer Cox, West Virginia Governor Jim Justice, and Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon.

Johnson Urges Biden Admin to Authorize Summer Sale of E15

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.), Biofuels Caucus co-chairs, and twenty-two other members urged the Biden Administration to allow drivers the option to choose the cleaner, cheaper E15 fuel during the summer driving season. Allowing more renewable fuels options at the pump will lower fuel prices, which have increased over 50% since President Biden took office.

"Home-grown, American biofuels are a straightforward, no-cost solution that strengthen our nation's energy infrastructure, support our farmers, and reduce consumer costs. We request you expeditiously grant this emergency waiver for 2024," the Members wrote. "Extending the nationwide sale of E15 can again bolster our nation's energy resilience by adding billions of gallons of ethanol to the nation's fuel supply at a time when domestic inventories of crude oil and petroleum products are at their lowest point in almost twenty years."

The letter urges President Biden to direct the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to allow the sale of E15 fuel during the summer months (June 1-September 15, 2024). While the year-round sale of E15 will be permissible in some states beginning in 2025, currently, the sale of E15 in South Dakota and other states will be prohibited beginning on June 1, 2024 due to a D.C. Circuit Court decision on the Clean Air Act in July of 2021.

"The planet benefits and consumers save money when they can fill up their cars with E15. In the absence of a federal legislative fix, we need EPA to act now to provide an emergency waiver, so that retailers have enough time to ensure their supplies of this more affordable, earth-friendly fuel won't be interrupted this summer. We thank Representatives Craig, Smith, Pocan, and Johnson for leading the charge on this critical issue, and hope this letter spurs the EPA into taking action on behalf of American drivers," said Emily Skor, CEO of Growth Energy.

"We thank Reps. Johnson, Smith, Craig, and Pocan along with a group of bipartisan House members for calling on the Biden Administration to quickly take action to allow the nationwide sale of E15 through the coming summer," said RFA President and CEO Geoff Cooper. "These Representatives understand that with current fuel supplies lower than the last two summer driving seasons and the market pressures of ongoing geopolitical conflicts, it is imperative that consumers have access to this American made supply of lower-cost, cleaner fuel."



Open House Bridal Shower

honoring

Jessica Bjerke

Saturday, April 20, 2024

1:00pm - 3:00pm

Olive Grove Golf Course

Registered at Target and Amazon



Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Detected in South Dakota Dairy Herd

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Agriculture (DANR) and the Animal Industry Board (AIB) have received confirmation from the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Veterinary Services Laboratory (NVSL) of the detection of highly pathogenic avian influenza in a dairy cattle herd in South Dakota. This is the first confirmed case of HPAI in a dairy farm in South Dakota.

"South Dakota Dairy Producers encourages all dairy producers to closely monitor their herd and contact their herd veterinarian immediately if cattle appear symptomatic," said Marv Post, Chairman of South Dakota Dairy Producers. "USDA continues to emphasize that pasteurization kills the virus and that milk and dairy products are safe to consume."

Symptoms are mostly restricted to late-stage lactating cows and include a drop in milk production loss of appetite, and changes in manure consistency. Producers are encouraged to enforce their biosecurity plans such as limiting visitors, separating new animals and sick animals, and cleaning pens, equipment, vehicles, clothing, footwear, and hands.

Dairies are required to ensure only milk from healthy animals enter the food supply chain. Additionally, the pasteurization process of heating milk to a high temperature ensures milk and dairy products can be safely consumed, as confirmed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). At this stage, there is no concern about the safety of the commercial milk supply or risk to consumer health. In line with long-standing policy, the CDC does not recommend consuming unpasteurized milk or raw milk. Pasteurization has continually proven to successfully inactivate bacteria and viruses, like influenza, in milk.

USDA, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as well as state veterinary and public health officials, continue to investigate the emerging illness among dairy cows that is causing decreased lactation, low appetite, and other symptoms.

City Officials from Bowdle, Groton, Elected to District Offices for SD Municipal League

GROTON, S.D. – A group of approximately 50 municipal officials representing 8 cities gathered at the South Dakota Municipal League's annual District 6 Meeting, held in Groton on April 10, 2024.

Harry Weller, SDML President and Mayor of Kadoka, discussed the direction and future of the Municipal League with the group. Sara Rankin, South Dakota Municipal League Interim Executive Director, spoke about the outcome of the 2024 Legislative Session and the effect new laws will have on South Dakota municipalities.

Others in attendance were representatives of various state agencies and representatives of groups affiliated with the Municipal League.

Weller also conducted the election of District 6 officers for the upcoming year. Rick Boschee, Bowdle Mayor, was re-elected Chair and Brian Bahr, Groton Councilmember, was re-elected Vice Chair. As the district chair, Boschee will act as a contact for and represent their district as a member of the SDML Board of Directors. Duties began immediately.



Rick Boschee, Bowdle, is chairman of District 6 and Brian Bahr, Groton, is vice chairman. (Courtesy Photo)

In other business, those attending voted to hold the 2025 District 6 Meeting in Redfield.

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15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460
Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



Living Heart Fitness Center

Neglect your muscles and
you'll pay the price

EMPLOYMENT

Dairy Queen in Groton is hiring! If you're looking for a fun job with lots of variety, look no further! We're looking for energetic, smiling people – we provide free meals, uniforms, competitive wages, fun atmosphere and flexible scheduling. Part-time – day, evening, week-end shifts available. We will work with your schedule. Stop in today and pick up an application.

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Northern State University to Break Ground on Business and Health Innovation Center

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Northern State University invites the public to a groundbreaking ceremony for its leading-edge Business and Health Innovation Center. The event will take place on Thursday, April 25, 2024, at 3 p.m. Central Time on the east side of Lincoln Hall, located at 1200 S. Jay St., Aberdeen, S.D.

Slated for completion in late 2025, the Business and Health Innovation Center will include state-of-the-art facilities for business, banking, finance, accounting, entrepreneurship, nursing and social learning spaces. It will also be home to the Innovation and Startup Center and serve as a hub for community members to directly engage with innovative business and health programming and resources.

Dr. Neal Schnoor, president of Northern, expressed his enthusiasm for the project, stating, "This is a generational opportunity to address critical workforce needs in business and nursing and engage in partnerships to advance regional healthcare and economic development."

In addition to housing innovative programs in the School of Business, Northern State University is completing development of its Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) degree program. The program is set to launch pending approval by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). Currently, prospective nursing students can enroll in NSU's outstanding pre-nursing courses.

"We are thrilled about the prospects this facility brings to advancing education, research, and community engagement," remarked Dr. Mike Wanous, provost and vice president for academic affairs at Northern State University.

The groundbreaking ceremony marks a significant milestone in Northern State University's commitment to innovation, education, and community engagement.

FUEL Empowers the Next Generation of Ag Leadership

By Lura Roti for South Dakota Farmers Union

When Jason and Kaeloni Latham were asked if they wanted to participate in the 2024 Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership (FUEL) program, they quickly said, "yes!"

"It was an opportunity to help better agriculture, so why not," said Jason, a fifth-generation Camp Crook rancher.

The Lathams have three reasons they want to improve agriculture: Jaydon, 9, Jarrett, 7, and James, 2.

"When you think about the future of agriculture, it does not look good. It is dying. We hear all the time that we are losing family farms and ranches. Up here, in Harding County, you see it all the time. A lot of places are selling," Jason said. "We look at it this way – if we want our ranch to be around in the future, we need to try and make agriculture better for our kids. We need to step out of our comfort zone and try and do more. And participation in FUEL is definitely stepping outside my comfort zone."

Sponsored by Farmers Union Enterprises, the organization which oversees Farmers Union Industries, FUEL is designed to strengthen young producers' leadership and communication skills. FUEL seminars are held throughout the year.

The Lathams are two of 20 young farmers/ranchers sponsored by Farmers Union Enterprises to participate in the 2024 class. Individuals are selected from South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Montana and Wisconsin.

"We appreciate the opportunity to be involved in FUEL together," Kaeloni said. "We have to do this ranch together to make it successful for our kids, so we need to be on the same page and FUEL helps with that."

In addition to the Lathams, Mission rancher Chaz Blotsky is also participating in the 2024 FUEL class.

"In a time when many agriculture organizations are concerned about the lack of interest in younger farmers and ranchers to take on leadership roles, we feel investing in the next generation is not only valuable to the future of family farming and ranching, but to the future of our organization as well," explained Doug Sombke, SDFU President.

Leadership in action

The Lathams attended their first FUEL seminar during the 2024 NFU National Convention in Scottsdale, Arizona.

During this first seminar, FUEL members received an overview of National Farmers Union, received parliamentary procedure training, gained insight into their personality strengths and received tips on how to have tough, but necessary conversations.

They also met with NFU President Rob Larew and Vice President Jeff Kippley. Kippley is also Vice President of South Dakota Farmers Union. Kippley credits the FUEL programming he and his wife, Rachel, received with the decision they made to become actively engaged in Farmers Union and ultimately run for an NFU leadership position.

"We enjoyed every speaker," Kaeloni said. "They were all interesting and the information was useful."

Blotsky agreed. "The speakers were cool and eye-opening. I learned a lot about advocating for farmers' rights, about parliamentary procedure, about myself," Blotsky said. "This first FUEL seminar gave me additional confidence in myself and my ability to use my voice for agriculture."

Blotsky got to know Farmers Union as an elementary-age camper. He became a youth leader, serving as a member of the Junior Advisory Council and receiving his Torchbearer Award in 2022. Today, he serves on the Senior Advisory Council.

Participation in FUEL is one more way that Blotsky can remain engaged in the organization he values.

"FUEL gives me a way to stay connected to Farmers Union," Blotsky said. "It is interesting too, because I learned about parliamentary procedure from Gerri (Eide) when I was a camper, and I got to receive training from her again as a FUEL participant."

Jason added that it was quite timely to receive training in parliamentary procedure during the National Convention.

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"During NFU policy, everything happens so fast and it can be tough to follow it if you don't understand parliamentary procedure," Jason said.

Get to know Kaeloni & Jason Latham

Laughter. This is the response Jason Latham would have given anyone suggesting that he would be working full time on his family's ranch alongside his dad, Darwin.

"One-hundred percent, I was not going to ranch. I was going to become a teacher," Jason explained.

But after student teaching, Jason's confidence in his chosen career path began to wane. He spent a few years working in the oil field and as a wildland firefighter.

And then his grandpa became ill and his dad needed help.

"At the end of the day, ranching is the job I enjoy most because of the sense of accomplishment I get at the end of the day," Jason explained. "I like looking back and seeing what I've done and feeling good about it."

Kaeloni works off the ranch full time, but when she is home, she enjoys helping Jason with ranch work. She also appreciates the childhood the ranch provides to their sons.

"I love that my kids have chores and responsibilities at their young ages, but also, they can go outside and go wherever they want and I don't have to worry about them," Kaeloni said. "There are days when our two older sons will put snacks in a backpack, grab their BB guns and go shoot prairie dogs."

Get to Know Chaz Blotsky

Chaz Blotsky grew up helping his mom, Kodi, Grandpa Bill Abbot and Uncle Bryan on the family's ranch near Mission. Over time he's built up his own herds of cattle and meat goats.

He's proud to be the fifth generation to raise livestock on his family's land. In fact, it's the reason he decided to pursue a degree in agricultural business at Mitchell Technical College.

"I wanted to bring knowledge back to our ranch to help not only me but my entire family," Blotsky said.

Currently enrolled in marketing classes, Blotsky said he is accomplishing his goal.

"I do not know how I will be connected to my family's ranch, but I know I will always have some kind of connection to my family ranch, so I want to do what I can to help improve things."

Involvement in Farmers Union through FUEL is another way Blotsky sees himself expanding his knowledge for a future in agriculture.

"Connecting with family farmers and ranchers from South Dakota and other states helped me realize that we all face similar challenges, but it is not me against the world as a rancher – it is all of us in Farmers Union w



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Noem, Jackley offer summer law enforcement course just for tribal recruits

Tribes with local police forces have until May 1 to submit applications

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 11, 2024 5:52 PM

Gov. Kristi Noem and Attorney General Marty Jackley said Thursday they aim to open an extra basic law enforcement certification course for tribal police recruits this summer, but it's unclear how many tribal recruits will be able to meet the course's tight deadlines.

Tribes can use federal funding to operate their own law enforcement agencies under what are known as 638 agreements. Those local agencies, such as the Oglala Sioux Tribal Police, are separate from federal law enforcement officers certified to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

BIA officers are required to attend a 13-week Indian Police Academy training in New Mexico — something tribal officials say hinders recruitment efforts. Last week, Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, sent a letter to the Department of Interior urging the consideration of a tribal law enforcement academy for the Midwest.

Tribal-level officers can also be trained in New Mexico. However, they can and do attend basic law enforcement certification in Pierre alongside officers from state and local agencies all over South Dakota. After that basic training, non-BIA tribal officers are required to attend a two-week course in New Mexico.

The announcement from Republicans Noem and Jackley signals that the state will open an additional law enforcement training certification course this summer just for potential recruits from the six tribal law enforcement agencies that operate under 638 agreements.

"We already train tribal officers here in a limited fashion," Jackley said, noting that typical training classes may include a few recruits from tribal agencies. "What's being proposed now is a specialized, stand-alone class."

Noem has spoken repeatedly about public safety on tribal reservations in recent months, starting with a joint speech to the Legislature in January when she alleged that Mexican drug cartels have infiltrated reservations. At a town hall last month in Winner, Noem alleged that some tribal leaders are "personally benefiting" from cartels.

Reacting to those and other comments, three tribal governments have since banned Noem from entering their reservations.

Noem said Thursday in a news release that tribal police departments need help.

"People in tribal communities continue to suffer because of the well-documented shortage of tribal law enforcement officers," she said. "This hurts all of South Dakota's nine reservations, so we are taking the lead on training more officers as quickly as possible."

The summer course in Pierre could train between 40 and 48 officers, but it's unclear how many officers will be able to give a notice of interest by April 19 and submit an application by May 1, the two deadlines listed in the Noem-Jackley letter sent to tribal officials.

Jackley said the course is possible because of support from the governor, but also from local law enforcement in Sioux Falls. That city holds 20-person basic certification courses for recruits from the southeast region and offers up current officers and Minnehaha County sheriff's deputies as adjunct professors for training both there and in Pierre. Minnehaha County Sheriff Mike Milstead and Sioux Falls Police Chief Jon Thum have pledged to support the special tribal academy in a similar fashion, Jackley said.

The news was welcome for Yankton Sioux Tribal Police Chief Edwin Young. He told South Dakota Searchlight he'd been in contact with state officials over the past week to talk about the possibility of a stand-

alone class.

He has two recruits he hopes to get into the course.

"They've got to get the applications in there soon," Young said. "It's coming up quick, but it's not impossible."

While tribal officers are eligible for a slot in the state's basic law enforcement academy, Young said the New Mexico training course has complicated their chances of nabbing one in the past. His officers typically apply for a slot in Pierre and New Mexico at the same time.

If New Mexico accepts them, the state typically gives the tribal slot in Pierre to a state or local officer, Young said

He's "pretty excited" about the possibility of a class where he needn't worry about that, because all of the slots in the class are for tribal trainees.

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

Thune, Rounds among U.S. Senate Republicans seeking Mayorkas impeachment trial

South Dakota's US senators sign letter with 41 other GOP members

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - APRIL 11, 2024 4:37 PM

WASHINGTON — More than 40 U.S. Senate Republicans lobbied Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on Thursday to hold a full impeachment trial for Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Schumer and other Democrats have indicated they'd be open to immediately voting to dismiss the House-passed articles of impeachment rather than holding a trial in the Senate. The Republicans who signed the letter urged Schumer not to pursue that option, saying Mayorkas should be held accountable.

"In the face of the disaster that mounts daily at our southern border, and in communities across America, the House of Representatives has formally accused Alejandro Mayorkas of demeaning his office," according to the letter signed by 43 Senate Republicans. "The American people deserve to hear the evidence through a Senate trial in the Court of Impeachment."

Six Senate Republicans did not sign the letter: Sens. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Rand Paul of Kentucky, Mitt Romney of Utah and Tommy Tuberville of Alabama.

A simple majority of senators would be needed to approve a pretrial motion to dismiss. Democrats and independents who typically vote with them hold a 51-49 advantage in the chamber.

House Republicans failed to impeach Mayorkas on their first try and needed a second vote to approve the articles of impeachment against the Homeland Security chief. No Democrats voted in favor.

The two articles of impeachment accuse Mayorkas of a "willful and systemic refusal to comply with the law," and a breach of public trust. Democrats say the charges are based on policy disputes rather than the "high crimes and misdemeanors" threshold of an impeachable offense.

House Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana and 11 House Republican impeachment managers had planned to ceremoniously walk over the two articles of impeachment to the Senate on Wednesday, which would have forced Schumer to begin the impeachment process the following day. But at the request of Senate Republicans concerned with catching flights back home the same day proceedings would start, Johnson delayed the delivery.

In a Tuesday statement announcing the delay, a Johnson spokesperson also said the Senate should not dismiss the charges without a trial.

"To ensure the Senate has adequate time to perform its constitutional duty, the House will transmit the articles of impeachment to the Senate next week," the Johnson spokesperson wrote in a statement. "There is no reason whatsoever for the Senate to abdicate its responsibility to hold an impeachment trial."

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

SD federal judge nominees get nod from U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee

BY: JOHN HULT - APRIL 11, 2024 10:41 AM

Two nominees for federal judgeships in the U.S. District Court of South Dakota earned the endorsement of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee on Thursday morning in Washington, D.C.

Committee members heard directly from Sioux Falls judge candidates Eric Schulte and Camela Theeler on March 6. Thursday's meeting involved no discussion of candidate qualifications, but rather saw committee members casting votes on whether to send the names of Schulte, Theeler and judicial nominees from other parts of the U.S. on to the full Senate.

The committee voted 12-9 for Schulte and 20-1 for Theeler.

The votes come after years of uncertainty about the open positions on South Dakota's federal bench. Judge Jeffrey Viken of Rapid City retired last October, more than a year after announcing his departure. Judge Karen Schreier of Sioux Falls announced her plans to retire or take senior status – meaning a lower caseload – in January.

Typically, either federal elected officials or state-level officials who are members of the party with a president in office offer up the names of potential judicial nominees. The South Dakota Democratic Party's initial suggestions stalled when its suggested candidates withdrew their names or failed to clear the screening process.

Last year, the party suggested Veronica Duffy, a current federal magistrate judge, but she was ultimately not considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Sen. Mike Rounds and Sen. John Thune, both Republicans, collaborated with the Biden administration to bring Schulte and Theeler's names forward. Neither senator is on the Judiciary Committee.

Schulte works as a lawyer with Davenport Evans in Sioux Falls; Theeler is a state circuit court judge in Sioux Falls. Theeler would replace Viken, and Schulte would replace Schreier.

Their names are now in line for a yet-unscheduled vote in the full Senate.

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

States race to restrict deepfake porn as it becomes easier to create

New laws include update to South Dakota definition of child pornography

BY: MADYSON FITZGERALD - APRIL 11, 2024 9:00 AM

After a 2014 leak of hundreds of celebrities' intimate photos, Uldouz Wallace learned that she was among the public figures whose images had been stolen and disseminated online.

Wallace, an actress, writer and social media influencer, found out the images were ones her ex had taken without her consent and had threatened to leak.

Over the next few years, Wallace spent loads of money paying private companies to take down the images, she said. It wasn't until later that she found out that those same photos had been used to make fake pornographic images of her.

"It's just ridiculous the amount of time that people have and how much they're profiting from these kinds of things," Wallace told Stateline. "For them to sit there and create so much fake content of someone that clearly doesn't want anything of that sort? Without consent? It's just crazy to me."

Mortified, Wallace was reluctant to share her story — at first. But in 2022, she went public with it and now she heads a nonprofit organization, Foundation Ra, that supports people who have become victims of manipulated or artificial intelligence-generated sexual images.

"I thought, 'At what point is somebody going to do something about this?'" she asked. "And that's when I decided to share my story and try to change the law."

As more people, including minors, become victims of deepfake pornography and the industry that's

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growing out of it, state lawmakers are pursuing legislation to deter the unauthorized creation and dissemination of digitally altered images.

Deepfakes — digitally altered photos and videos that can make someone appear to be, or be doing, just about anything — have proliferated on the internet. Examples range from simple face swaps done using readily available software to a person grafting Tom Cruise's face and voice onto their body for content on a TikTok account.

In 2023, the total number of deepfake videos online was 95,820, up 550% from 2019, according to a report by Home Security Heroes, a group that researches best practices for online security. Pornography made up 98% of them.

The issue made international headlines in January, when fabricated sexually explicit images of pop star Taylor Swift that had been created by a free AI generator went viral, prompting lawmakers in several states to introduce legislation to combat deepfake porn, including Missouri's Taylor Swift Act.

Several years ago, special equipment was needed to make a deepfake video. That's no longer true, said Marc Berkman, CEO of the Organization for Social Media Safety, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to social media safety.

"This is a clear public policy issue," Berkman said. "This is a behavior that we recognize causes harm, does not conform to societal values, relies on new technology, and so there should be a public policy response."

Adding to existing laws

Indiana, Texas and Virginia in the past few years have enacted broad laws with penalties of up to a year in jail plus fines for anyone found guilty of sharing deepfake pornography. In Hawaii, the punishment is up to five years in prison.

Many states are combatting deepfake porn by adding to existing laws. Several, including Indiana, New York and Virginia, have enacted laws that add deepfakes to existing prohibitions on so-called revenge porn, or the posting of sexual images of a former partner without their consent. Georgia and Hawaii have targeted deepfake porn by updating their privacy laws.

Other states, such as Florida, South Dakota and Washington, have enacted laws that update the definition of child pornography to include deepfakes. Washington's law, which was signed by Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee in March, makes it illegal to be in possession of a "fabricated depiction of an identifiable minor" engaging in a sexually explicit act — a crime punishable by up to a year in jail.

Washington state Sen. Tina Orwall, a Democrat, said that she and her colleagues wanted to act right away because it can be hard to keep up with this kind of technology.

"It [technology] just moves so fast," she said. "Deepfakes and AI have been around, but now it seems like it's accelerated. We're just concerned about how we can protect people from the parts that are harmful."

Deepfake pornography bills also are advancing in other states, including Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey and Ohio.

"States need to have their own laws that empower local law enforcement to be able to step in and act in these circumstances," said Illinois Republican state Sen. Dan McConchie, who is sponsoring a bill that would prohibit the creation of deepfakes that feature minors engaged in sexual activity. "We can't wait for an overtaxed federal judiciary to hopefully get around to it at some point."

There are no federal laws banning deepfake porn, but several bills have been introduced in Congress, including the AI Labeling Act of 2023 and the DEFIANCE Act of 2024. Neither has moved out of committee.

High school victims

In 2023, sophomore students at Westfield High School in New Jersey allegedly created and spread deepfake porn images of Francesca Mani and other classmates without their consent. As a response, school principal Mary Asfendis sent a letter notifying the school community of the incident and inviting students to seek support from the school's counselors. The school also launched an investigation, Mary Ann McGann, coordinator of school and community relations, wrote in an email to Stateline.

Francesca and her mother, Dorota, have been advocating for legislation that would protect girls in the future, Dorota Mani said in an interview.

Since the Westfield High incident, there have been news reports of middle- and high-school students in California, Florida and Washington state becoming victims of deepfake pornography. The students — primarily girls — were allegedly targeted by their classmates, according to the reports.

The American Legislative Exchange Council, a conservative public policy organization, is promoting model language for state lawmakers to use that would target individual actors rather than technology developers. The Stop Deepfake CSAM Act is intended to supplement laws against child pornography, while the Stop Non-Consensual Distribution of Intimate Deepfake Media Act aims to bolster revenge porn laws.

"Artificial intelligence is a tool that can be used for good or used for ill," said Jake Morabito, who heads a technology task force at the organization. "What we should be focusing on is harmful conduct use with AI. So, we should go after the bad actors and the harmful conduct, but don't go after the people who are making the software."

In Virginia, legislators realized that a revenge porn law enacted in 2014 was not enough to protect people who had been harmed by deepfake porn. As a result, state Del. Marcus Simon, a Democrat, helped pass an amendment in 2019 to include images that were artificially created.

"What duties do we owe to each other as good digital citizens?" Simon asked. "And what are the remedies for violating people? All of that will need to be worked out."

Madyson Fitzgerald is the newsletter producer and breaking news reporter for Stateline.

New rule to close 'gun show loophole' finalized by Biden administration

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - APRIL 11, 2024 6:00 AM

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration on Thursday finalized a new rule that would require anyone selling a gun to obtain a federal license and conduct background checks.

The rule aims to close what's known as the "gun show loophole." Gun merchants who sell online, by mail or at flea markets and gun shows until now have not been subject to the same federal regulations as those who own and operate gun stores as their main source of income.

"This single gap in our federal background check system has caused unimaginable pain and suffering," Vice President Kamala Harris, who oversees the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention, said on a call with reporters Wednesday previewing the regulation.

The new rule by the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, stems from requirements of the bipartisan gun safety legislation package Congress passed in 2022.

It's likely to face legal challenges, but a senior White House official told reporters on the call that the Biden administration is confident the rule will survive any legal disputes.

"Strong regulations like this one are not in conflict with the Second Amendment," the senior White House official said.

The 2022 law would require those gun sellers to obtain a Federal Firearm License, record gun purchases and conduct background checks, which are the same requirements as brick-and-mortar gun shops.

Prior to the rule, if someone claimed that selling guns was not a main source of income, they were not required to obtain a license or perform a background check.

There are 80,000 individuals who have a Federal Firearm License, a senior Department of Justice official on the call said. Under the new rule, there would be about 20,000 additional individuals who would be required to obtain a license and "that has the potential to impact tens and tens of thousands of gun sales," the official said.

"This is part of a broader administration effort, where the president has focused our attention, resources and strategy at the source of illegal guns," the senior Department of Justice official said. "All of this is

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intended to get beyond the individual who has committed a crime and look to the source of those illegal guns."

Attorney General Merrick Garland said on the call that the new rule is one of the "most significant gun regulations in decades."

"Under this regulation, it will not matter if guns are sold on the internet, at a gun show, or in a brick and mortar store," Garland said. "If you sell guns predominantly to earn a profit, you must be licensed and you must conduct background checks."

ATF Director Steven Dettelbach said that "repeatedly selling guns for profit without running a criminal background check is not safe for innocent, abiding Americans, in fact, it's doggone dangerous."

Dettelbach added that there are some exemptions to the rule for hobbyists, antique gun collectors and occasional family transfers.

"(The rule) provides ... clarity to make sure that true hobbyists and true collectors can enhance or liquidate their professional and personal collection without fear of violating the law," Dettelbach said.

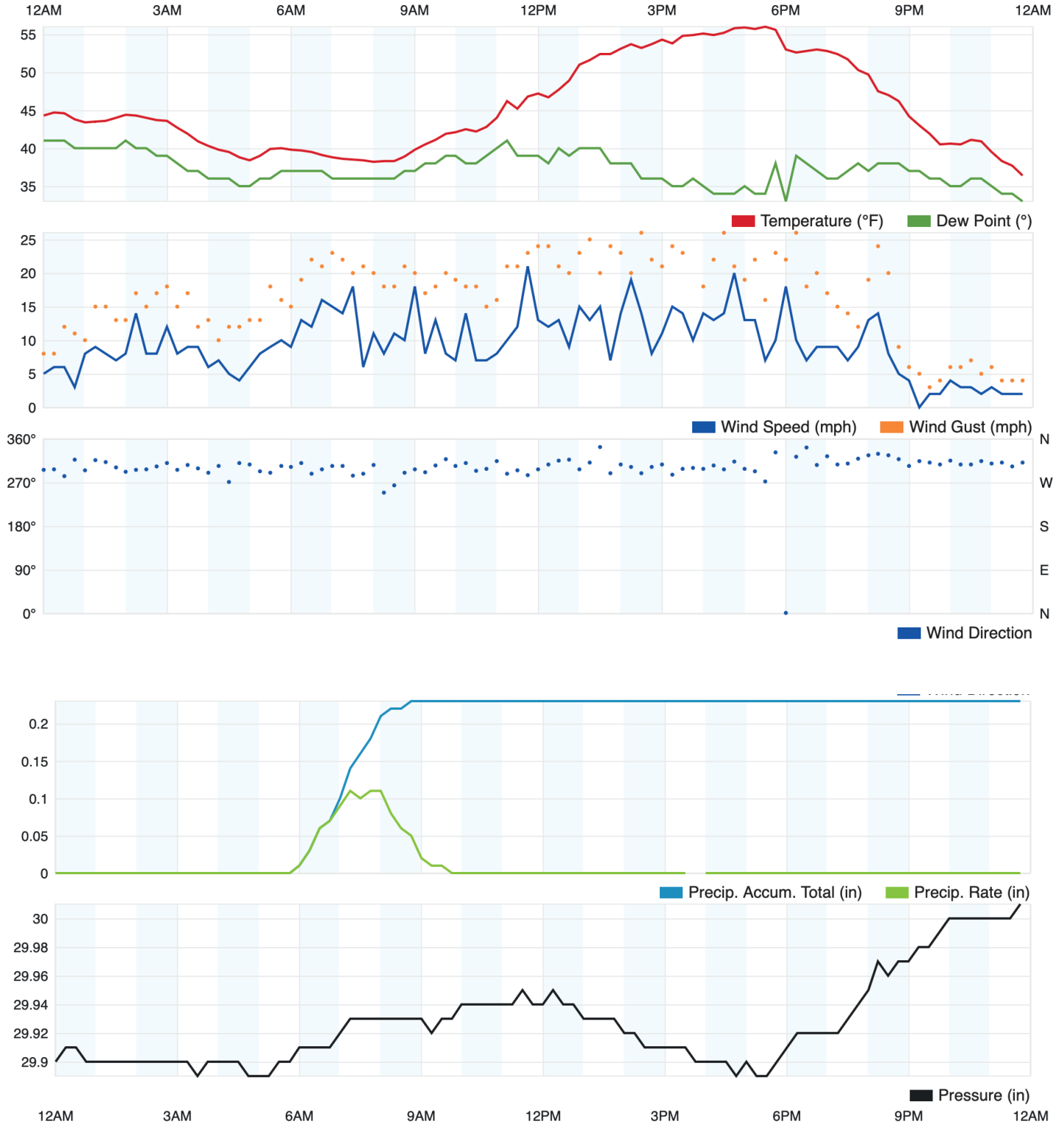
The new rule will go into effect 30 days after being published in the Federal Register.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Saturday

Saturday
Night

Sunday



Sunny

High: 61 °F



Mostly Clear

Low: 40 °F



Sunny

High: 79 °F



Mostly Clear

Low: 45 °F



Sunny

High: 76 °F



Warm Weekend on Tap

April 11, 2024
3:11 PM

Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)

	4/12 Fri	4/13 Sat	4/14 Sun	4/15 Mon
Aberdeen	64	79	77	77
Britton	59	77	74	77
Brookings	64	78	77	82
Chamberlain	71	84	81	84
Clark	60	78	75	79
Eagle Butte	66	79	76	74
Ellendale	61	78	75	77
Eureka	63	79	76	73
Gettysburg	64	80	77	74
Huron	69	82	81	84
Kennebec	68	82	80	78
McIntosh	63	77	74	72
Milbank	60	80	75	81
Miller	66	82	79	82
Mobridge	67	80	80	78
Murdo	69	81	78	77
Pierre	69	83	81	78
Redfield	65	82	79	82
Sisseton	59	77	73	75
Watertown	59	78	75	80
Webster	58	75	72	76
Wheaton	58	77	74	75

-Key Weekend Messages-

- A warm weekend incoming
- Temperatures 15-25° above normal
- Little or no chance of rain
- Relatively benign winds



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A ridge of high pressure aloft will build across the Northern Plains for this weekend and will provide for warm temperatures and dry conditions.

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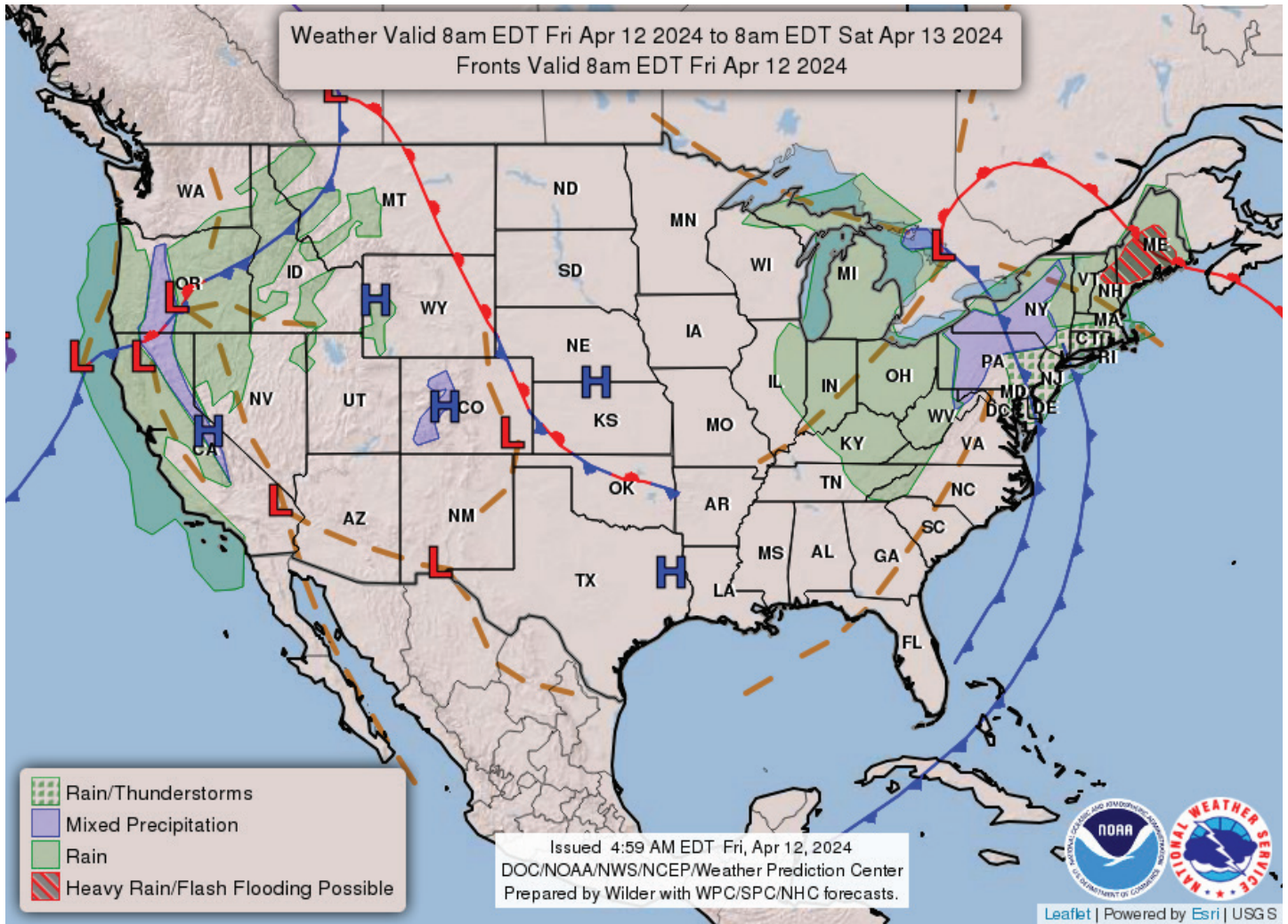
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 56 °F at 5:43 PM
Low Temp: 38 °F at 11:26 PM
Wind: 27 mph at 8:16 PM
Precip: : 0.23

Day length: 13 hours, 27 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 85 in 1931
Record Low: 9 in 1961
Average High: 56
Average Low: 30
Average Precip in April.: 0.56
Precip to date in April: 1.19
Average Precip to date: 2.57
Precip Year to Date: 2.09
Sunset Tonight: 8:16:44 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:47:25 am



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Today in Weather History

April 12, 1970: A strong spring storm affected the northern and western two-thirds of South Dakota. Heavy snow fell throughout the morning hours dumping over a foot of snow over a large area of the state. Winds whipped the snow into 2 to 4-foot drifts across much of northern South Dakota. The Aberdeen area was the hardest hit with around 17 inches reported. While southeast South Dakota, southwest Minnesota, and northwest Iowa did not feel the effects of the storm, east-central South Dakota was not as fortunate. Freezing drizzle and freezing rain resulted in heavy icing in east central South Dakota causing extensive damage. The ice storm caused power outages to 20 to 80% of the rural electric service in the area.

1927 - A tornado wiped out the town of Rock Springs, TX, killing 72 persons and causing 1.2 million dollars damage. The tornado, more than one mile in width, destroyed 235 of 247 buildings, leaving no trace of lumber or contents in many cases. Many survivors were bruised by large hail which fell after the passage of the tornado. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1934: Winds atop Mount Washington New Hampshire, averaged 186 mph for five minutes, with a peak gust of 231 mph, the highest wind speed ever clocked in the world at that time. In a report released by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), that record was toppled in 1996 at Barrow Island, Australia during Typhoon Olivia. The new world record is now 253 mph. The 316 mph wind speed recorded at Moore, Oklahoma on 5/3/1999 logged during an F5 tornado was not recorded at ground level.

1945: A series of significant tornadoes raked Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, and Illinois. Antlers, Oklahoma were nearly obliterated by a massive F5 tornado that zigzagged from southwest to northeast across the town. 69 people died in the twister. Another tornado killed eight people in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The disaster was overshadowed by the loss of President Franklin Roosevelt, who died suddenly at his vacation home at Warm Springs, Georgia.

1987 - A cold front crossing the central U.S. produced heavy snow in the Central Rockies, and severe thunderstorms over Kansas and Oklahoma. Snowfall totals ranged up to 16 inches at Red Mountain Pass CO. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 87 mph at Ponca City OK. Winds associated with the cold front itself gusted to 69 mph at Tucumcari NM. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow blanketed the Southern Appalachians. Totals in North Carolina ranged up to 17 inches at Mitchell. Winds at Flat Top Mountain gusted to 80 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-two cities in the south central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Elkins WV with a low of 15 degrees, and Baton Rouge LA with a reading of 37 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Arctic air invaded the central U.S. Lincoln, NE, reported a record low of 17 degrees. Thunderstorms developing along the arctic cold front produced heavy snow in north central Kansas, wind gusts to 61 mph at Midland TX, and wind gusts to 69 mph at Rawlins WY. Warm weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. Las Vegas NV reported a record high of 91 degrees, and on the 13th, Sacramento CA reported a record high of 95 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2010 - One-inch diameter hail falls in Fresno, CA. Two condominiums are destroyed by thunderstorms in California's San Joaquin Valley. Up to three funnel clouds were also seen in the region.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

IT'S NOT HOW LONG BUT HOW WELL

The class had become boring. So, the teacher decided to liven it up with a group discussion.

"If Shakespeare were alive today," he asked, "would he be considered remarkable?"

"Remarkable?" replied one student. "That's hardly the way to put it. He'd be considered ancient."

Living long does not mean that one has lived well or accomplished much. It simply means that one has lived. What we do with the time that God gives us is what really matters.

We all must face one simple, significant, serious question: Who and what do we live for?

After his conversion Paul had one desire: To live and die for Christ. He wrote "that I will never do anything that causes me shame...that I will always be bold for Christ...that my life will always honor Christ...for me to live is Christ."

Paul's whole purpose in life was to become more like Christ and to speak boldly for Christ. It did not matter if he was among friends or in a prison, in front of a crowd or writing a letter. He was totally consumed with serving the Lord. Someone said that if we are not ready to die, we are not prepared to live.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, may we always put You first in all that we do, and one day hear You say, "Well done my good and faithful servant." In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. Philippians 1:21



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:
04.09.24

34 43 51 52 69 25

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$120,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 8 Mins 7 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.10.24

2 15 21 33 47 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$2,800,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 23 Mins 7 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.11.24

4 10 27 33 40 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 38 Mins 7 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.10.24

4 11 12 27 29

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$54,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 38 Mins 7 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.10.24

8 21 24 57 64 2

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 7 Mins 7 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.10.24

6 7 12 24 36 15

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$46,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 7 Mins 7 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Biden administration announces another round of loan cancellation under new repayment plan

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is canceling student loans for another 206,000 borrowers as part of a new repayment plan that offers a faster route to forgiveness.

The Education Department announced the latest round of cancellations Friday in an update on the progress of its SAVE Plan. More people are becoming eligible for student loan cancellation as they hit 10 years of payments, a new finish line for some loans that's a decade sooner than what borrowers faced in the past.

Casting a shadow over the cancellations, however, are two new lawsuits challenging the plan's legality. Two groups of Republican-led states, fronted by Kansas and Missouri, recently filed federal suits arguing that the Biden administration overstepped its authority in creating the repayment option.

"From day one of my Administration, I promised to fight to ensure higher education is a ticket to the middle class, not a barrier to opportunity," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "I will never stop working to cancel student debt — no matter how many times Republican elected officials try to stop us."

With the latest action, the Education Department has now approved cancellation for about 360,000 borrowers through the new repayment plan, totaling \$4.8 billion.

The SAVE Plan is an updated version of a federal repayment plan that has been offered for decades, but with more generous terms.

Congress created the first income-driven repayment option in the 1990s for people struggling to afford payments on standard plans. It capped monthly payments to a percentage of their incomes and canceled any unpaid debt after 25 years. Similar plans were added later, offering cancellation in as little as 20 years.

Arguing that today's borrowers need even more help, the Biden administration merged most of those plans into a single repayment option with more lenient terms.

The SAVE (Saving on a Valuable Education) Plan allows more borrowers to pay nothing until their income rise above certain limits. It also lowers payments more than past plans, eliminates interest growth and cancels unpaid debt in as little as 10 years.

Biden announced the plan in 2022 alongside his broader proposal for a one-time cancellation of up to \$20,000 for more than 40 million people. While the one-time cancellation was struck down by the Supreme Court, the SAVE Plan moved forward and initially escaped legal scrutiny.

The repayment plan opened for enrollment last fall, with certain provisions scheduled to be phased in later this year. The faster path to cancellation was among those slated to start this summer, but the Biden administration fast-tracked that benefit early this year, announcing forgiveness for 153,000 borrowers who had hit 10 years of payments.

Almost 8 million Americans have enrolled in the plan, including 4.5 million who pay nothing because they have lower incomes.

In a call with reporters, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said the plan provides relief and prevents borrowers from falling behind on their loans.

"Now they have some money back in their pockets, instead of a bill that too often competed with basic needs like groceries and health care," he said.

Under the plan, borrowers who originally borrowed \$12,000 or less are eligible for forgiveness after 10 years. Those who took out more than \$12,000 can get cancellation but on a longer timeline. For each \$1,000 borrowed beyond \$12,000, it adds an additional year of payments on top of 10 years.

The Biden administration says it's designed to help those who need it most. Counterintuitively, those with smaller student loan balances tend to struggle more. It's driven by millions of Americans who take out student loans but don't finish degrees, leaving them with the downside of debt without the upside of a higher income.

In two separate lawsuits, Republican attorneys general in 18 states are pushing to have the plan tossed and to halt any further cancellation. They say the SAVE Plan goes beyond Biden's authority and makes it harder for states to recruit employees. They say the plan undermines a separate cancellation program that encourages careers in public service.

It's unclear what the suits could mean for loans that have already been canceled. A court document filed by Kansas' attorney general says it's "unrealistic to think that any loan forgiveness that occurs during this litigation will ever be clawed back."

The lawsuits don't directly address the question, and the attorneys general didn't immediately respond to an Associated Press request.

The Education Department says Congress gave the agency power to define the terms of income-driven payment plans in 1993, and that authority has been used in the past.

Along with the repayment plan, Biden is trying again at a one-time student loan cancellation. In a visit to Wisconsin on Monday, he highlighted a proposal to reduce or cancel loans for more than 30 million borrowers in five categories.

It aims to help borrowers with large sums of unpaid interest, those with older loans, those who attended low-value programs, and those who face other hardships preventing them from repaying student loans. It would also cancel loans for people who are eligible for other forgiveness programs but haven't applied.

The Biden administration says it will accelerate parts of the proposal, with plans to start waiving unpaid interest for millions of borrowers starting this fall. Conservative opponents have threatened to challenge that plan, too.

On Friday the administration also said it's canceling loans for 65,000 borrowers who are enrolled in older income-driven repayment plans and hit the finish line for forgiveness. It also announced cancellation for another 5,000 borrowers through the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

Through a variety of programs, the Biden administration says it has now provided loan relief to 4.3 million people, totaling \$153 billion.

German parliament to vote on making it easier for people to legally change their name and gender

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — German lawmakers are expected to vote Friday on a government plan to make it easier for transgender, intersex and nonbinary people to change their name and gender in official documents.

The "self-determination law," one of several social reforms that Chancellor Olaf Scholz's liberal-leaning coalition government pledged when it took office in late 2021, would take effect on Nov. 1.

It would allow adults to change their first name and legal gender at registry offices without further formalities. They would have to notify the office three months before making the change.

The existing "transsexual law," which dates back four decades, requires individuals who want to change gender on official documents to first obtain assessments from two experts "sufficiently familiar with the particular problems of transsexualism" and then a court decision.

Since that law was drawn up, Germany's top court has struck down other provisions that required transgender people to get divorced and sterilized, and to undergo gender-transition surgery.

The new legislation focuses on individuals' legal identities. It does not involve any revisions to Germany's rules for gender-transition surgery.

The new rules allow minors 14 years and older to change their name and legal gender with approval from their parents or guardians; if they don't agree, teenagers could ask a family court to overrule them.

In the case of children younger than 14, parents or guardians would have to make registry office applications on their behalf.

After a formal change of name and gender takes effect, no further changes would be allowed for a year. The new legislation provides for operators of, for example, gyms and changing rooms for women to continue to decide who has access.

Nyke Slawik, one of two transgender women who were elected as lawmakers in 2021, said ahead of the vote in parliament's lower house, or Bundestag, that the new rules would have saved her over a year of dealing with courts, seeking expert assessments and spending nearly 2,000 euros (\$2,150).

"We finally want to make it easier," Slawik, a lawmaker with the Greens, one of the governing parties, told ARD television. "Many other countries have gone this way, and Germany is simply following suit in significantly simplifying this registration."

Among others, Spain's parliament in early 2023 passed a law that allows people over 16 years of age to change their legally registered gender without any medical supervision.

In the U.K., the Scottish parliament in 2022 passed a bill that would allow people aged 16 or older to change the gender designation on identity documents by self-declaration. That was vetoed by the British government, a decision that Scotland's highest civil court upheld in December.

In other socially liberal reforms, Scholz's government has legalized the possession of limited amounts of cannabis; eased the rules on gaining German citizenship and ended restrictions on holding dual citizenship; and ended a ban on doctors "advertising" abortion services. Same-sex marriage was already legalized in 2017.

If O.J. Simpson's assets go to court, Goldman, Brown families could be first in line

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — O.J. Simpson died Thursday without having paid the lion's share of the \$33.5 million judgment a California civil jury awarded to the families of his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and her friend Ron Goldman.

Acquitted at a criminal trial, Simpson was found liable by jurors in a 1997 wrongful death lawsuit.

The public is now likely to get a closer look Simpson's finances, and the families are likely to have a better shot at collecting — if there is anything to collect.

Here's how the next few months may play out.

THE PROBATE PROCESS

Whether or not he left behind a will, and whatever that document says, Simpson's assets will now almost certainly have to go through what's known as the probate process in court before his four children or other intended heirs can collect on any of them.

Different states have different probate laws. Generally, the case is filed in the state where the person was living when they died. In Simpson's case that's Nevada. But if significant assets are in California or Florida, where he also lived at various times, separate cases could emerge there.

Nevada law says an estate must go through the courts if its assets exceed \$20,000, or if any real estate is involved, and this must be done within 30 days of the death. If a family fails to file documents, creditors themselves can begin the process.

A STRONGER CLAIM IN DEATH?

Once the case is in court, creditors who say they are owed money can then seek a piece of the assets. The Goldman and Brown families will be on at least equal footing with other creditors, and will probably have an even stronger claim.

Under California law, creditors holding a judgment lien like the plaintiffs in the wrongful death case are deemed to have secured debt, and have priority over creditors with unsecured debt. And they are in a better position to get paid than they were before the defendant's death.

Arash Sadat, a Los Angeles attorney who specializes in property disputes, says it is "100%" better for the claimant to have the debtor be deceased and their money in probate.

He said his firm had a jury trial where their clients got a \$9 million jury award that the debtor appealed and delayed endlessly.

"He did everything he could to avoid paying this debt," Sadat said. "Three or four years later, he died. And within weeks, the estate cuts a check for \$12 million. That's the \$9 million plus interest that I had

accrued over this time.”

The executor or administrator of the estate has much more of an incentive to dispense with debts than the living person does. “That’s why you see things like that happening,” Sadat said.

But of course that doesn’t mean payment will be forthcoming.

“I do think it’s going to be quite difficult for them to collect,” attorney Christopher Melcher said. “We don’t know what O.J. has been able to earn over the years.”

Neither Sadat nor Melcher is involved with the Simpson estate or the court case.

WHAT ASSETS DID SIMPSON HAVE?

Simpson said he lived only on his NFL and private pensions. Hundreds of valuable possessions were seized as part of the jury award, and Simpson was forced to auction his Heisman Trophy, fetching \$230,000.

Goldman’s father Fred Goldman, the lead plaintiff, always said the issue was never the money, it was only about holding Simpson responsible. And he said in a statement Thursday that with Simpson’s death, “the hope for true accountability has ended.”

WHAT ABOUT TRUSTS?

There are ways that a person can use trusts established during their life and other methods to make sure their chosen heirs get their assets in death. If such a trust is irrevocable, it can be especially strong.

But transfers of assets to others that are made to avoid creditors can be deemed fraudulent, and claimants like the Goldman and Brown families can file separate civil lawsuits that bring those assets into dispute.

Russian soldiers who quit Putin’s war get no hero’s welcome abroad as asylum claims surge

By ERIKA KINETZ Associated Press

ASTANA, Kazakhstan (AP) — If the choice was death or a bullet to the leg, Yevgeny would take the bullet. A decorated hero of Russia’s war in Ukraine, Yevgeny told his friend and fellow soldier to please aim carefully and avoid bone. The tourniquets were ready.

The pain that followed was the price Yevgeny paid for a new chance at life. Like thousands of other Russian soldiers, he deserted the army.

“I joke that I gave birth to myself,” he said. “When a woman gives birth to a child, she experiences very intense pain and gives new life. I gave myself life after going through very intense pain.”

Yevgeny made it out of the trenches. But the new life he found is not what he had hoped for.

The Associated Press spoke with five officers and one soldier who deserted the Russian military. All have criminal cases against them in Russia, where they face 10 years or more in prison. Each is waiting for a welcome from the West that has never arrived. Instead, all but one live in hiding.

For Western nations grappling with Russia’s vast and growing diaspora, Russian soldiers present particular concern: Are they spies? War criminals? Or heroes?

Overall asylum claims from Russian citizens have surged since the full-scale invasion, but few are winning protection. Policymakers remain divided over whether to consider Russians in exile as potential assets or risks to national security.

Andrius Kubilius, a former prime minister of Lithuania now serving in the European Parliament, argues that cultivating Russians who oppose Vladimir Putin is in the strategic self-interest of the West. Fewer Russian soldiers at the front, he added, means a weaker army.

“Not to believe in Russian democracy is a mistake,” Kubilius said. “To say that all Russians are guilty is a mistake.”

All but one of the soldiers spoke with AP on condition of anonymity, fearing deportation and persecution of themselves and their families. The AP reviewed legal documents, including criminal case files, Russian public records and military identification papers, as well as photos and videos to verify their stories, but it was impossible to independently corroborate every detail.

Independent Russian media outlet Mediazona has documented more than 7,300 cases in Russian courts against AWOL soldiers since September 2022; cases of desertion, the harshest charge, leapt sixfold last year.

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Record numbers of people seeking to desert – more than 500 in the first two months of this year – are contacting Idite Lesom, or “Get Lost,” a group run by Russian activists in the Republic of Georgia. Last spring, just 3% of requests for help came from soldiers seeking to leave; in January, more than a third did, according to the group’s head, Grigory Sverdlin. The numbers of known deserters may be small compared to Russia’s overall troop strength, but they are an indicator of morale.

“Obviously, Russian propaganda is trying to sell us a story that all Russia supports Putin and his war,” Sverdlin said. “But that’s not true.”

The question now is, where can they go?

German officials have said that Russians fleeing military service can seek protection, and a French court last summer ruled that Russians who refuse to fight can claim refugee status. In practice, however, it’s proven difficult for deserters, most of whom have passports that only allow travel within a handful of former Soviet states, to get asylum, lawyers, activists and deserters say.

Fewer than 300 Russians got refugee status in the U.S. in fiscal year 2022. Customs and Border Patrol officials encountered more than 57,000 Russians at U.S. borders in fiscal year 2023, up from around 13,000 in fiscal year 2021.

In France, asylum requests rose more than 50% between 2022 and 2023, to a total of around 3,400 people, according to the French office that handles the requests. And last year, Germany got 7,663 first-time asylum applications from Russian citizens, up from 2,851 in 2022, Germany’s Interior Ministry told AP in an email. None of the data specifies how many were soldiers.

As they count the days until their legal right to stay in Kazakhstan ends, Yevgeny – and the others – have watched other deserters get seized by Russian forces in Armenia, deported from Kazakhstan and turn up dead, riddled with bullets, in Spain.

“There is no mechanism for Russians who do not want to fight, deserters, to get to a safe place,” Yevgeny said. He urges Western policymakers to reconsider. “After all, it’s much cheaper economically to allow a person into your country -- a healthy young man who can work -- than to supply Ukraine with weapons.”

YEVGENY

Sitting in his spartan room in Astana, Kazakhstan, Yevgeny rummaged through a cardboard box that holds the things he thought to save.

“It’s like a woman’s handbag, there’s so much stuff,” he muttered, poking around real and fake passports, a letter with hearts on it, blister packs of pills.

He can’t find his military medals. He has the certificates, though, commemorating his service in Syria and Ukraine.

Yevgeny seems suddenly ashamed. “I don’t care about them,” he said, shoving everything back in the box.

The son of postal workers, Yevgeny went to military school mostly because it was free. He did 41 parachute jumps, and learned to ride horses, dive, shoot and handle explosives. The cost of his education would come after graduation: five years of mandatory military service.

The night of Feb. 23, 2022, Yevgeny and his unit barely slept. Their tanks, hulking and dark, cast long shadows on a thin layer of snow beside the railroad tracks that would carry them toward Ukraine. Yevgeny was too drunk with fatigue to think much about what would happen next.

On Yevgeny’s second day at war, an officer leaned against his machine gun and shot off his own finger, he said. Later, a guy fell asleep under a military vehicle and died when it drove over him. People got lost and never came back.

In the chaos, around 10 men in his unit were accidentally killed with guns or grenades. One soldier shot another square in the chest. What were they doing, Yevgeny wondered, testing their bulletproof vests? None of it made sense in a world where life mattered. But Yevgeny wasn’t in that world anymore.

The deeper Yevgeny moved into Ukraine, the uglier things got.

“We didn’t want to kill anyone, but we also wanted to live,” explained Yevgeny, a senior lieutenant who oversaw a platoon of around 15 men. “The locals would come in civilian cars and shoot at our military. What would you do?”

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He said that Ukrainian prisoners of war were executed because the Russians couldn't get them back to Russia and didn't want to build detention centers.

"Special people were chosen for this, because a lot of others refused," he said. "People with a special, so to speak, psyche were appointed executioners."

There are things Yevgeny can't forget: A 14-year-old Ukrainian boy who seemed to be making Molotov cocktails and was executed. A 24-year-old Ukrainian woman caught with compromising information on her phone raped by two Russian soldiers.

Yevgeny was within breathing distance of Kyiv when Moscow ordered a retreat. In a single day in April 2022, around seventy people from his brigade died in an ambush, he said. The Ukrainian military released a video of the encounter with the retreating column.

Pop, pop, pop go the fireballs. Little flags bob above the tanks, giving it the feel of a video game. Shells crash a bit off to the left. Then, a hit. The video cuts to a magnified image of a Russian tank pluming black smoke, two lifeless bodies curled beside it.

"Very cool," wrote someone in the comments.

"The best sight in my life is to see how the Russians die," wrote another.

Yevgeny was in that column. He knows men who are dying in those balls of fire. His face is flat. He doesn't want to see it again.

"Many of my friends have died. And these were really good guys who didn't want to fight," he said. "But there was no way out for them."

He is crying.

If he could, Yevgeny would go back to 2013, the year he entered military school. He would stand sentinel at the gates of his school and tell all the boys go home, stay away, this place is not what it seems.

He wants them to understand three words: "You will die."

It took Yevgeny less than three months at war to decide to get himself shot in the leg.

"You can only leave wounded or dead," Yevgeny explained. "No one wants to leave dead."

He made a pact with three other soldiers. They called it their Plan B. Yevgeny would take the first bullet, then the comms guy, then the sniper. The machine gunner said he didn't want to leave Ukraine without his brother, who was also fighting, but he'd stand by their story.

One chill May morning, as they trudged through even columns of pine trees on their way to retrieve a drone that had landed in Ukrainian territory, Yevgeny and his friends decided it was time for Plan B. They'd already lost one man in that area and now felt like they were on a suicide mission.

When the sniper shot Yevgeny, the pain was like a strong man hammering a 9 mm metal bar into his flesh. Then the comms guy took a bullet to his thigh. After seeing the two of them crumple and scowl, the third man chickened out.

Blood kept gushing, despite the tourniquet, and Yevgeny was shocked to discover he couldn't walk. His friends dragged him 300 meters back through the woods. He was given sweet tea and evacuated that same evening.

Yevgeny spent months in rehabilitation and figured he could ride out his injury until his contract expired in June 2023. But after Putin's announcement of partial mobilization in September 2022, it no longer mattered what his contract said. Soldiers like him were now obliged to serve until the end of the war.

He knew he had to leave. He made it to Kazakhstan in early 2023, with the help of Idite Lesom. Russian authorities filed a criminal case against him. His relatives back in Russia were questioned, his apartment there searched.

Since then, Yevgeny has been doing his best to disappear. He found a place in Astana in an apartment that stank of cat. They were four men with only three cups, three spoons and three chairs to go around. They boiled water with an electric coil in a glass jar because no one wanted to splurge for a kettle.

He worked for a few weeks skittering around Astana on an old motorcycle delivering food. But his paychecks never arrived, possibly because his SIM card and bank account were in different people's names.

He doesn't know what he'll do when his savings run out. He said he's applied for asylum in France, Germany and the United States – obviously the best place to hide from Russia, he said. He'd like serve in

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a U.N. mission somewhere, but it's hard for him to conceive a path from here to there.

He wakes at ten o'clock, steps out of the shower into another molten, formless day. That night, he will comb his hair and go out to a bar with other deserters, to pass a few sparkling hours as a normal guy.

At the bar, someone remembered that it was the one-year anniversary of Russia's September 2022 mobilization. Putin drafted 300,000 troops to fight in Ukraine. Tens of thousands of them are now dead.

The table went quiet. Yevgeny searched for a word that meant the opposite of evil so they could drink to it.

In the end, they raised their glasses to virtue, then to peace.

FARHAD

Within hours of Putin's September 2022 mobilization decree, threatening messages started pinging in on Farhad Ziganshin's phone. A small man with a big voice, Farhad had abandoned a career in music for the military to please his dad. He'd tried to resign from the armed forces, but the military school where he taught rejected his application, he said.

Panicked, he piled into the family Chevrolet with his mother, sister, dog and aunt and took off for the Kazakh border near midnight. They'd try to make it look like a fun family vacation. The roads were jammed with other Russians fleeing Putin's draft.

"Hurrah!" shouted Farhad, pumping his fists in the air, as they left Russia.

Farhad landed a job at a burger joint near the border, then followed a friend of a friend to Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city, where he'd been promised work as a singer. He ended up working in a banquet hall, sleeping on a vast, golden bed in a newlywed suite and eating as much leftover food as he wanted.

Life was good, but uncertain. Kazakhstan was playing a delicate game, trying to assuage Russia without distancing allies in Europe. In December 2022, Kazakhstan deported a Russian intelligence officer, Mikhail Zhilin, who had deserted. In March 2023, a Russian court sentenced Zhilin to six and a half years in prison.

That same month, Farhad decided to move to Armenia, thinking it was probably safer. But he was blocked from boarding his flight. "Are you on the wanted list?" a border agent asked as he flicked through Farhad's passport. Farhad went pale. Cold sweat prickled over his body.

He was led to a room for questioning. A man in civilian clothes sat across from him.

"You are my Muslim brother," he told Farhad. "I'm also against the war. Tell me everything."

Farhad confessed.

Farhad tried to brace himself for what was to come. He slipped his toothbrush, toothpaste, socks, slippers, snacks and a book – Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" — into a transparent bag. His cell at the detention center had a metal door with a small window and slot for food, a security camera and a hole in the floor for a toilet.

Farhad stared at the ceiling all night, his panic mounting: How am I going to live here? Will I be beaten or raped? I'd kill myself first.

The morning of his third day in detention, three huge bags arrived for Farhad, packed with food, clothes and cigarettes from local human rights activists. "I lay down and thought that's the end," Farhad said. "Kaput." Why would he need all this stuff if he weren't in for a long incarceration?

Two hours later, a police officer appeared. "Take your things and get out," he ordered.

Farhad was free.

Farhad's lawyer told AP he was released because under the Kazakh criminal code, as well as multilateral agreements with Russia, suspects accused of military crimes can't be extradited. Farhad was safe, at least for the moment.

"We don't know what tomorrow will bring," said his lawyer, Artur Alkhastov, who works with the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law in Astana. "In Kazakhstan, politics is higher than the law. . . Everything can change."

In July, independent Russia media reported that France had rejected Farhad's application for asylum. What actually happened was that Farhad's application for a travel permit to France to apply for asylum had been denied, Alkhastov said.

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Without an international passport, Farhad was stuck in Kazakhstan. Moreover, the publicity raised fears that Russian authorities would take fresh interest in his case. Farhad moved from Almaty to Astana, the capital, to lower his profile.

"It's not safe to stay in Kazakhstan," he said. "I just try to lead a normal life, without violating the laws of Kazakhstan, without being too visible, without appearing anywhere. We have a proverb: Be quieter than water and lower than grass."

He changes his SIM card every few months, doesn't live at his registered address and avoids employers who ask too many questions. After six weeks, he ran out of money and moved in with another Russian deserter, Yevgeny. His bed was a pile of coats and sweaters on the floor. It was impossible to sleep. His back was killing him.

He thought of the life he'd left behind in Russia. "In Kazan, I had a completely different life. I had my own apartment, I had a job there, I earned money, I had staff under my command," he said. "Here I am living sleeping on coats, eating I don't know what. And without any money in my pocket. It's very depressing," Online, people call him a coward and traitor and say he should be killed.

Farhad got a job at a real estate startup that didn't ask for documents. Every morning, he sang Whitney Houston's "I Have Nothing" to his co-workers.

After work, Farhad liked to walk around Astana, singing deep slow songs to himself to fill the darkening hours. He dreamed of starting a family but couldn't afford to take a woman out to the movies. "I can't fall in love with someone and have someone fall in love with me," he said. "So I just walk around and sing songs."

But he wanted to believe that he had made a worthy choice.

"I realized that I didn't want to serve in this kind of Russian army that destroys cities, kills civilians, and forcibly appropriates foreign land and territory," he said. "If perhaps watching, listening to my story could bring even one person to reason, I would have made a certain contribution."

Six months later, the real estate business has collapsed and Farhad is trying to sell flooring instead. He moved into an apartment of his own, but keeps missing rent payments. He's been warned that his legal right to stay in Kazakhstan is coming to an end. He doesn't know what to do next.

SPARROW

Sparrow knew from the start that money could mean the difference between life and death. The month before he was born, his father was killed in a gambling dispute over money. His mother raised him, along with his brother and sister, alone, working as a cook in an orphanage in a tiny village.

Later, he moved farther north, to work in a diamond-mining town not far from the Arctic Circle.

The company Sparrow worked for owned more than diamonds. They effectively owned the town, sponsoring its theater, schools, hospital, sports complex and apartment blocks. As it turned out, they also owned Sparrow.

Sparrow finished his shift the afternoon of Friday, Sept. 23, 2022, and was cleaning his Bobcat when his boss came by and told him to report immediately to human resources. They took his passport and military ID and locked them in a safe.

"They said, 'You're fired,'" Sparrow recalled. "You have one hour to get to the military recruitment point. If you don't, you'll have a criminal case against you."

Sparrow obeyed. At 6 a.m. the next morning, he and hundreds of other conscripts boarded a heavy old plane bound for a military base in the regional capital.

The thought of war did not cross Sparrow's mind. All he could think about was his job. Sparrow is delicately composed, with a pale, Asian face, ink-dark eyes and bone-china cheeks. Unable to finish university, he worked hard at laying road. Winters, he endured temperatures so extreme they could crack a backhoe. Why had they fired him?

When he arrived, the military base was chaos. Some 6,000 people were crammed into the barracks, he calculated, and no one was giving orders. Men spilled over each other, hiving off into small groups to drink. He couldn't find a free bed, so he dropped his bag in a corner and curled up on the floor.

The next day, he found his way to an information stand to figure out who was in charge. But instead of

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a list of personnel, he found photographs of dead people and an exhortation to kill Ukrainian soldiers. "I saw this photo – what is all this?" he thought. "I'm not going anywhere to kill people – never!"

Sparrow pulled his commander aside to try to find a way to avoid going where he was being sent. He would serve in a different way. He could pay.

The commander was not interested in bribes and told him that if he didn't fight with the Russian armed forces, he'd end up with a private military company, like Yevgeny Prigozhin's then-powerful Wagner Group. "You still have just one path," his commander told him. "Write a refusal, you will go to jail, and we know where you will end up, at PMC Wagner."

He was 30 years old. He called his mother for help.

Sparrow's guts couldn't take it. He ran to the bathroom. He paced in anxious circles. Then ran to the bathroom again. And again.

"What's wrong with you?" his commander demanded.

"I just have some stomach problems," Sparrow said.

While the commander was at lunch, Sparrow grabbed his ID, telephone and civilian clothes and headed for a hole in the wall. His mother was waiting on the other side.

The next morning, they boarded the first flight out of town. Forty hours later, Sparrow was in Kazakhstan. Astana felt fresh and warm. He realized he'd been cold his entire life.

"I am free," he told himself.

Freedom for Sparrow actually meant a bigger cage.

Two weeks after he fled, Russian authorities opened a criminal case against him. Russian media reported on his case, and Sparrow felt the publicity only increased the size of the target on his back. The charges against him were soon upgraded under a tough new clause in Russia's criminal code. Now he faces up to 15 years in prison if he gets sent back to Russia.

Security agents interrogated his mother back in Russia. Before he ditched his Russian SIM, he used to get calls from Russian police who said they knew where he was. In October, a man claiming to be a Kazakh policeman started calling him to set up a meeting. He said he'd wait for a summons. None ever came.

Sparrow is afraid of the background checks that come with permanent employment. Instead, he picks up occasional jobs collecting trash or hauling equipment at construction sites.

He was going to bed at 4 a.m. and waking at noon. He couldn't even get back to Russia to bury his grandfather.

Sparrow's eyes went red with tears.

"I don't want anything in life. I have no interest in my own affairs," he said. "Sometimes I don't understand myself. I just sit all day on the Internet, on YouTube, and read news, news, news of what's going on in Ukraine, and that's it."

He doesn't know the status of his own asylum applications. Without a foreign passport, how could he leave Kazakhstan anyway? Every time he dared to believe something good might happen to him, it hasn't. Why try?

Outside his bare apartment, he could hear the cries of children who are not his, the thwack of a ball from a game he is not playing, the voices of men speaking to friends he does not have.

"There are moments I regret, but I did the right thing," he said. "I'd rather sit here and suffer and look for something than go there and kill a human being because of some unclear war, which is 100% Russia's fault. I don't regret it."

SPORTSMASTER

As a child, the boy was not particularly good at school, but he could run. His mother was raising him alone in a village in Western Russia hemmed in by busted coal mines, a place as short on hope as it was on jobs. She called a friend to get her son a spot at a military school. The family wouldn't have to pay a cent. It looked like a ticket to a better life.

At the military academy, the boy studied engineering to become a radio technician. But his real passion was sports. He wanted to run faster than anyone else.

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Now known by the nickname Sportsmaster, he ultimately commanded 30 men, but said he never went into combat. He stayed in service even after he'd fulfilled his five-year contract: He didn't want to be a burden on his mother and who else was going to pay him to run?

The night Moscow launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Sportsmaster jolted awake for no reason at 3 a.m. and spent three sickening hours glued to the television in disbelief. By dawn, all hope had drained from his body. He knew he would be ordered to fight.

"At that moment, I immediately decided that I would not support it in any way, not even lift my little finger to support what had begun," he said. "I understood that this was a point of no return that would change the lives of the entire country, including mine."

Sportsmaster said he stopped showing up at his base. In October 2022, his paychecks stopped coming.

His coach, the head of military sports training, told him to report to the base, they'd find something easy for him to do and he'd get paid again. It was a tempting offer from a trusted mentor.

His commanders were waiting for him beneath a huge portrait of a legendary Russian military hero. As he entered the room, they began to speak. It took a moment for the words to become clear: Special Military Operation. Order. Luhansk.

He realized they were reading out his combat orders. He'd been tricked. They told him to sign.

He refused to touch the pen.

The brigade's chief of staff picked up a book with a Russian flag on the cover, a copy of Russia's Criminal Code. "You either go to jail or you go there," he said. "You have only two options."

Seized by panic, Sportsmaster turned to leave. He had to get out of the building before they locked him inside. His division's chief of staff grabbed him by the shoulder, but he slipped away and did what he did best: run.

He pounded down three flights of stairs, taking six turns on a zig-zagging staircase, blew past the guards at the door and beelined for a stretch of fence far from any checkpoint. He grabbed onto the black metal bars of the fence and heaved himself over, clearing the speared tips, 2.5 meters tall, without a scratch.

"What I felt was only disgust," he said.

Idite Lesom gave him step-by-step instructions for how to slip out of Russia. AP is withholding details of the route.

Before he left, he recorded a video, a political message for the keepers of whatever country he might end up in, a plea to convince them of his friendship.

"They wanted to force me to go fight against the free people of Ukraine," he said to the camera. "Our freedom is taken away from us every day, but Putin wanted to steal it from them in three days."

And he did what he could to make a grand gesture.

"Putin wanted me to be in a bag," he said. "But it's his uniform that will be in a bag."

He shoved his military uniforms in two black trash bags and threw them in a dumpster.

Near midnight that same day, his mother stood in a pool of streetlight in an empty parking lot, weeping. As her son filmed her from the bus taking him away, she forced a strained, sorrowful smile.

The bus carried Sportsmaster and his girlfriend back to the town where he learned to be a soldier.

"I always thought I was being trained to protect my country and defend it, but it turned out that I was being taught to attack and conquer," he said.

By that afternoon, they were out of Russia and beaming. He was optimistic. At the least, he would not have to show up to his court hearing in Russia, where he faced criminal charges for not participating in the war.

"The worst thing that could have happened has happened," he said. "Now only good things are coming."

Sportsmaster and his girlfriend found a studio apartment in one of the teeming, anonymous buildings slapped up at the edges of Astana.

Six months later, like the other deserters, he's hiding in plain sight. No SIM card of his own. No clear path to citizenship or asylum. The gnawing peril of a knock at the door.

"There are Russian agents here who try to push Kazakhstan under Russia's wing," he said. "I can't say it's as safe here as I would like because where the wind blows, Kazakhstan will turn."

He doesn't have an international passport and if he tried to cross the border, he'd likely be arrested because of the criminal case against him in Russia.

While he waits for the wind to turn in his favor, Sportsmaster has found work as a trainer in Astana. Business is booming.

"I teach people to run with pleasure," he said, bursting into an incandescent smile. "I am for people to not get stuck."

On his daily runs, Sportsmaster eats through 10 kilometers in 40 minutes with animal grace. His breath is even, his heartbeat slow, at ease — if only for a moment — with his place in the world.

He wants people to understand that there are Russians with dignity.

"Something new is starting," he said. "I will not let anyone decide my destiny for me."

13 men plead not guilty to role in Brooklyn synagogue tunnel scuffle

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Thirteen members of the Hasidic Jewish community pleaded not guilty Wednesday to charges stemming from their alleged role in a dispute over an illegal tunnel built beneath a historic Brooklyn synagogue.

The defendants, many of them international students from Israel, appeared in Brooklyn court Wednesday on charges of reckless endangerment, criminal mischief and obstruction of governmental administration. They were issued a limited protection order that bars them from making any excavations or alterations to the building. They also cannot be in contact with a local rabbi.

Prosecutors say the defendants — who ranged in age from 19 to 26 — were involved in a Jan. 8 melee in the basement of the global headquarters of Chabad-Lubavitch, a movement of Orthodox Judaism. The dispute erupted after the discovery of an underground passage connecting four buildings within the famed Jewish complex.

Proponents of the tunnel said they were carrying out the wishes of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the former Chabad leader and one of Judaism's most influential leaders, who spoke of expanding the densely packed worship space before his death in 1994. Some members of the Chabad community believe Schneerson is still alive and that he is the messiah.

When Chabad leaders moved to seal the tunnel, characterizing it as a rogue act of vandalism, a group of young men fought back, ripping the wooden siding off the synagogue and refusing to leave the dusty passage. Their protest escalated as police arrived, leading to a chaotic scuffle and more than \$1,500 in property damage, according to court papers.

None of the men who were charged in the brawl were accused of digging the passage, which authorities described as a linear tunnel that was 60 foot (18.3 meters) long and 8 foot (2.4 meters) wide. In addition to the 13 people who pleaded not guilty on Wednesday, four others are expected to face charges when they return from Israel in the coming weeks.

An investigation by the Department of Buildings found the tunnel, which has since been filled with concrete, compromised the stability of several structures surrounding the religious complex, leading to vacate orders at four buildings.

A two-story building adjacent to the synagogue remains subject to a vacate order due to the removal of fire-separating materials, according to a spokesperson for the buildings department.

An attorney for the defendants, Levi Huebner, did not respond to a request for comment Thursday. He previously said his clients were suffering from "a combination of a little naivete and misintended good thoughts."

Rabbi Motti Seligson, a spokesperson for the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, said in a text message: "We pray that they see the error of their ways and atone for the harm that they have caused."

Manhattan court must find a dozen jurors to hear first-ever criminal case against a former president

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Of the 1.4 million adults who live in Manhattan, a dozen are soon to become the first Americans to sit in judgment of a former president charged with a crime.

Jury selection is set to start Monday in ex-President Donald Trump's hush-money case — the first trial among four criminal prosecutions of the presumptive Republican presidential nominee. The proceedings present a historic challenge for the court, the lawyers and the everyday citizens who find themselves in the jury pool.

"There is no question that picking a jury in a case involving someone as familiar to everyone as former President Trump poses unique problems," one of the trial prosecutors, Joshua Steinglass, said during a hearing.

Those problems include finding people who can be impartial about one of the most polarizing figures in American life and detecting any bias among prospective jurors without invading the privacy of the ballot box.

There's also the risk that people may try to game their way onto the jury to serve a personal agenda. Or they may be reluctant to decide a case against a politician who has used his social media megaphone to tear into court decisions that go against him and has tens of millions of fervent supporters.

Still, if jury selection will be tricky, it's not impossible, says John Jay College of Criminal Justice psychology professor Margaret Bull Kovera.

"There are people who will look at the law, look at the evidence that's shown and make a decision," says Kovera, whose research includes the psychology of juries. "And the job of the judge and the attorneys right now is to figure out who those people are."

Trump has pleaded not guilty to fudging his company's books as part of an effort to conceal payments made to hide claims of extramarital sex during his 2016 campaign. He denies the encounters and contends the case is a legally bogus, politically engineered effort to sabotage his current run.

He will go on trial in a criminal court system where juries have decided cases against a roster of famous names, including mob boss John Gotti, disgraced film mogul Harvey Weinstein and Trump's own company.

Over the last year, writer E. Jean Carroll's sex assault and defamation civil suits against Trump went before juries in a nearby federal courthouse. New York state's fraud lawsuit against the ex-president and his company went to trial without a jury last fall in a state court next door.

But the hush-money case, which carries the possibility of up to four years in prison if he's convicted, raises the stakes.

Trump lived for decades in Manhattan, where he first made his name as a swaggering real estate developer with a flair for publicity. As Steinglass put it, "There is no chance that we're going to find a single juror that doesn't have a view" of Trump.

But the question isn't whether a prospective juror does or doesn't like Trump or anyone else in the case, Judge Juan M. Merchan wrote in a filing Monday. Rather, he said, it's whether the person can "set aside any personal feelings or biases and render a decision that is based on the evidence and the law."

The process of choosing a jury begins when Merchan fills his New Deal-era courtroom with prospective jurors, giving them a brief description of the case and other basics. Then the judge will excuse any people who indicate by a show of hands that they can't serve or can't be fair and impartial, he wrote.

Those who remain will be called in groups into the jury box — by number, as their names won't be made public — to answer 42 questions, some with multiple parts.

Some are standard inquiries about prospective jurors' backgrounds. But the two sides have vigorously debated what, if anything, prospective jurors should be asked about their political activities and opinions.

Merchan emphasized that he won't let the lawyers ask about jurors' voting choices, political contributions or party registration.

But the approved questionnaire asks, for example, whether someone has "political, moral, intellectual or religious beliefs or opinions" that might "slant your approach to this case." Another query probes whether

prospective jurors support any of a half-dozen far-right or far-left groups, have attended Trump or anti-Trump rallies, and have worked or volunteered for Trump or for organizations that criticize him.

Potential jurors also will be quizzed about any "strong opinions or firmly held beliefs" about Trump or his candidacy that would cloud their ability to be fair, any feelings about how Trump is being treated in the case and any "strong opinions" on whether ex-presidents can be charged in state courts.

The process of choosing 12 jurors and six alternates can be chesslike, as the opposing sides try to game out whom they want and whom their adversaries want. They must also weigh which prospective jurors they can challenge as unable to serve or be impartial and when it's worth using one of their limited chances to rule someone out without giving a reason.

"A lot of times you make assumptions, and arguably stereotypes, about people that aren't true, so it's important to listen to what they say" in court and, if possible, online, says Thaddeus Hoffmeister, a University of Dayton law professor who studies juries.

In prominent cases, courts and attorneys watch out for "stealth jurors," people trying to be chosen because they want to steer the verdict, profit off the experience or have other private motives.

Conversely, some people might want to avoid the attention that comes with a case against a famous person. To try to address that, Merchan decided to shield the jurors' names from everyone except prosecutors, Trump and their respective legal teams.

The six jurors and three alternates in each of Carroll's federal civil cases against Trump were driven to and from court through an underground garage, and their names were withheld from the public, Carroll, Trump, their attorneys and even the judge.

Carroll's lawyer, Roberta Kaplan, says that if she were involved in the hush-money case, she would ask the court to do everything possible to ensure that jurors stay anonymous and don't fear being singled out online or in the media.

"The main concern, given the world we live in, has to be the potential for juror intimidation," Kaplan said.

Jurors were chosen within hours for both trials of Carroll's claims, which Trump denies. Carroll's lawyers later tried midtrial to boot a juror who had mentioned listening to a conservative podcaster who criticized Carroll's case. The judge privately queried the juror, who insisted he could be fair and impartial.

He remained on the panel, which unanimously found Trump liable for sexual abuse and defamation and awarded Carroll \$5 million. Eight months later, the second jury awarded Carroll an additional \$83.5 million for defamation.

20 years later, Abu Ghraib detainees get their day in US court

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (AP) — Twenty years ago this month, photos of abused prisoners and smiling U.S. soldiers guarding them at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison were released, shocking the world.

Now, three survivors of Abu Ghraib will finally get their day in U.S. court against the military contractor they hold responsible for their mistreatment.

The trial is scheduled to begin Monday in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, and will be the first time that Abu Ghraib survivors are able to bring their claims of torture to a U.S. jury, said Baher Azmy, a lawyer with the Center for Constitutional Rights representing the plaintiffs.

The defendant in the civil suit, CACI, supplied the interrogators who worked at the prison. The Virginia-based contractor denies any wrongdoing, and has emphasized throughout 16 years of litigation that its employees are not alleged to have inflicted any abuse on any of the plaintiffs in the case.

The plaintiffs, though, seek to hold CACI responsible for setting the conditions that resulted in the torture they endured, citing evidence in government investigations that CACI contractors instructed military police to "soften up" detainees for their interrogations.

Retired Army Gen. Antonio Taguba, who led an investigation into the Abu Ghraib scandal, is among those expected to testify. His inquiry concluded that at least one CACI interrogator should be held accountable for instructing military police to set conditions that amounted to physical abuse.

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There is little dispute that the abuse was horrific. The photos released in 2004 showed naked prisoners stacked into pyramids or dragged by leashes. Some photos had a soldier smiling and giving a thumbs up while posing next to a corpse, or detainees being threatened with dogs, or hooded and attached to electrical wires.

The plaintiffs cannot be clearly identified in any of the infamous images, but their descriptions of mistreatment are unnerving.

Suhail Al Shimari has described sexual assaults and beatings during his two months at the prison. He was also electrically shocked and dragged around the prison by a rope tied around his neck. Former Al-Jazeera reporter Salah Al-Ejaili said he was subjected to stress positions that caused him to vomit black liquid. He was also deprived of sleep, forced to wear women's underwear and threatened with dogs.

CACI, though, has said the U.S. military is the institution that bears responsibility for setting the conditions at Abu Ghraib and that its employees weren't in a position to be giving orders to soldiers. In court papers, lawyers for the contractor group have said the "entire case is nothing more than an attempt to impose liability on CACI PT because its personnel worked in a war zone prison with a climate of activity that reeks of something foul. The law, however, does not recognize guilt by association with Abu Ghraib."

The case has bounced through the courts since 2008, and CACI has tried roughly 20 times to have it tossed out of court. The U.S. Supreme Court in 2021 ultimately turned back CACI's appeal efforts and sent the case back to district court for trial.

In one of CACI's appeal arguments, the company contended that the U.S. enjoys sovereign immunity against the torture claims, and that CACI enjoys derivative immunity as a contractor doing the government's bidding. But U.S. District Judge Leonie Brinkema, in a first-of-its kind ruling, determined that the U.S. government can't claim immunity when it comes to allegations that violate established international norms, like torturing prisoners, so CACI as a result can't claim any derivative immunity.

Jurors next week are also expected to hear testimony from some of the soldiers who were convicted in military court of directly inflicting the abuse. Ivan Frederick, a former staff sergeant who was sentenced to more than eight years of confinement after a court-martial conviction on charges including assault, indecent acts and dereliction of duty, has provided deposition testimony that is expected to be played for the jury because he has refused to attend the trial voluntarily. The two sides have differed on whether his testimony establishes that soldiers were working under the direction of CACI interrogators.

The U.S. government may present a wild card in the trial, which is scheduled to last two weeks. Both the plaintiffs and CACI have complained that their cases have been hampered by government assertions that some evidence, if made public, would divulge state secrets that would harm national security.

Government lawyers will be at the trial ready to object if witnesses stray into territory they deem to be a state secret, they said at a pretrial hearing April 5.

Judge Brinkema, who has overseen complex national security cases many times, warned the government that if it asserts such a privilege at trial, "it better be a genuine state secret."

Jason Lynch, a government lawyer, assured her, "We're trying to stay out of the way as much as we possibly can."

Of the three plaintiffs, only Al-Ejaili, who now lives in Sweden, is expected to testify in person. The other two will testify remotely from Iraq. Brinkema has ruled that the reasons they were sent to Abu Ghraib are irrelevant and won't be given to jurors. All three were released after periods of detention ranging from two months to a year without ever being charged with a crime, according to court papers.

"Even if they were terrorists it doesn't excuse the conduct that's alleged here," she said at the April 5 hearing.

'I'm dying, you're not': Those terminally ill ask more states to legalize physician-assisted death

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — On a brisk day at a restaurant outside Chicago, Deb Robertson sat with her teenage grandson to talk about her death.

She'll probably miss his high school graduation. She declined the extended warranty on her car. Sometimes she wonders who will be at her funeral.

Those things don't frighten her much. She didn't cry when she learned two months ago that the cancerous tumors in her liver were spreading, portending a tormented death.

But later, she received a call. A bill moving through the Illinois Legislature to allow certain terminally ill patients to end their own lives with a doctor's help had made progress.

Then she cried.

"Medical-aid in dying is not me choosing to die," she says she told her 17-year-old grandson. "I am going to die. But it is my way of having a little bit more control over what it looks like in the end."

That same conversation is happening beside hospital beds and around dinner tables across the country, as Americans who are nearing life's end negotiate the terms with themselves, their families and, now, state lawmakers.

At least 12 states currently have bills that would legalize physician-assisted death. Eight states and Washington, D.C., already allow it, but only for their own residents. Vermont and Oregon permit any qualifying American to travel to their state for the practice. Patients must be at least 18 years old, within six months of death and be assessed to ensure they are capable of making an informed decision.

Two states have gone in the opposite direction. Kansas has a bill to further criminalize those who help someone with their physician-assisted death. West Virginia is asking voters to enshrine its current ban into the state constitution.

That patchwork of laws has left Americans in most states without recourse. Some patients choose to apply for residency in a state where it's legal. Others take arduous trips in the late-stage throes of disease to die in unfamiliar places and beds, far from family, friends and pets.

It was late at night when Rod Azama awoke to his wife crawling on the floor, screaming. Pain from her cancer had punched through the heavy morphine dose.

"Let me die," screamed his wife, Susan.

As Rod rushed to hold her, the cries faded to repeated mumbles. "Heaven," she said, again and again.

Susan pieced through her life's belongings — family heirlooms, photos, an antique spinning wheel — touching the memories a final time. Then she decided where their next lives would be.

She said goodbye to her constant sidekick, a small, fluffy Maltipoo named Sunny. Rod packed the dog's favorite toy, a stuffed bunny, as a reminder for Susan, who had to leave Sunny behind.

Then the two flew to Oregon.

The issue is contentious. Opponents, including many religious groups and lawmakers, have moral objections with the very concept of someone ending their life. Even with safeguards in place, they argue, the decision could be made for the wrong reasons, including depression or pressure from family burdened by their caretaking.

"It's normalizing suicide, and it's incentivizing individuals to end their lives," said Danielle Pimentel of Americans United for Life. Pimentel raised concerns that pain isn't the top reason people choose an early departure, adding that policy should focus on bettering end-of-life care.

Two national organizations lobbying for the bills argue it's about autonomy and compassion, some power over one's preordained exit.

"It comes down to the right of an individual to control their own end of life decisions free from government intervention or religious interference," said Goeff Sugerman, national campaign strategist Death with Dignity.

Even though it's illegal in most states, a 2018 Gallup poll showed more than two-thirds of Americans

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support physician-assisted death.

Only a small fraction of Americans nationwide, about 8,700, have used physician-assisted death since Oregon became the first state to legalize it in 1997, according to the advocacy group Compassion & Choices. Most are cancer cases; others include heart and respiratory diseases. A third of people prescribed the medication cocktail don't end up using it.

Gary Drake planned to. He began a Facebook post on Feb. 13 with "RIP." The 78-year-old was referring to himself. He was off to Oregon, and wouldn't be responding to any more messages and calls.

"I'm too busy and weak to do much more in this lifetime," he wrote.

The jovial businessman from Florida had watched a close friend decline from late-stage lung cancer, driving him to and from chemotherapy, until his friend shot himself. When Drake received a diagnosis around Christmas that his own lung, bone and kidney cancer would end his life within six months, he didn't deliberate long.

He signed off on Facebook: "I love you all, say a prayer for me, and I'll see you on the other side. Bon Voyage."

The finality of the post prompted a flood of comments, as if he were attending his own funeral.

"I know my dad and George are waiting to have a drink with you," someone wrote.

Less than three years ago Drake wouldn't have had the option. Oregon's residency requirement was rolled back in 2022 and Vermont's ended last year, after successful federal lawsuits argued it was unconstitutional for states to deny the service to non-residents.

While debates to legalize the bills are playing out in Kentucky, Delaware, Maryland and Iowa, among others, the advocacy organization Compassion & Choices is using the courts to try to remove residency requirements.

"People are dying right now who don't have the luxury for endless deliberation," said Kim Callinan, CEO and president of the group.

While California has a bill before lawmakers that would allow out-of-staters to access the procedure, that provision in a Colorado bill was stripped out. Three states, including Colorado, have proposals to expand in-state access, such as allowing advanced practice registered nurses, not just doctors, to prescribe the medication.

As Robertson discussed the topic with her grandson over noodles, he got teary eyed. If it became legal in Illinois tonight, would his grandmother be gone tomorrow? How does it differ from suicides that left empty seats at his school?

Robertson reassured him it would be the very last option as she embarks on a new chemo treatment. Then she explained the safeguards.

Typically, two doctors must confirm that a patient has six months to live. The patient must verbally request it twice with a waiting period that varies by state, and submit a written request with witnesses. At three meetings, a physician assesses the patient to ensure they are able to make an informed decision. The patient can be referred to a psychologist for an assessment if there are concerns.

Patients must take the medication themselves. They lose consciousness within a few minutes and usually pass away within a few hours.

Eventually the teenager met her eyes. "Granny, I support whatever you choose to do," he said.

Robertson was glad she had the conversation. "When you just think of the words 'medical-aid dying,' a 17-year-old gets stuck on the 'dying' part," she said.

Dr. Jess Kaan is no stranger to the controversy and fixation on the "dying" part. Living on the border between Oregon and Washington, she has worked on over 200 cases between the two states. A quarter of those traveled to Oregon.

Kaan has faced condemnation even from some fellow doctors, who accuse her of violating the Hippocratic oath of "do no harm." Kaan's own mother is aghast on religious grounds, and though it's become a major part of Kaan's life, the two have only spoken about it once.

For Kaan, it's a simple argument. She recalled watching a hospitalized patient with Lou Gehrig's disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, slowly decline, tormented by an inexorable feeling of suffocation, until

her passing.

"She didn't die the death she wanted to die," Kaan said.

"I'm just so convinced that death itself is not the enemy per se," she said. "For me, the ethical principles upon me are beneficence, in that I feel that the relief of suffering is really what I'm supposed to do as a physician."

As Drake prepared to fly to Oregon after posting on Facebook, he told his 12-year-old granddaughter that their special word would be "LuLu," a tease over her obsession with the clothing brand LuLulemon. Every time she saw it, he said, that would be him looking down from above.

"The last conversation she had with him was like any normal conversation that she's ever had with him. And that's the way she'll be able to remember him," said his son, Mitch Drake.

Mitch flew to meet up with his father in Oregon in February. He thanked him for the life he had given him. They said their goodbyes.

Gary Drake drank the cocktail as they played his song request: "Toes," by Zac Brown Band.

He put the cup down and sang.

"I got my toes in the water, ass in the sand Not a worry in the world, a cold beer in my hand Life is good today Life is good today."

Then he fell asleep.

Teaching refugee women to drive goes farther than their destination

By SHARON JOHNSON Associated Press

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. (AP) — In a large, empty parking lot outside Atlanta, one car slowly careened around parking spaces. From the passenger seat, driving instructor Nancy Gobran peered over large sunglasses at her student, a 30-year-old Syrian refugee woman who was driving for one of the first times in her life.

"Turn the wheel and then accelerate," Gobran, the owner of Safety Driving School, said softly in Arabic. Gripping the wheel tightly, the student cautiously rounded the corners of the parking lot for nearly an hour.

Gobran has been working for nearly five years with a program called Women Behind the Wheel, which offers 14 hours of free drivers' education to mostly refugee and immigrant women. Many of the women who enroll come from countries that discourage women from driving or working outside their home.

It's not a new concept, but Women Behind the Wheel is unique to Georgia. Similar programs exist across the country, such as Refugee Women Rising in Omaha, Nebraska, which offers driver's education, seat belt safety and car seat installation help, and Driving Opportunity in Denver, which offers classroom and road instruction to refugee women.

"Helping a lot of refugees is not easy," Gobran said. "At the beginning, it's kind of awkward for some people for their first time being behind the wheel, but by the end of the program, they gained the benefit they've been looking for."

Students sign up for the driving program through Ethaar, an Atlanta-area nonprofit organization that aids refugee families through their resettlement. Its name is an Arabic word meaning altruism and affection.

Ethaar co-founder Mona Megahed said she started Women Behind the Wheel to fill a glaring need many refugee families have that partially stem from cultural differences.

"We named it Women Behind the Wheel for a reason," Megahed said. "We really wanted to empower our female clients. A lot of these women were struggling because they were fully dependent on their spouses."

She noted some husbands held beliefs from their home countries that their wives shouldn't drive or work.

"We quickly explained, well, you can't really provide if you're making minimum wage and you have six mouths to feed in addition to helping with your wife," Megahed said. "So she also needs to kind of learn how to drive and find a job and get out there."

The stress can be compounded for families in metro Atlanta, where many people rely on cars to get around. Most of the refugee families Ethaar works with settle in Clarkston, a suburb 15 miles (24 kilometers) northeast of Atlanta.

"Most of the time because of lack of access to transportation, it's hard for them to get to their jobs," said Sarah Karim, Ethaar's executive director. "It's hard for them to go study anywhere except for what is close by, and there aren't that many options, unfortunately."

Their clientele depends on the shifting global landscape and conflicts, Karim said.

"Lately, we've observed various nationalities among our clients, including families and individuals from Afghanistan, Burma, Syria, Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq, and Eritrea," Karim said.

So far, there have been 230 graduates of the program, including a few men. The driving program typically has a three-to-four-month waitlist because of the demand. The U.S. government gives refugee families up to 12 months of financial and medical assistance, so there is limited time to become autonomous.

"The point is for every refugee to reach self-sufficiency or self-reliance," said Dorian Crosby, a Spelman College professor who is an expert in refugee migration.

"Learning how to drive and getting access to a license is critical to refugee women reaching that level of self-reliance," Crosby said. "It's not just to meet the government regulations of the cutoff, but they now can sustain themselves. It is also such an emotional boost."

Instructors like Gobran are fluent in Arabic, which makes students more comfortable. She watched her client slowly gain confidence over her hourlong session. A smile crept across her face. A month later, her student passed her driving test.

"This is their new home, and they have to understand how this country works," Gobran said. "It starts with the very little thing as driving to build a future."

A near-total ban on abortion has supercharged the political dynamics of Arizona, a key swing state

By STEVE PEOPLES and JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona was already expected to be one of the most closely contested states in November's U.S. presidential election. But a ruling this week instituting a near-total abortion ban supercharged the state's role, transforming it into perhaps the nation's most critical battleground.

This Sunbelt state with a fierce independent streak has long been at the forefront of the nation's immigration debate due to its 378-mile border with Mexico and its large Hispanic and immigrant populations. It now moves to the center of the national debate over reproductive rights after the U.S. Supreme Court ended a federally guaranteed right to abortion.

Abortion and immigration have been two of this year's biggest political issues. No battleground state has been affected more directly by both than Arizona.

"Do not underestimate this," Democratic pollster John Anzalone, who polls for President Joe Biden's reelection campaign, said of the Arizona abortion ruling. "It's dynamic-changing."

Biden and presumptive Republican nominee Donald Trump are expected to fight hard to win Arizona after Biden carried the state four years ago by less than 11,000 votes.

In addition to the presidency, the U.S. Senate majority may be decided by the state's high-profile contest between Republican Kari Lake and Democratic Rep. Ruben Gallego in the race to replace retiring Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an independent who caucuses with Democrats.

The state Supreme Court's ruling reviving an abortion ban passed in 1864 also added rocket fuel to Democrats' push to add a question to the November ballot asking voters to approve a constitutional amendment protecting the right to abortion until viability, when a fetus could survive outside the womb. Later abortions would be allowed to save the woman's life or protect her physical or mental health.

Trump campaign senior adviser Chris LaCivita, who also serves as chief of staff to the Republican National Committee, described Arizona as "a key part of the strategy."

He declined to discuss any specifics on strategy but disagreed that the abortion ruling fundamentally changed Arizona's dynamics.

"Is abortion an issue that the campaign has to deal with in the battleground states — and more specifically in Arizona? Absolutely. We feel that we are doing that and we are exceeding what we need to do,"

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LaCivita said, even as he suggested other issues would be more salient for most Arizona voters this fall. "The election is going to be determined really in large part based on the key issues that the vast majority of Arizonans have to deal with every single day, and that's, 'Can I afford to put food on the table and feed my family and get in the car to go to work?'" he said.

Democrats are quick to note that they have won virtually every major election in which abortion was on the ballot since the June 2022 reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

The Biden campaign on Thursday launched a statewide abortion-related advertising campaign that it said would reach seven figures, although ad tracking firms had yet to confirm the new investment. The new ads come in addition to a \$30 million nationwide advertising blitz that was already underway, according to Biden campaign spokesman Kevin Munoz.

In the new ad, Biden links Arizona's abortion restrictions directly to Trump.

"Your body and your decisions belong to you, not the government, not Donald Trump," Biden says. "I will fight like hell to get your freedom back."

Beyond the ad campaign, Vice President Kamala Harris is scheduled to appear in Arizona on Friday to highlight the Democrats' dedication to preserving abortion rights.

Even without this week's abortion ruling, Democrats were already betting big on Arizona this fall.

Biden's team is on track to spend more than \$22 million on Arizona advertising between April 1 and Election Day, according to data collected by the ad tracking firm AdImpact. That's millions more than other swing states like Wisconsin, Georgia and Nevada. Only Pennsylvania and Michigan are seeing more Democratic advertising dollars.

Trump's team, meanwhile, isn't spending anything on Arizona advertising this month and hasn't yet reserved any general election advertising in the state, according to AdImpact.

Yet Trump remains bullish on the state, which had backed a Republican presidential candidate in every election since 1996 before it narrowly supported Biden in 2020. They point to a modest shift among Hispanic voters, a core group in the Democratic coalition, which may be more open to Trump.

Meanwhile, Arizona Republicans are still bogged down by GOP infighting in a state where the party apparatus built and nurtured by the late Sen. John McCain has been usurped by Trump's "Make America Great Again" loyalists.

The division came to a head in the 2022 primary for governor, when Trump and his allies lined up enthusiastically behind Kari Lake, while traditional conservatives and the business establishment backed her rival.

Lake won the primary. Rather than mend fences with the vanquished establishment, she gloated that she "drove a stake through the heart of the McCain machine." She's since made a more concerted effort behind the scenes to win over her GOP critics, with mixed results.

Lake, a major MAGA figure sometimes discussed as a potential Trump running mate, is now running in the state's high-profile Senate race.

Like Trump, she has come out against the latest abortion ruling, arguing it is too restrictive. But two years ago, Lake called the abortion ban "a great law," said she was "incredibly thrilled" that it was on the books and predicted it would be "setting the course for other states to follow."

The ruling played straight into the hands of Gallego, her Democratic rival, who had already put abortion rights at the center of his pitch to Arizona voters.

"I think we were on our way to winning this," he said in an interview. "I think what it does is it focuses people's attention on abortion rights that maybe weren't thinking about it as the most important thing or one of the top issues."

Meanwhile, Anzalone, the Biden pollster, warned his party against overconfidence.

"It's not going to be easy. These are all close races. I'm not getting ahead of myself in any way," he said of the fight for Arizona this fall. "But we like the advantage we have there."

Many say Biden and Trump did more harm than good, but for different reasons, AP-NORC poll shows

By SEUNG MIN KIM and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — There's a reason why President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump are spending so much time attacking each other — people don't think either man has much to brag about when it comes to his own record. Americans generally think that while they were in the White House, both did more harm than good on key issues.

But the two candidates have different weak spots. For Biden, it's widespread unhappiness on two issues: the economy and immigration. Trump, meanwhile, faces an electorate where substantial shares think he harmed the country on a range of issues.

A new poll from the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that more than half of U.S. adults think Biden's presidency has hurt the country on cost of living and immigration, while nearly half think Trump's presidency hurt the country on voting rights and election security, relations with foreign countries, abortion laws and climate change.

"Considering the price of gas, the price of groceries, the economy — I did very well during those four years," Christina Elliott, 60, a Republican from Texas, said of the Trump presidency. "I didn't have to worry about filling up my tank or losing half of my paycheck to the grocery store."

Elliott wasn't too keen on Trump's handling of abortion and said that when it comes to the former president's rhetoric, "He just needs to learn how to be tactful and shut his mouth."

"But other than that, like I said, I did very well during the Trump years," she added.

The polling underscores why certain issues — such as abortion for Biden and immigration for Trump — have been persistent focal points for each of the campaigns. The former president regularly decries the number of asylum-seekers who have arrived in the U.S. under Biden, describing the situation in apocalyptic and dark terms. And Biden has gone on the offensive against Trump on abortion, especially after this week's ruling from the Arizona Supreme Court that essentially criminalized the procedure in the state.

When asked which president did more to help people like them, roughly one-third say Donald Trump and about one-quarter say Joe Biden. Yet 30% of adults said neither Biden nor Trump benefitted them. It's another data point reflecting an electorate that has been largely disappointed with this year's general election choices, generating little enthusiasm among key parts of the Biden and Trump political coalitions.

Americans rate Biden particularly negatively on a few specific issues. Only about 2 in 10 Americans think Biden's presidency helped "a lot" or "a little" on cost of living, and 16% say that about immigration and border security. Nearly 6 in 10 say his presidency hurt a lot or a little on these issues. Nearly half, 46%, of Americans, by contrast, say that Trump's presidency helped a lot or a little on immigration or border security. Four in 10 say it helped on cost of living.

Texas resident Trelicia Mornes, 36, said she feels the Biden presidency has hurt a lot when it comes to everyday expenses.

"Now that he's in the office, the cost of living has spiked out of control, and there's nothing being done about it," Mornes, a Democrat, said, pointing to rising costs of rent and food. She said she believes Biden can do more, "He just chooses to do other things."

The pandemic hurt Trump in terms of employment as the economy lost 2.7 million jobs under his watch. But the pandemic lockdowns also dramatically curbed inflation. At the same time, low interest rates and historic levels of deficit-funded government stimulus left many households feeling better off under Trump.

Coming out of the pandemic, Biden gave the economy a boost with additional aid that helped spur job gains of 15.2 million under his watch. But supply chain issues, Russia's war in Ukraine and Biden's aid package are judged by many economists as having contributed to rising inflation, hurting the Democrat's approval ratings.

Trump's advantage on the cost of living and immigration is driven partially by Democrats' lack of enthusiasm about Biden's performance. About one-third of Democrats, for example, think Biden's presidency hurt on cost of living, and another third think Biden neither helped nor hurt. Just one-third of Democrats

think Biden's presidency helped on cost of living. About 3 in 10 Democrats think Biden's presidency helped on immigration and border security, a similar share think his presidency hurt, and about 4 in 10 think it made no difference.

Nadia Stepicheva, 38, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, is unhappy with how Biden has handled immigration. "The problem is, I really don't like illegal type of immigration," Stepicheva said. She thinks that people who enter the U.S., even if they come in illegally, should be allowed to work so that taxpayer dollars aren't used to care for them and house them.

Stepicheva said she has always leaned in favor of Democrats and the party's policies, "But the last four years, I feel like it's getting too much in terms of money spent for immigration, forgiving all these student loans." She said she's torn in terms of who she will vote for this November.

But independents also rate Biden low on these issues: Nearly 6 in 10 independents say Biden's presidency has hurt the country on cost of living. About 4 in 10 independents say Biden's presidency has hurt the country when it comes to the cost of health care and relations with other countries.

Trump has a different problem.

The former president doesn't have any asked-about issues where more than half of Americans think he did more to hurt things than to help, but the overall sense of harm is somewhat broader. Nearly half of Americans think his presidency did more to hurt than help on climate change, voting rights and election security, abortion laws and relations with foreign countries.

Catherine Scott, a Republican who recently moved to New York from Florida, said she found Trump's approach to foreign policy particularly concerning.

"I understand that some people really admire Trump's ability to be a spitfire and just say whatever is at the top of his mind," said Scott, 30. But, pointing to Trump's complimentary comments toward autocrats like Russian President Vladimir Putin, Scott said, "I don't think he has all the foresight to understand that might not always be the thing to do."

The best issue for both Biden and Trump overall is job creation. Trump has a small edge here: Nearly half say his presidency helped, while 36% say Biden's presidency helped. About half of Americans also think Trump's presidency helped on immigration and 4 in 10 think his presidency helped on cost of living.

On every other issue, the share of Americans who say that Biden or Trump helped the country a lot or a little is around 3 in 10 or less. But Republicans, overall, tend to see more of a benefit from Trump's presidency than Democrats do from Biden's — even on issues where Biden has worked to highlight his victories.

For example, only about half of Democrats say that Biden's presidency has helped on climate change or the cost of health care. On abortion laws, 77% of Democrats think that Trump's presidency was at least a little harmful, but only about 4 in 10 say that Biden's presidency helped a lot or a little, and a similar share think Biden's presidency hasn't made a difference.

Meanwhile, around 8 in 10 Republicans say that Trump's presidency helped on immigration and border security, creating jobs and cost of living.

Legendary athlete, actor and millionaire:

O.J. Simpson's murder trial lost him the American dream

By KEN RITTER and LINDA DEUTSCH Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — For a long time, O.J. Simpson was the man who had it all.

He lived the American dream as a sports legend, movie actor, commercial pitchman and millionaire. With his wildly successful career, startling good looks and a gorgeous wife, he became an image of success for Black Americans and was embraced by people of all races. It was safe for everyone to love Simpson, who inhabited a world of glamour and privilege available to few.

"I'm not Black, I'm O.J.," he liked to tell friends.

It all came crashing down in the summer of 1994, when Simpson's ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, was found dead outside her condominium in Los Angeles. Her friend Ronald Goldman, a waiter who had come to her home to return a pair of eyeglasses left behind at a restaurant, was lying a few feet away, stabbed

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to death.

Simpson, who died Wednesday at 76 of prostate cancer, immediately came under suspicion amid talk of domestic abuse and jealousy.

A criminal-court jury found him not guilty of murder in 1995, but a separate civil trial jury found him liable in 1997 for the deaths and ordered him to pay \$33.5 million to relatives of Brown and Goldman.

The criminal case was a media sensation. Simpson was charged with murder, but before surrendering, he led police on a slow-speed chase across the freeways of Los Angeles. The so-called Bronco Chase, named for the white vehicle he rode in, was televised in prime time and became the first of many TV moments in the bizarre saga that engrossed America.

"I've had a great life, great friends," he said in what many believed was a suicide note written just before he set out in the Bronco. "Please think of the real O.J. and not this lost person."

His monthslong televised trial, dubbed "the trial of the century," ended up eclipsing his dazzling record as one of the most gifted running backs in football history. The trial touched on fame and wealth, love and hate, the judicial system, the media, domestic violence and racism. It was a Greek tragedy, soap opera and circus sideshow. America couldn't get enough.

In 2011, the suit Simpson wore when he was acquitted was donated and displayed at the Newseum in Washington, a remnant of one of the biggest American news stories of all time.

TV comedians satirized the case. Trial Judge Lance Ito was parodied by a black-robed group of "Dancing Itos." Prosecutor Marcia Clark was wooed by an admirer who flew a plane over the courthouse with a banner asking her to marry him.

At the trial, prosecutors painted a picture of Simpson as a jealous ex-husband and a cold-blooded killer. They pleaded with jurors not to be intimidated by his "dream team" of highly paid defense attorneys, his charisma as an actor or his status as a football star.

Evidence found at the murder scene seemed overwhelmingly against Simpson: Bloody footprints in his size were there, as were blood drops seeming to match his DNA and a glove identical in style to one bought by his slain ex-wife and worn by him at televised football games. Another glove, smeared with his blood and blood of the two victims, was found at his home.

But the science of DNA analysis was in its infancy, and there were mistakes by police and forensic technicians in handling evidence. When Simpson tried on the gloves in court, he couldn't get them onto his large hands, leading to the famous line his attorney Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. later delivered to jurors: "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit."

Simpson spoke only three words during the trial: "They're too small." Many felt that was enough to make his case.

Defense attorneys were unwavering in professing Simpson's innocence. He was framed, they said, pointing to former Los Angeles police Detective Mark Fuhrman, who denied making anti-Black racial slurs but recanted after a recording was played in court. He later pleaded guilty to perjury.

It was Fuhrman who found the bloody glove at Simpson's home — or planted it, as some claimed — and it was Fuhrman who could not be trusted, defense attorneys said. Jurors apparently agreed, saying Fuhrman's past weighed heavily on their minds.

In his final argument, Cochran played up racism and compared Fuhrman to Adolf Hitler.

The acquittal was viewed by millions on TV and on a Jumbotron in New York's Times Square. President Bill Clinton took a break from meetings to watch.

Simpson's efforts to resume his old life were undermined by Ron Goldman's family. They believed Simpson was guilty and pursued their wrongful death lawsuit relentlessly. In a civil trial, a jury found Simpson liable for the murders and ordered him to pay \$33.5 million in damages to the Goldmans and Nicole Brown Simpson's family.

Hundreds of valuable possessions were seized as part of the award, and Simpson was forced to auction his Heisman Trophy, fetching \$230,000. He never could pay off the \$33.5 million, saying he lived only on his NFL and private pensions.

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"The money is not the issue, it never has been," Goldman's father, Fred Goldman, said. "It's making certain that one man, the man who murdered my son and Nicole, is held responsible by a court of law."

In a statement Thursday, Fred Goldman and his daughter Kim noted that with Simpson's death, "the hope for true accountability has ended."

A decade later, still shadowed by the California wrongful death judgment, Simpson led five men he barely knew into a confrontation with two sports memorabilia dealers in a cramped Las Vegas hotel room. Two men with Simpson had guns. A jury convicted Simpson of armed robbery and other felonies.

Imprisoned at age 61, he served nine years in a remote northern Nevada lockup, including a stint as a gym janitor. Many believed he was being punished for crimes he had been acquitted of, including the Goldmans.

"It's a bittersweet moment," Fred Goldman said. "It was satisfying seeing him in shackles like he belongs."

Simpson was not contrite when released on parole in October 2017. The parole board heard him insist yet again that he was only trying to retrieve memorabilia and heirlooms stolen from him after his criminal trial.

"I've basically spent a conflict-free life, you know," Simpson said.

Simpson lived his final years in Las Vegas, mostly out of the public eye but occasionally taking to social media to opine about sports and his country club lifestyle. He was sometimes seen attending minor league baseball games, and posing for selfies with fans.

Simpson filed a defamation lawsuit in 2017 against a Las Vegas Strip resort accusing it of telling a celebrity news site that he had been banned for being drunk and disruptive. Attorneys for The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas argued that Simpson could not be defamed because his reputation was already tarnished. The case was settled in 2021 on terms that were not disclosed.

Public fascination with Simpson never faded. In 2016, he was the subject of an FX miniseries and a five-part ESPN documentary.

"I don't think most of America believes I did it," Simpson told The New York Times in 1995, a week after a jury determined he did not kill Brown and Goldman. "I've gotten thousands of letters and telegrams from people supporting me."

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"I was part of the history of the game," he said years later. "If I did nothing else in my life, I'd made my mark."

Orenthal James Simpson was born July 9, 1947, in San Francisco, where he grew up in government-subsidized housing.

After graduating from high school, he enrolled at City College of San Francisco for a year and a half before transferring to the University of Southern California for the spring 1967 semester.

He married his first wife, Marguerite Whitley, on June 24, 1967, moving her to Los Angeles the next day so he could begin preparing for his first season with USC — which, in large part because of Simpson, won that year's national championship.

Simpson won the Heisman Trophy in 1968. He accepted the statue the same day that his first child, Arnelle, was born.

He had two sons, Jason and Aaren, with his first wife; one of those boys, Aaren, drowned as a toddler in a swimming pool accident in 1979, the same year he and Whitley divorced.

Simpson and Brown were married in 1985. They had two children, Justin and Sydney, and divorced in 1992. Two years later, Nicole Brown Simpson was found murdered.

"We don't need to go back and relive the worst day of our lives," he told the AP 25 years after the double slayings. "The subject of the moment is the subject I will never revisit again. My family and I have moved on to what we call the 'no negative zone.' We focus on the positives."

Mali's junta bans the media from reporting on political activities in a deepening crackdown

By BABA AHMED and JESSICA DONATI Associated Press

BAMAKO, Mali (AP) — In a deepening crackdown, Mali's ruling junta on Thursday banned the media from reporting on activities of political parties and associations, a day after suspending all political activities in the country until further notice.

The order, issued by Mali's high authority for communication, was distributed on social media. The notice said it applied to all forms of the media, including television, radio, online and print newspapers.

Mali has experienced two coups since 2020, leading a wave of political instability that has swept across West and Central Africa in recent years. Along with its political troubles, the country is also in the grip of a worsening insurgency by militants linked to al-Qaida and the Islamic State group.

The scope of the ban — or how it would be applied in practice — was not immediately clear. It was also not known if journalists would still be allowed to report on issues such as the economy, which are closely tied to politics and who would monitor their work.

The umbrella organization that represents journalists in Mali responded with an unusually stern rebuttal.

The group, known as Maison de le Press, or Press House, said it rejects the order and called on journalists to continue to report on politics in Mali. It also urged them to "stand tall, remain unified and to mobilize to defend the right of citizens to have access to information."

Mali's national commission for human rights also expressed regret and profound concern over the decision in a statement published late Thursday. It warned the junta the decision could prove harmful.

"Instead of calming the social climate, these restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms could potentially stir up trouble and tension, which the country does not need," it said.

The clampdown on the media followed a similar action on Wednesday, when the junta ordered the suspension of all activities by political parties until further notice, citing a need to preserve public order. The news was broadcast on state television as the population was celebrating Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan during which observant Muslims fast from dawn till dusk.

Analysts said the move was likely a backlash against political figures, civil society and students who have expressed frustration with the junta's failure to return the country to democratic rule as promised.

"Recent weeks saw mounting pressure by political parties and figures," Rida Lyammouri of the Policy Center for the New South, a Morocco-based think tank, told The Associated Press. "For the first time, the public and politicians have publicly criticized junta leaders and accused them of a lack of seriousness."

Col. Assimi Goita, who took charge after a second coup in 2021, promised to return the country to democracy in early 2024. But in September, the junta canceled elections scheduled for February 2024 indefinitely, citing the need for further technical preparations.

The junta has vowed to end the insurgency that emerged in 2012 after deposing the elected government. It cut military ties with France amid growing frustration with the lack of progress after a decade of assistance, and turned to Russian contractors, mercenaries from the Wagner group, for security support instead. But analysts say the violence has only grown worse.

The United States said it was "deeply concerned" by the ban on political activities. "Freedom of expression and freedom of association are critical to an open society," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters in Washington.

Houston police reviewing if DNA tests could have helped in thousands of dropped cases

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Houston police said Thursday that they are still reviewing if DNA testing in connection with thousands of sexual assault and sex crime cases that were dropped due to staffing issues could have led officers to potential suspects and possible arrests.

The more than 4,000 sexual assault cases that were dropped by police in the past eight years are part of more than 264,000 incident reports that were never submitted for investigation as officers assigned them an internal code that cited a lack of available personnel. Police Chief Troy Finner first made public the existence of the dropped cases in February.

During a news conference Thursday, police Cmdr. Elizabeth Lorenzana said that after meeting March 27 with the city's crime lab, the Houston Forensic Science Center, officials were told that of the 4,000 sexual assault incident reports, more than 1,100 had sexual assault kits that had been tested for DNA.

The crime lab also reviewed nearly 5,100 incident reports related to indecent assaults and exposures and reported that 57 had kits tested for DNA.

All the DNA testing in these cases resulted in 95 with matches to suspects in the FBI's Combined DNA Index System, or CODIS, database.

Finner said police are reviewing those 95 matches and conducting additional investigations. Many of those cases involve either victims who don't want to move forward or whom officers have not been able to contact, or suspects who have already been charged.

Lorenzana said officials are still trying to determine when during the past eight years officers were notified by the crime lab about the matches on CODIS and whether anything was done with this information before an ongoing internal review.

Finner said the investigation, expected to be completed by the end of the month, will provide answers to who created the internal code and why officers continued to use it even after he ordered his command staff in November 2021 to stop using it after learning of its existence. Finner said he learned on Feb. 7 that the code was still being used, prompting the probe.

The code, part of the department's record management system, was created in 2016, years before Finner became chief in April 2021.

"Let's move forward to do whatever we can to expedite investigating these cases, look at our processes, look at who did what, when," Finner said. "But I hear the frustration. We all are frustrated. This is Houston, this is HPD and I expect better."

Last month Mayor John Whitmire announced the creation of an independent panel to review police handling of the dropped incident reports.

"I am confident in the process. I have confidence in Chief Finner, who wants to resolve this as much as anyone that can hear my voice," Whitmire said Wednesday. "He's begun the process of reviewing it. He's going to give a report, and then there will be accountability for all of us."

Two assistant chiefs have already been demoted over their roles in the matter.

Finner said officers have reviewed 81,650 of the 264,000 suspended incident reports. About 26,000 of them should have been suspended but under a different internal code related to a lack of leads, arrest by a patrol officer or arrest by emergency detention order.

Five people have been charged in connection with a review of 807 domestic violence cases that are part of the dropped cases, according to Finner.

10 years after Chibok, Nigerian families cope with the trauma of more school kidnappings

By CHINEDU ASADU Associated Press

KADUNA, Nigeria (AP) — His weak body stood in the doorway, exhausted and covered in dirt. For two years, the boy had been among Nigeria's ghosts, one of at least 1,500 schoolchildren and others seized by armed groups and held for ransom.

But paying a ransom didn't work for 12-year-old Treasure, the only captive held back from the more than 100 schoolchildren kidnapped from their school in July 2021 in the northwestern Kaduna state. Instead, his captors hung on, and he had to escape the forests on his own in November.

Treasure's ordeal is part of a worrying new development in Nigeria, Africa's most populous country where the mass abduction of 276 Chibok schoolgirls a decade ago marked a new era of fear —with nearly 100 of the girls still in captivity. Since the Chibok abductions, at least 1,500 students have been kidnapped, as armed groups increasingly find in them a lucrative way to fund other crimes and control villages in the nation's mineral-rich but poorly policed northwestern region.

The Associated Press spoke with five families whose children have been taken hostage in recent years and witnessed a pattern of trauma and struggle with education among the children. Parents are becoming more reluctant to send their children to school in parts of northern Nigeria, worsening the education crisis in a country of over 200 million where at least 10 million children are out of school — one of the world's highest rates.

The AP could not speak with Treasure, who is undergoing therapy after escaping captivity in November. His relatives, however, were interviewed at their home in Kaduna state, including Jennifer, his cousin, who was also kidnapped when her boarding school was attacked in March 2021.

"I have not recovered, my family has not recovered (and) Treasure barely talks about it," said Jennifer, 26, as her mother sobbed beside her. "I don't think life will ever be the same after all the experience," she added.

Unlike the Islamic extremists that staged the Chibok kidnappings, the deadly criminal gangs terrorizing villages in northwestern Nigeria are mostly former herdsman who were in conflict with farming host communities, according to authorities. Aided by arms smuggled through Nigeria's porous borders, they operate with no centralized leadership structure and launch attacks driven mostly by economic motive.

Some analysts see school kidnappings as a symptom of Nigeria's worsening security crisis.

According to Nigerian research firm SBM Intelligence, nearly 2,000 people have been abducted in exchange for ransoms this year. However, armed gangs find the kidnapping of schoolchildren a "more lucrative way of getting attention and collecting bigger ransoms," said Rev. John Hayab, a former chairman of the local Christian association in Kaduna who has often helped to secure the release of abducted schoolchildren like Treasure.

The security lapses that resulted in the Chibok kidnappings 10 years ago remain in place in many schools, according to a recent survey by the United Nations children's agency's Nigeria office, which found that only 43% of minimum safety standards such as perimeter fencing and guards are met in over 6,000 surveyed schools.

Bola Tinubu, who was elected president in March 2023, had promised to end the kidnappings while on the campaign trail. Nearly a year into his tenure there is still "a lack of will and urgency and a failure to realize the gravity of the situation, or to respond to it," said Nnamdi Obasi, senior adviser for Nigeria at the International Crisis Group.

"There is no focused attention or commitment of resources on this emergency," he added.

Treasure was the youngest of more than 100 children seized from the Bethel Baptist High School in the Chikun area of Kaduna in 2021. After receiving ransoms and freeing the other children in batches, his captors vowed to keep him, said Rev. Hayab.

That didn't stop his family from clinging to hope that he would one day return home alive. His grandmother, Mary Peter, remembers the night he returned home, agitated and hungry.

"He told us he was hungry and wanted to eat," she said of Treasure's first words that night after two years and three months in captivity.

"Treasure went through hell," said Rev. Hayab with the Christian association. "We need to work hard to get him out of ... what he saw, whatever he experienced."

Nigerian lawmakers in 2022 outlawed ransom payments, but desperate families continue to pay, knowing kidnapers can be ruthless, sometimes killing their victims when their relatives delay ransom payments often delivered in cash at designated locations.

And sometimes, even paying a ransom does not guarantee freedom. Some victims have accused security forces of not doing anything to arrest the kidnapers even after providing information about their calls and where their hostages were held.

Such was the experience of Treasure's uncle Emmanuel Audu, who was seized and chained to a tree for more than a week after he had gone to deliver the ransom demanded for his nephew to be freed.

Audu and other hostages were held in Kaduna's notorious Davin Rugu forest. Once a bustling forest reserve that was home to wild animals and tourists, it is now one of the bandit enclaves in the ungoverned and vast woodlands tucked between mountainous terrains and stretching across thousands of kilometers as they connect states in the troubled region.

"The whole forest is occupied by kidnapers and terrorists," Audu said as he talked about his time in captivity. His account was corroborated by several other kidnap victims and analysts.

Some of his captors in the forest were boys as young as Treasure, a hint of what his nephew could have become, and a sign that a new generation of kidnapers is already emerging.

"They beat us mercilessly. When you faint, they will flog you till you wake up," he said, raising his hand to show the scars that reminded him of life in captivity.

No one in the Peter family recovered after their experience with kidnapping.

Jennifer says she rarely sleeps well even though it's been almost three years since she was freed by her captors. Her mother, a food trader, is finding it hard to raise capital again for her business after using most of her savings and assets inherited from her late husband to pay for ransoms.

Therapy is so costly, that the church had to sponsor that of Treasure while other members of the family are left to endure and hope they eventually get over their experiences.

"Sometimes, when I think about what happened, I wish I did not go to school," said Jennifer with a rueful grin. "I just feel sorry for the children that are still in boarding school because it is not safe. They are the main target."

O.J. Simpson, legendary football player and actor brought down by his murder trial, dies at 76

By KEN RITTER Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — O.J. Simpson, the football star and Hollywood actor acquitted of charges he killed his former wife and her friend in a trial that mesmerized the public and exposed divisions on race and policing in America, has died. He was 76.

The family announced on Simpson's official X account that he died Wednesday of prostate cancer. He died in Las Vegas, officials there said Thursday.

Simpson earned fame, fortune and adulation through football and show business, but his legacy was forever changed by the June 1994 knife slayings of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend Ronald Goldman in Los Angeles. He was later found liable for the deaths in a separate civil case, and then served nine years in prison on unrelated charges.

Goldman's father, Fred, and his sister, Kim, released a statement acknowledging that "the hope for true accountability has ended."

"The news of Ron's killer passing away is a mixed bag of complicated emotions and reminds us that the journey through grief is not linear," they wrote.

Live TV coverage of Simpson's arrest after a famous slow-speed chase marked a stunning fall from grace.

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He had seemed to transcend racial barriers as the star tailback for college football's powerful University of Southern California Trojans in the late 1960s, as a rental-car ad pitchman rushing through airports in the late 1970s, and as the husband of a blond and blue-eyed high school homecoming queen in the 1980s.

"I'm not Black, I'm O.J.," he liked to tell friends.

His trial captured America's attention on live TV. The case sparked debates on race, gender, domestic abuse, celebrity justice and police misconduct.

Evidence found at the scene seemed overwhelmingly against Simpson. Blood drops, bloody footprints and a glove were there. Another glove, smeared with blood, was found at his home.

Simpson didn't testify, but the prosecution asked him to try on the gloves in court. He struggled to squeeze them onto his hands and spoke his only three words of the trial: "They're too small."

His attorney Johnnie L. Cochran Jr. told the jurors, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit."

The jury found him not guilty of murder in 1995, but a separate civil trial jury found him liable in 1997 for the deaths and ordered him to pay \$33.5 million to relatives of Brown and Goldman.

A decade later, still shadowed by the California wrongful death judgment, Simpson led five men he barely knew into a confrontation with two sports memorabilia dealers in a cramped Las Vegas hotel room. Two men with Simpson had guns. A jury convicted Simpson of armed robbery and other felonies.

Imprisoned at 61, he served nine years in a remote Nevada lockup, including a stint as a gym janitor. He wasn't contrite when he was released on parole in October 2017. The parole board heard him insist yet again that he was only trying to retrieve memorabilia and heirlooms stolen from him after his Los Angeles criminal trial.

"I've basically spent a conflict-free life, you know," said Simpson, whose parole ended in late 2021.

Public fascination with Simpson never faded. Many debated whether he had been punished in Las Vegas for his acquittal in Los Angeles. In 2016, he was the subject of an FX miniseries and a five-part ESPN documentary.

"I don't think most of America believes I did it," Simpson told The New York Times in 1995, a week after a jury determined he did not kill Brown and Goldman. "I've gotten thousands of letters and telegrams from people supporting me."

Twelve years later, following an outpouring of public outrage, Rupert Murdoch canceled a planned book by the News Corp.-owned HarperCollins in which Simpson offered his hypothetical account of the killings. It was to be titled "If I Did It."

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"I was part of the history of the game," he said years later. "If I did nothing else in my life, I'd made my mark."

Simpson's football rise happened simultaneously with a television career. He signed a contract with ABC Sports the night he won the Heisman Trophy in 1968. That same year, he appeared on the NBC series "Dragnet" and "Ironside." During his pro career, Simpson was a color commentator for a decade on ABC followed by a stint on NBC. In 1983, he joined ABC's "Monday Night Football."

Simpson became a charismatic pitchman. In 1975, Hertz made him the first Black man hired for a corporate national ad campaign. The commercials, featuring Simpson running through airports toward the Hertz desk and young girls chanting "Go, O.J., go!" were ubiquitous.

Simpson made his big-screen debut in 1974's "The Klansman," an exploitation film in which he starred

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alongside Lee Marvin and Richard Burton. The film flopped, but Simpson would go on to appear in several dozen films and TV series, including 1974's "The Towering Inferno," 1976's "The Cassandra Crossing," 1977's "Roots" and 1977's "Capricorn One."

Most notable, perhaps, was 1988's "The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad" and two sequels. Simpson played Detective Nordberg in the slapstick films, opposite Leslie Nielsen.

Of course, Simpson went on to other fame.

One of the artifacts of his murder trial, the tailored tan suit he wore when acquitted, was donated and displayed at the Newseum in Washington. Simpson had been told the suit would be in the hotel room in Las Vegas, but it wasn't there.

Orenthal James Simpson was born July 9, 1947, in San Francisco, where he grew up in government-subsidized housing.

After graduating from high school, he enrolled at City College of San Francisco for a year and a half before transferring to the University of Southern California for the spring 1967 semester.

He married his first wife, Marguerite Whitley, on June 24, 1967, moving her to Los Angeles the next day so he could begin preparing for his first season with USC — which, in large part because of Simpson, won that year's national championship.

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House Speaker Mike Johnson negotiating with White House to advance Ukraine aid

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Speaker Mike Johnson is negotiating with the White House as he prepares for the treacherous task of advancing wartime funding for Ukraine and Israel through the House, a top House Republican said Thursday.

House Republican Leader Steve Scalise told reporters that Johnson had been talking with White House officials about a package that would deviate from the Senate's \$95 billion foreign security package and include several Republican demands. It comes after Johnson has delayed for months on advancing aid that would provide desperately needed ammunition and weaponry for Kyiv, trying to find the right time to advance a package that will be a painful political lift.

"There's been no agreement reached," Scalise said. "Obviously there would have to be an agreement reached not just with the White House, but with our own members."

Johnson, R-La., is being stretched between a Republican conference deeply divided in its support for Ukraine, as well as two presidential contenders at odds over the U.S.'s posture towards the rest of the world. President Joe Biden has repeatedly chastised Republicans for not helping Ukraine, saying they are doing the bidding of Russian President Vladimir Putin and hurting U.S. security. Meanwhile, Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican candidate, has said he would negotiate an end to the conflict as he tries to push the U.S. to a more isolationist stance.

The Republican speaker is set to travel to the former president's Mar-a-Lago club in Florida on Friday to meet with Trump and has been consulting him in recent weeks on the Ukraine funding to gain his support — or at least prevent him from openly opposing the package.

Sen. Markwayne Mullin, an Oklahoma Republican who often works closely with House lawmakers, said this week he and Trump have spoken with Johnson "in depth" about how to advance Ukraine aid. It is

not clear whether Trump would lend any political support, but Mullin said he was hoping to get the former president behind the package, especially now that Johnson's job is at stake.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Georgia Republican, has threatened to try to oust Johnson as speaker and warned that advancing funding for Ukraine would help build her case that GOP lawmakers should select a new speaker.

Meanwhile, Johnson has been in conversations with the White House about legislation that would structure some of the funding for Kyiv as loans, pave the way for the U.S. to tap frozen Russian central bank assets and include other policy changes.

Johnson has also been pushing for the Biden administration to lift a pause on approvals for Liquefied Natural Gas exports. At times, he has also demanded policy changes at the U.S. border with Mexico.

"This becomes a more dangerous world with Russia in Kyiv," said Rep. Don Bacon, a Republican who supports aiding Ukraine. "So we're just got to find a the smart way to get a bill passed that we can get out and back to the Senate."

Still, Johnson is facing a practically open rebellion from a group of hardline House conservatives who are dissatisfied with the way he has led the House. With a narrow and divided majority, Johnson has been forced to work with Democrats to advance practically any major legislation.

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said Thursday that the "only path forward" for the House was a vote on the Senate's national security package. He also suggested that Democrats would help Johnson hold onto the speaker's gavel if he did so.

While Democrats have pressured Johnson to put the Senate package to a vote, they also may be divided on a vote as a growing number oppose sending Israel offensive weaponry while it engages in a campaign in Gaza that has killed thousands of civilians.

The Biden administration, which would administer any military funding, has issued stern warnings to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that future U.S. support depends on the swift implementation of new steps to protect civilians and aid workers.

"If we want to prevent handing Putin a victory in Europe, the House should do the right thing for democracy and pass the Senate's aid package now," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a floor speech Thursday.

Biden says US support for Philippines, Japan defense 'ironclad' amid growing China provocations

By AAMER MADHANI and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Thursday that U.S. defense commitment to Pacific allies was "ironclad" as he gathered Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the White House in the midst of growing concern about provocative Chinese military action in the Indo-Pacific.

The U.S. and the Philippines have had a mutual treaty in place for more than 70 years. Biden's forceful reinforcement of the American commitment comes in the midst of persistent skirmishes between the Philippine and Chinese coast guards in the disputed South China Sea.

"The United States defense commitments to Japan and to the Philippines are ironclad. They're ironclad," Biden said as he began three-way talks at the White House with Kishida and Marcos. "As I said before, any attack on Philippine aircraft, vessels or armed forces in the South China Sea would invoke our mutual defense treaty."

Relations between China and the Philippines have been repeatedly tested by confrontations involving the two nations' coast guard vessels in the disputed South China Sea. Chinese coast guard ships also regularly approach disputed Japanese-controlled East China Sea islands near Taiwan.

The so-called "gray-zone" harassment by China has included shining military-grade lasers at the Philippine Coast Guard, firing water cannons at vessels and ramming into Philippine ships near the Second Thomas Shoal, which both Manila and Beijing claim. In 1999, Manila intentionally ran a World War II-era

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ship aground on the shoal, establishing a permanent military presence there.

Biden, in a wide-ranging phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping last week, raised concerns about China's operations in the South China Sea, including efforts to impede the Philippines from resupplying its forces on the Second Thomas Shoal.

Chinese officials have bristled at criticism over their action in the South China Sea and blamed the U.S. for exacerbating tensions.

"No one should violate China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and China remains steadfast in safeguarding our lawful rights," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Mao Ning said Thursday.

The White House billed the first-ever trilateral summit with Japan and the Philippines as a potent response to China's attempts at "intimidation" and said it would send a message that China is "the outlier in the neighborhood," according to an administration official. The White House said in a statement that Biden and Marcos during the talks "underscored their commitment to international law in the South China Sea" and reaffirmed their countries' treaty obligations to defend each other.

The leaders also announced joint patrols in the Indo-Pacific this year, a follow-up on law enforcement drills carried out last year by the allies in waters near the South China Sea. The U.S. Coast Guard will welcome Philippine and Japanese coast guard members onto a U.S. Coast Guard vessel during the patrol for training, according to White House.

The summit followed Biden's one-on-one talks and glitzy state dinner Wednesday at the White House for the Japanese premier, a diplomatic honor meant to recognize Tokyo's growing clout on the global stage. White House officials said they were aiming to send a clear signal that the Democratic administration remains determined to build what it calls a "latticework" of alliances in the Indo-Pacific even as it grapples with the Israel-Hamas war and Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Biden also hosted Marcos for a private meeting at the White House ahead of the three-way talks.

"Today's summit is an opportunity to define the future that we want, and how we intend to achieve it together," Marcos said.

Biden also announced that the three nations were launching a new economic corridor in the Philippines as part of the G7 Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment that would help develop clean energy, port, agriculture and other projects in the country. Biden said the leaders were forging a "new era" and predicted "a great deal of history in our world will be written in the Indo-Pacific in the coming years."

The United States, the United Kingdom and Japan on Wednesday announced joint military exercises in the Indo-Pacific in 2025. That followed the Pentagon revealing earlier this week that the U.S., the U.K. and Australia were considering including Japan in the AUKUS partnership, a grouping launched in 2021 that aims to equip Australia with nuclear-powered and conventionally armed submarines.

Kishida visited Capitol Hill on Thursday for an address to U.S. lawmakers that focused on the need to strengthen the partnership between the U.S. and Japan at a time of tension in the Asia-Pacific and skepticism in Congress about U.S. involvement abroad. He offered concern about "the undercurrent of self-doubt among some Americans about what your role in the world should be."

Biden has made improving relations with the Philippines a priority since Marcos became the country's president in June 2022. The relationship has had ups and downs over the years and was in a difficult place when Marcos took office. Human rights groups said Marcos' predecessor Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs" resulted in thousands of extrajudicial killings.

Marcos, the son and namesake of the country's former dictator, said as a candidate he would look to pursue closer ties with China. But he has increasingly drifted toward Washington amid concerns about China's coercive action.

Biden hosted him for talks at the White House last year, the first Washington visit by a Philippine president in more than a decade. Biden also met him on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly soon after Marcos took office, and dispatched Vice President Kamala Harris to Manila in 2022 to meet him.

Last year, the Philippines agreed to give the U.S. access to four more bases on the islands.

Lawsuit settled: 2 top US gun parts makers agree to temporarily halt sales in Philadelphia

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM Associated Press

Two of America's leading gun parts manufacturers have agreed to temporarily halt sales of their products in Philadelphia and elsewhere in Pennsylvania, city officials said Thursday, announcing a settlement of their lawsuit against the companies.

Philadelphia filed suit against Polymer80 and JSD Supply in July, accusing the manufacturers of perpetuating gun violence in the city by manufacturing and selling untraceable, self-manufactured weapons commonly known as "ghost guns." The suit came under a broader legal effort to restrict where manufacturers can market their assemble-at-home guns.

David Pucino, legal director of Giffords Law Center, which represented the city, accusing Polymer80 and JSD Supply of "reckless business practices ... that threatened public safety."

"The gun industry must be held accountable when it breaks the law and endangers Americans," he said in a statement.

Under the settlement, JSD Supply, based in Butler, Pennsylvania, agreed it would no longer sell its products in the state for four years, city officials said. JSD-owned Eagle Shows, which bills itself as Pennsylvania's largest gun show, will be required to prohibit vendors from selling such gun parts for two years.

Dayton, Nevada-based Polymer80 agreed to a four-year ban on sales to customers in Philadelphia and the nearby counties of Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Lancaster, Lehigh, Montgomery and Northampton, which include the cities of Allentown, Easton, Reading and Lancaster. Additionally, Polymer80 agreed to pay \$1.3 million, which Philadelphia officials said will fund efforts to address gun violence.

The settlement was expected to be filed with the court on Friday. Messages were left at both companies seeking comment on the agreement.

"These weapons have ended up in the hands of our youth and individuals who are not otherwise permitted to possess a firearm, and the consequences in our communities have been devastating," Renee Garcia, Philadelphia's city solicitor, said in a statement.

Ghost guns, which can be purchased without a background check and assembled at home, have become the weapon of choice for children, criminals and others who cannot lawfully own a gun, according to city officials.

They have been used in a staggering number of shootings in recent years. Between 2019 and 2022, police recorded a fourfold increase in the number of ghost guns that had been used to commit crimes, according to the city's lawsuit. In 2022, city police seized 575 of the guns.

Last July, a gunman armed with an AR-15-style weapon and a handgun — both self-manufactured — went on a shooting spree that killed five people in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia Mayor Chelle Parker, announcing the settlement at a news conference to discuss her first 100 days in office, said Polymer80 and JSD produced 90% of the ghost guns recovered in the city,

"We needed to find a way to hold them accountable for their role in supplying the crime gun market, and perpetuating gun violence," she said.

In February, Polymer80 agreed to stop selling its firearms to Maryland residents under a settlement with the city of Baltimore.

Last month, a federal judge permanently banned a Florida gun retailer from selling or delivering certain gun parts in New York that officials say could be used to assemble untraceable ghost guns and sold without background checks.

Shohei Ohtani's ex-interpreter charged with stealing \$16M from baseball star in sports betting case

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Federal authorities charged the former longtime interpreter for Los Angeles Dodgers star Shohei Ohtani on Thursday with federal bank fraud, alleging that he stole more than \$16 million from the Japanese sensation to cover gambling bets and debts.

Interpreter Ipppei Mizuhara, a constant presence beside Ohtani in baseball stadiums across the country since 2018, abused the two-way player's trust in him and exploited the language barrier to plunder a bank account that only he could access, prosecutors said.

U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada said Mizuhara was so intertwined in Ohtani's life and career that he became the star's "de facto manager." The role enabled him to withdraw money from the account — at times lying and impersonating Ohtani to bank employees — to finance his "insatiable appetite for illegal sports betting."

Thursday's announcement, at a packed news conference in downtown Los Angeles, ended weeks of speculation about Mizuhara's self-admitted gambling problems, the wide-ranging federal investigation and Ohtani's role in the scandal.

Estrada said that there is no evidence that Ohtani was aware of his interpreter's actions, adding that Ohtani has cooperated with investigators.

"I want to emphasize this point: Mr. Ohtani is considered a victim in this case," he said.

The criminal complaint — detailing the scheme through text messages, financial records and recordings of phone calls — showed even Mizuhara knew the game was over. In a message to his illegal bookmaker on March 20, the day the Los Angeles Times and ESPN broke the news of the investigation, he wrote: "Technically I did steal from him. it's all over for me."

Mizuhara faces up to 30 years in federal prison if he's convicted of a single count of bank fraud. His attorney, Michael G. Freedman, declined to comment Thursday. Mizuhara's first appearance in federal court is likely to occur this week.

The scale of the theft shocked the sports community, but also further absolved Ohtani from wrongdoing in baseball's biggest gambling disgrace since Pete Rose was banned for life. Major League Baseball opened its own investigation after the controversy surfaced last month, and the Dodgers immediately fired Mizuhara.

"Given the information disclosed (Thursday), and other information we have already collected, we will wait until resolution of the criminal proceeding to determine whether further investigation is warranted," MLB said in a statement.

MLB rules prohibit players and team employees from wagering — even legally — on baseball. MLB also bans betting on other sports with illegal or offshore bookmakers.

Ohtani left the Los Angeles Angels in December to sign a record \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Dodgers. Ohtani and Mizuhara had been daily companions since Ohtani joined the Angels in 2018. Ohtani's baseball salaries prior to the Dodgers deal totaled around \$40 million, although it's also expected he earns tens of millions at least in endorsements each year.

Federal investigators say Mizuhara made around 19,000 wagers between December 2021 and January 2024 — nearly 25 bets per day on average. The wagers ranged from roughly \$10 to \$160,000 per bet, averaging around \$12,800. Estrada said investigators did not find any evidence Mizuhara had wagered on baseball.

While Mizuhara's winning bets totaled over \$142 million, which he deposited in his own bank account and not Ohtani's, his losing bets were around \$183 million — a net loss of nearly \$41 million.

At one point, the bookmaker couldn't reach Mizuhara and threatened to approach Ohtani, identified as Victim A in the criminal complaint.

"Hey Ippie, it's 2 o'clock on Friday. I don't know why you're not returning my calls. I'm here in Newport Beach and I see (Victim A) walking his dog," the bookmaker wrote to Mizuhara on Nov. 17, 2023. "I'm just gonna go up and talk to him and ask how I can get in touch with you since you're not responding?"

Please call me back immediately.”

The alleged fraud also spanned the lucrative memorabilia market. Investigators seized roughly 1,000 collectible baseball cards, including for such players as Yogi Berra, and discovered approximately \$325,000 in transactions to online retailers from January to March. Authorities believe Mizuhara purchased the cards from the sites with the intent to resell them later.

Conflicting reports engulfed the beginning of the baseball season last month, prompting a swift move to filing the charge.

“We understood there was a significant amount of public interest in this case,” Estrada said.

Mizuhara told ESPN on March 19 that Ohtani paid his gambling debts at the interpreter’s request, saying the bets were on international soccer, the NBA, the NFL and college football.

But ESPN said Mizuhara changed his story the next day, saying Ohtani had no knowledge of the gambling debts and had not transferred any money to bookmakers.

Ohtani said he first became aware of Mizuhara’s gambling problem during a team meeting after the Dodgers’ March 20 win over the San Diego Padres in Seoul during MLB’s first game in South Korea. The LA Times and ESPN published their stories hours later.

Five days later, Ohtani told a Dodger Stadium press conference that he never bet on sports or knowingly paid any gambling debts accumulated by his interpreter. He placed responsibility entirely on Mizuhara, and refuted the interpreter’s inconsistent accounts of whether Ohtani had paid off Mizuhara’s gambling debts.

“I am very saddened and shocked someone whom I trusted has done this,” the Japanese star said through a new interpreter.

“Ipei has been stealing money from my account and has been telling lies,” Ohtani said. “I never bet on sports or have willfully sent money to the bookmaker.”

According to the criminal complaint, the Mizuhara case stemmed from a broader probe of illegal sports bookmaking organizations operating in Southern California and the laundering of proceeds through casinos in Las Vegas.

“To date, these investigations have led to criminal charges and/or convictions of 12 criminal defendants and one money service business, as well as non-prosecution agreements with two Las Vegas casinos,” the complaint said. “The investigations remain ongoing and have multiple targets, not all of whom are related to each other.”

Judge dismisses lawsuits filed against rapper Drake over deadly Astroworld concert

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Hip-hop artist Drake has been dismissed from a lawsuit over the deadly 2021 Astroworld festival in Houston in which 10 people were killed, a judge has ruled.

Drake was a special guest of rap superstar Travis Scott, who had headlined the festival. He performed with Scott at the end of the concert on Nov. 5, 2021, as the crowd surged and attendees were packed so tightly that many could not breathe or move their arms or legs. Authorities and festival organizers were trying to shut down the show.

The families of the 10 people who died during the concert, as well as hundreds who were injured, sued Drake, Scott and Live Nation — the festival’s promoter — as well as dozens of other individuals and entities.

Many of those who were sued, including Drake and Scott, have asked state District Judge Kristen Hawkins to dismiss the lawsuits against them. On Wednesday, Hawkins dismissed Drake from the case in a brief order.

Lawyers for Drake, whose full name is Aubrey Drake Graham, had argued during a court hearing April 1 in Houston that he was not involved in putting the concert together so was not liable for the deaths and injuries that had occurred.

During a deposition he gave in November in Toronto, the Canadian rapper said in the moments before he took the stage, no one told him that people in the crowd were suffering cardiac arrests or other inju-

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ries. He said when he was on stage, the crowd looked like a blur and he couldn't make out any details.

In the deposition, Drake was shown a video that the youngest victim, 9-year-old Ezra Blount, took as he sat on his father's shoulders.

"Do you see the panic in those people's eyes?" an attorney asked Drake about the video.

"I do, sir," the rapper responded.

Later, when asked by an attorney for Blount's family about whether it would be important for him to hear from those who put the concert together about why Blount died, Drake said, "I think I would want answers for what happened, yes."

On Monday, Hawkins dismissed seven companies and individual people who had been sued. But she denied motions to dismiss that were filed by 10 other companies and individuals, including Apple Inc., which produced a livestream of the concert, and two companies associated with Scott. Hawkins was set to hear other motions to dismiss, including one related to Scott as an individual, on Monday.

Following an investigation by Houston Police, no charges were filed against Scott. A grand jury in June declined to indict him and five other people on any criminal counts related to the deadly concert. Police Chief Troy Finner declined to say what was the overall conclusion of his agency's investigation.

In July, the police department made public its nearly 1,300-page investigative report in which festival workers highlighted problems and warned of possible deadly consequences.

Those killed, who ranged in age from 9 to 27, died from compression asphyxia, which an expert likened to being crushed by a car.

The first trial from the lawsuits is scheduled for May 6.

Some of the lawsuits have since been settled, including those filed by the families of four of the people killed during the concert. The most recent settlement related to a person who was killed was announced in court filings on Feb. 5, with lawyers for the family of 23-year-old Rodolfo "Rudy" Peña saying they had settled their case.

The OJ Simpson saga was a unique American moment.

3 decades on, we're still wondering what it means

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A dog's plaintive wail. A courtroom couplet-turned-cultural catchphrase about gloves. A judge and attorneys who became media darlings and villains. A slightly bewildered houseguest elevated, briefly, into a slightly bewildered celebrity. Troubling questions about race that echo still. The beginning of the Kardashian dynasty. An epic slow-motion highway chase. And, lest we forget, two people whose lives ended brutally.

And a nation watched — a nation far different than today's, where the ravenousness for reality television has multiplied. The spectator mentality of those jumbled days in 1994 and 1995, then novel, has since become an intrinsic part of the American fabric. Smack at the center of the national conversation was O.J. Simpson, one of the most curious cultural figures of recent U.S. history.

Simpson's death Wednesday, almost exactly three decades after the killings that changed his reputation from football hero to suspect, summoned remembrances of an odd moment in time — no, let's call it what it was, which was deeply weird — in which a smartphone-less country craned its neck toward clunky TVs to watch a Ford Bronco inch its way along a California freeway.

"It was an incredible moment in American history," said Wolf Blitzer, anchoring coverage of Simpson's death Thursday on CNN. What made it so — beyond, of course, tabloid culture and the fundamental news value of such a famous person accused in such brutal killings?

THE SAGA ANTICIPATED 21ST CENTURY MEDIA

In an era when the internet as we know it was still being born, when "platform" was still just a place to board a train, Simpson was a unique breed of celebrity. He was truly transmedia, a harbinger of the digital age — a walking, talking crossover story for multiple audiences.

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He was sports — the very pinnacle of football excellence. He was stardom, not only for his athletic prowess but for his Hertz-hawking run through airports on TV and his acting in movies like “The Naked Gun.” He embodied societal questions about race, class and money long before Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman were stabbed to death on June 12, 1994.

Then came the saga, beginning with the killings and ending — only technically — in a Los Angeles courtroom more than a year later. The most epic of American novels had nothing on this period of the mid-1990s. Americans watched. Americans talked about watching. Americans debated. Americans judged. And Americans watched some more.

The generations-old chasm between white Americans and Black Americans was not helped by Time magazine’s decision to tactically darken Simpson’s mugshot on its cover for dramatic — and, many said, racist — effect. For those who lived through that period, it’s hard to remember much in the public sphere that wasn’t crowded out by the O.J. storyline and its many components, including the subsequent civil trial that found Simpson liable for the deaths. One newspaper even ran a series of possible endings to the storyline, written by mystery novelists.

Sure, people were saying different things. But it was, inarguably, a national conversation.

The nation — and its media — are far more fragmented now. Rarely these days do Americans gather around the virtual campfire for a common experience; instead, small brush fires draw niche crowds in virtual corners for equally intense, but smaller, common experiences. This week’s eclipse was a rare exception.

In 1994, everyday real-time, wall-to-wall coverage was still emerging. Sure, we had Walter Cronkite during the Kennedy assassination and again during the chaotic 1968 Democratic National Convention. And the first Gulf War in 1991 firmly cemented live-TV expectations. But coverage of the Bronco chase and the trial fed the appetite in a way no other event did. Even now, such universal viewership is rare.

“The media we consume is much more diffuse now. It’s so rare that we’re all glued to the same spectacle,” said Danielle Lindemann, author of the 2022 book “True Story: What Reality TV Says About Us.”

“In 1994 we were watching our television sets and following along with news coverage,” Lindemann, a professor of sociology at Lehigh University, said in an email. “But there wasn’t that parallel discourse happening via social media.”

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEN AND NOW

The connections between the Simpson saga and today aren’t hard to find.

Judges and lawyers in high-profile cases are now regular fodder for the spotlight. One of Simpson’s attorneys, Robert Kardashian, paved the way for the next generation of his family to change the very face of how celebrity operates. A local Los Angeles TV reporter who covered the case, Harvey Levin, went on to establish TMZ, a luridly foundational pillar of modern multiplatform celebrity coverage — and the outlet that broke the news of Simpson’s death.

And of course, as with so many American stories, there is the question of race.

Simpson’s acquittal on murder charges revealed a fundamental fault line: Some Black people welcomed the verdict, while many white people were in disbelief. Simpson probably confused matters more over the years by saying, famously, “I’m not Black. I’m O.J.” But for many Black Americans who felt their interactions with police and the courts had produced unjust results, the acquittal was a notable exception.

“There was a sense that it’s only justice for a rich Black man to get off when a rich white man would,” said John Baick, a professor of history at Western New England University.

Three decades on, that conversation isn’t over — he’s certainly still discussing it with students. On Thursday, Baick invoked Simpson to talk about race, fame and wealth in class; only after it ended did he find out his subject had died.

A generation has passed since these events were fresh. And after thousands of hours of video, millions of written words and countless talking heads weighing in, the O.J. Simpson case stands as two things: an American moment like no other, and an interlude that contained so much of what American culture is and was becoming.

From the old, weird America, it got the obsession with violent true crime and its quirky cast of film noir villains and heroes, not to mention the tragedy and the whodunit. And it was a teaser trailer of the emerg-

ing, fragmenting internet culture that would, in a few years, give us smartphones, social media, reality-TV saturation and live coverage of just about everything.

Was it, as so many said so loudly, “the trial of the century”? That’s subjective. But any culture is made up of small bits, and the Simpson case left many of those in its wake. This much is incontrovertibly true: After the slow-speed chase, American media culture got a whole lot faster really quickly. So fast, in fact, that many of the central questions around the case — about race, justice and how we consume murder and misery as just another set of consumer products — linger unanswered.

“Where does this fit in? What do Americans think about this now?” Baick wonders. “What you think about O.J. Simpson might be a litmus test for a long time still.”

Starting over: Women emerging from prison face formidable challenges to resuming their lives

By SAMANTHA HENDRICKSON Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — On a cold and dreary October day, Heather C. Jarvis packed everything she had into a pink duffel and a plastic trash bag and waited for the rest of her life to begin.

Sitting in the lobby of the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville, Ohio, she smiled anxiously as her longtime therapist told her she’d be fine, that she was ready for the outside world. She had checked all the boxes during her nearly 10 years behind bars — substance abuse treatment, professional development, even earning an associate’s degree — and had people intent on helping her.

“Sometimes, I’m just so scared that it’s not enough,” Jarvis, her voice breaking, told The Associated Press before her release.

Jarvis, 32, is part of the fastest-growing prison population in the country, one of more than 190,000 women held in some form of confinement in the United States as of this year. Their numbers grew by more than 500% between 1980 and 2021, more than twice the growth rate for men, according to a report by The Sentencing Project, a research and advocacy organization for incarcerated people.

The sharp increase is partially due to the increased penalties and mandatory minimum sentences for drug possession and trafficking that many states have implemented over the past few decades. Approximately 25% of incarcerated women are in prison for drug-related crimes, compared to 12% of men, according to the 2023 report. Ohio — an epicenter of the opioid crisis — is among the states that experienced the most dramatic jump in female prisoners.

Programs aimed at helping women stay out of prison once they’re released have not grown at nearly the same pace, according to the National Institute of Justice.

“Women’s incarceration grew very rapidly in the early 2000s, but it took a good decade or so before the field really acknowledged the widening gap between available programs and services and the number of women who need them,” said Wendy Sawyer, research director at the Prison Policy Initiative, a research and advocacy nonprofit.

That makes the journey harder for women, who confront different challenges than their male counterparts. Over half, for example, are mothers to minor children, the group says.

“Women face all of the same barriers that men face in reentry — securing employment, housing, and transportation, and reestablishing family connections — but with an extra level of difficulty,” Sawyer said. “For example, housing ... often forces women to choose between homelessness and returning to abusive situations, while in contrast, many men return to female supports: mothers, wives, girlfriends.”

There is also the issue of sexism.

“There is more stigma attached to a woman getting involved in a crime or using drugs than there is men,” remarked Linda Janes, chief operating officer of Alvis, a Columbus-based nonprofit that works with the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections to provide reentry services, including housing and job assistance.

Jarvis is one of the lucky ones. In October, she was released into “transitional control” at Alvis, and she’s already found an apartment to live in after her time there is up. Columbus is far from her hometown of

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Parkersburg, West Virginia — a long way from the friends she did drugs with and the family members who overdosed or went to jail themselves while struggling with substance misuse.

In 2015, Jarvis pleaded guilty to aggravated robbery and involuntary manslaughter after a friend was fatally shot by a man whom he tried to force to withdraw cash from an ATM. The man's son owed Jarvis and her friend money — funds they needed to fuel their mutual drug addiction. In Ohio, someone can be charged with murder if their accomplice dies while committing or fleeing from a crime. Jarvis' guilty plea reduced her charges.

Now, after serving her time, she is ready to start anew. She's employed, attending The Ohio State University to get a degree in social work, and was recently granted full custody of the oldest of her two daughters, 17-year-old Adessa.

But her longing to be with her children more than Alvis allowed led her to violate the terms of her release. She moved into her apartment with Adessa, despite being forbidden from living outside transitional housing without another adult.

Jarvis' mother — who had been approved to live with her but could only stay part time — reported her daughter to her parole officer. She was upset about Jarvis' decision to reconcile with the father of her youngest daughter, 11-year-old Anna.

So now, Jarvis is back at Alvis. Adessa and Anna are living with Jarvis' mother back in Parkersburg.

Still, she hasn't given up. While she doesn't expect Adessa to return, she is working toward gaining shared custody of Anna with Anna's father in the hopes that they will all live together soon in Columbus. She and Anna — who was 5 months old when Jarvis went to prison — have been slowly checking off a bucket list during their brief moments together. It includes eating Takis, a spicy snack made of rolled corn tortilla chips, and for the first time in Anna's life, having Jarvis brush her hair.

"I think that was like, the moment for me when I was like, I'm going to get to be her mom," Jarvis said.

She is also still coming to grips with her new freedom and the daunting number of decisions she now has to make for herself: choosing what she wears, whom she talks to on the phone, what she buys with her own money.

"I remember how strange it felt to put clothes on and look at myself in the mirror," she said, recalling the tears that flowed freely her first night at Alvis. "I sat there in front of it for a while trying to decide if I recognized myself."

Her discomfort is echoed in life outside, where society is not necessarily embracing her with open arms. One day, she was forced to explain to a Verizon employee that she had no credit to buy a cellphone because she had been in prison for almost a decade. And just when she was about to start orientation for a job at an addiction treatment center in Columbus, her application was dropped. Even though she never directly harmed anyone herself, her record listed a violent felony, which disqualified her.

"No matter what I do, it's (the felony's) always gonna be violent," Jarvis said in a video message, sobbing into the camera. "I'm not a violent person."

Jarvis has since gotten a job as a restaurant server. On April 20, she will finally be able to move full time into the two-bedroom apartment, a space lovingly furnished with hand-painted mason jars and donated furniture. Anna's bedroom has been tenderly decorated in a pink and purple color scheme.

As the date of her full independence approaches like a fast-moving train filled with the cargo of her past and future life, she has trouble separating her anticipation from her anxiety.

For now, she knows the two emotions will have to coexist.

Sitting in the apartment during a recent interview, she takes a deep breath.

"I'm proud I'm doing what I said I was going to do," she finally says. "I am the person I thought I was, even on my bad days."

US measles cases are up in 2024. What's driving the increase?

By DEVI SHASTRI and MIKE STOBBE Associated Press

Measles outbreaks in the U.S. and abroad are raising health experts' concern about the preventable, once-common childhood virus.

One of the world's most contagious diseases, measles can lead to potentially serious complications. The best defense, according to experts? Get vaccinated.

Here's what to know about the year — so far — in measles.

How many measles cases has the U.S. seen this year?

Nationwide, measles cases already are nearly double the total for all of last year.

The U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention documented 113 cases as of April 5. There have been seven outbreaks and most of U.S. cases — 73% — are linked to those flare-ups.

Still, the count is lower than some recent years: 2014 saw 667 cases and 2019 had 1,274.

Why is this a big deal?

The 2019 measles epidemic was the worst in almost three decades, and threatened the United States' status as a country that has eliminated measles by stopping the continual spread of the measles virus.

The CDC on Thursday released a report on recent measles case trends, noting that cases in the first three months of this year were 17 times higher than the average number seen in the first three months of the previous three years.

While health officials seem to be doing a good job detecting and responding to outbreaks, "the rapid increase in the number of reported measles cases during the first quarter of 2024 represents a renewed threat to elimination," the report's authors said.

Where is measles coming from?

The disease is still common in many parts of the world, and measles reaches the U.S. through unvaccinated travelers.

According to Thursday's report, most of the recent importations involved unvaccinated Americans who got infected in the Middle East and Africa and brought measles back to the U.S.

Where were this year's U.S. measles outbreaks?

Health officials confirmed measles cases in 17 states so far this year, including cases in New York City, Philadelphia and Chicago.

More than half of this year's cases come from the Chicago outbreak, where 61 people have contracted the virus as of Thursday, largely among people who lived in a migrant shelter.

The city health department said Thursday that cases are on the decline after health officials administered 14,000 vaccines in just over a month.

How does measles spread?

Measles is highly contagious. It spreads when people who have it breathe, cough or sneeze and through contaminated surfaces. It also can linger in the air for two hours.

Up to 9 out of 10 people who are susceptible will get the virus if exposed, according to the CDC.

Measles used to be common among kids. How bad was it?

Before a vaccine became available in 1963, there were some 3 million to 4 million cases per year, which meant nearly all American kids had it sometime during childhood, according to the CDC. Most recovered.

But measles can be much more than an uncomfortable rash, said Susan Hassig, an infectious disease researcher at Tulane University.

"I think that people need to remember that this is a preventable disease," Hassig said. "It is a potentially dangerous disease for their children."

In the decade before the vaccine was available, 48,000 people were hospitalized per year. About 1,000 people developed dangerous brain inflammation from measles each year, and 400 to 500 died, according to the CDC.

Is the measles vaccine safe? Where do vaccination rates stand?

The measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine is safe and effective. It is a routine and recommended childhood vaccine that is split into two doses.

Research shows it takes a very high vaccination rate to prevent measles from spreading: 95% of the population should have immunity against the virus.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, national vaccination rates for kindergartners fell to 93% and remain there. Many pockets of the country have far lower rates than that. The drop is driven in part by record numbers of kids getting waivers.

Before murder charges tarnished his legacy, O.J. Simpson was one of the NFL's greatest running backs

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Long before the Bronco chase gripped a national television audience and the "Trial of the Century" captivated the country, O.J. Simpson was making his mark on the football field.

The Juice was the best running back of his era during an 11-year NFL career mostly played with the Buffalo Bills. He won a national championship and a Heisman Trophy in college and set records in the NFL. But Simpson's accomplishments on the field were overshadowed and his image was forever ruined by charges that he killed his former wife and her male friend in 1994. Though he was acquitted of murder, Simpson was later found liable for the deaths in a separate civil case.

Simpson's tarnished legacy resulted in a muted reaction to news of his death Thursday. He wasn't acknowledged publicly by the NFL, the Bills or the San Francisco 49ers, where he played his final two seasons.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame issued a statement attributed to its President Jim Porter that said: "O.J. Simpson was the first player to reach a rushing mark many thought could not be attained in a 14-game season when he topped 2,000 yards. His on-field contributions will be preserved in the Hall's archives in Canton, Ohio."

Simpson's name remains on the Bills' Wall of Fame, which rings the inside of Highmark Stadium, known as Rich Stadium during his playing days. That could change in a few years when the Bills move into a new stadium set to open across the street in 2026. Fans previously petitioned the team to remove Simpson's name from the wall.

Otherwise, there are very few reminders of Simpson's time playing in Buffalo. No statues. Many of his teammates and friends have moved away or died.

"He and I had a bumpy start and then we had a great relationship throughout," former Bills defensive back Booker Edgerson told the AP. "Because he was a celebrity. And in his ways, he just didn't understand. He was a young guy. He didn't understand the game of professional football and what all the guys went through. He just didn't react to the veterans as I thought he should have. Like, disrespect and everything. But once we got to know each other and everything, and then eventually when we became roommates for that one year, from that point on, he and I had a very good relationship."

After his success at USC, Simpson didn't initially live up to the hype and expectations of a No. 1 overall draft pick. He averaged 642 yards and four touchdowns in his first three seasons with the Bills and some thought he would be a bust.

Then the arrival of coach Lou Saban in 1972 changed the trajectory of Simpson's football career. Saban built Buffalo's offense around Simpson's skills. That led to his breakout.

The 6-foot-2, 212-pound Simpson ran more with grace than power, though he could push through defenders for that extra yard or two. He danced and jukeed, dodged and eluded tacklers, using his instincts to find open space that allowed him to use his speed to outrace the defense into the end zone.

Simpson rushed for 1,251 yards and six TDs in Saban's first year in Buffalo. He followed up with one of the greatest seasons in league history, rushing for 2,003 yards and 12 scores in 1973 while earning the NFL Most Valuable Player award.

Simpson accomplished that remarkable total in 14 games and his record of 143.1 yards rushing per game still stands. Simpson topped 1,000 yards in each of his next three seasons and 1975 was his best all-around effort.

He rushed for 1,817 yards and 16 TDs and had 426 yards receiving and seven more scores that year.

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A knee injury ended his season early in 1977 and Simpson finished his career in San Francisco, where he grew up.

The five-time All-Pro was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985.

By then, he was already a fixture on television as an actor, pitchman and football analyst. Simpson first appeared in an ad for Hertz in 1975, and legions of sports fans knew him as the former player who dashed through airports wearing three-piece suits and holding a briefcase while hurdling railings on his way to the rental counter to secure his car.

Simpson began acting during his time at USC, appeared in various roles on television shows while in the NFL and co-starred in several movies after retiring. His promising on-screen career and everything else was halted following the murder allegations.

Hall of Fame guard Joe DeLamielleure was a rookie with the Bills during Simpson's record-breaking season and became an important member of an offensive line known as "The Electric Company" that paved the lane for Simpson to run free.

Simpson had matured as a teammate by the time DeLamielleure met him, aided by guidance he received from Edgerson and other veteran players who helped him find his way.

"He was like a star to us, even back then," DeLamielleure told the AP. "He was like an icon even back then. ... But I'll tell you what, he was never cocky. He worked hard in practice. ... He was just one of those guys who was bigger than all of us. But he hung with everybody. Very humble to football players and very respectful to the offensive line because he's a guy who shined a light on the offensive linemen throughout the league. He was a special person, a special player. ... I watched Pete Maravich play. I also saw Muhammad Ali box. ... Holy cow. But I was privileged to play with him."

In the end, however, Simpson is remembered more for the murder trial than his football accolades.

AP WAS THERE: OJ Simpson's slow-speed chase

By MICHAEL FLEEMAN Associated Press

EDITOR'S NOTE: The first week of the O.J. Simpson case in mid-June 1994 moved quickly, with reporters racing to reach the news. The only thing that was slow was The Chase.

The football great had been accused of killing his ex-wife and her friend, and there he was on live television, in the back of his friend's white Ford Bronco with a gun to his head. The freeway was like a parade — with the police, media and fans following "The Juice." There were crowds on the overpasses, signs, cheers and fists punching the air as the pursuit unfolded.

In The Associated Press newsroom, editors and writers were riveted to small televisions. And that's where many would stay for the next 17 months — glued to a TV as the so-called "Trial of the Century" unfolded.

After Simpson died Wednesday at 76, the AP is making available the story wrapping up all the developments from The Chase.

O.J. ARRESTED IN SLAYINGS OF EX-WIFE AND HER FRIEND

O.J. Simpson was hunted down and captured in his driveway Friday night after running from charges of murdering his ex-wife and her male friend and leading police along 60 miles of freeways and city streets.

"I can't express the fear I had that this matter would not end the way it did," said Simpson's attorney, Robert Shapiro, who had worried earlier that the former football great would kill himself.

Outside the walls of Simpson's estate, members of Simpson's family hugged each other and cried after word of the arrest came out.

A cheer came up from the crowd of 300 spectators.

The arrest shortly before 9 p.m. culminated an incredible drama that unfolded on live national TV in which police first announced charges against the former football great, then said he had disappeared and finally followed him along the highways for more than an hour.

After the white Ford Bronco came to a halt at Simpson's estate, a man believed to be his lifelong friend and teammate, Al Cowlings, got out. Simpson's lawyer arrived at the mansion nearly an hour later and the arrest came minutes later.

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Before fleeing as he was about to be arrested, the former football great left a handwritten letter proclaiming his innocence, saying goodbye to friends and making "a last wish" to "leave my children in peace."

Shapiro earlier said he feared Simpson was suicidal and pleaded with him to give up. At the same news conference, a friend read Simpson's letter.

"I've had a great life, great friends," the football Hall of Famer's letter said. "Please think of the real O.J. and not this lost person."

The district attorney called it "the fall of an American hero," and Los Angeles police, angered that he reneged on a promise to surrender earlier in the day, mounted a manhunt for him and a former teammate.

In the letter, Simpson wrote that he tried to do "most of the right things" in life and asked: "Why do I end up like this?"

"First, everyone understand, I had nothing to do with Nicole's murder," Simpson's letter begins. "If we had a problem, it's because I loved her so much."

"I don't want to belabor knocking the press, but I can't believe what is being said. Most of it is totally made up. I know you have a job to do, but as a last wish, please, please, please, leave my children in peace," he wrote.

Shapiro said Simpson has been "exceedingly depressed," but he didn't know if Simpson had committed suicide.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed and praying that we will be able to bring him into a court," Shapiro said.

"Wherever you are, for the sake of your family, for the sake of your children, please surrender immediately."

Police immediately mounted a manhunt when Simpson fled, and said he may be armed.

"Mr. Simpson is out there somewhere and we will find him," Police Cmdr. David Gascon told reporters.

If convicted of killing Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman, Simpson - among the most prominent celebrities ever charged with murder - could face the death penalty.

"We saw, perhaps, the fall of an American hero," District Attorney Gil Garcetti said.

Simpson, 46, was scheduled to surrender at 11 a.m. but failed to honor the agreement made with Shapiro, Gascon said.

Shapiro said he was with Simpson, Cowlings and two doctors in a house in the San Fernando Valley on Friday morning when police called to say they were coming to arrest him. He said Simpson and Cowlings, who grew up with Simpson in a San Francisco housing project and was his teammate in high school, at the University of Southern California and the Buffalo Bills, vanished before police arrived.

"The Los Angeles Police Department is actively searching for Mr. Simpson," Gascon said. "The Los Angeles Police Department is also very unhappy with the activities surrounding his failure to surrender."

Authorities also were looking for Cowlings, Garcetti said, warning, "If you assist him in any way you are committing a felony."

The investigation was anchored by a grisly array of evidence, from media reports of a blood-stained ski mask to a bloody glove.

Gascon declined to say how the police lost Simpson, who was handcuffed and questioned by police Monday but let go. He had been seen at his house earlier in the week and attended his ex-wife's funeral Thursday. Someone resembling Simpson was seen driving away from his house an hour before his expected surrender.

Mike Botula, a spokesman for Garcetti, said the charges included the special capital punishment circumstance of multiple killings. There is no bail in such cases, Botula added.

"A final decision on whether we would seek the death penalty will be made at a later time," Botula said.

Fans and colleagues of the sports legend who had insisted on his innocence were forced by Friday's arrest warrant to confront an ominous possibility - that Simpson could have killed the mother of their two children, daughter Sydney, 9, and son Justin, 6.

"There's nothing to say except that the law must take its course," said Howard Cosell, who worked with Simpson on ABC's "Monday Night Football."

The bodies of Mrs. Simpson, the football star's strikingly beautiful ex-wife, and Goldman, a 25-year-old aspiring model and waiter at a trendy restaurant, were found outside Mrs. Simpson's posh condominium.

Mortally wounded by multiple stab wounds, the bodies were discovered in a pool of blood by a passerby. The couple divorced in 1992 following a seven-year marriage. While still married, Mrs. Simpson called police in 1989 saying she feared he was going to kill her. She had been punched, slapped and kicked by Simpson, who pleaded no contest in the case, authorities said.

Some reports suggested the two were attempting to reconcile at the time of the slayings. They had recently been seen together, but a family friend said those attempts failed and Simpson had turned vengeful. "He was telling her girlfriends and her that if he ever caught her with anyone he would kill her," the friend told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity. "She totally broke it off with him three weeks ago."

Through his attorneys, Simpson maintained his innocence, claiming he was at home at the time of the slayings, waiting for a limousine to take him to the airport for a flight to Chicago. He attended his wife's funeral Thursday and hired forensic experts to assist in his defense.

Simpson flew to Chicago the night of the killings and was summoned home by police the next morning. In filing the charges, authorities painted a grim picture in stark contrast to Simpson's graceful moves on the football field. Simpson was accused of using a knife to kill Mrs. Simpson and Goldman. The knife hasn't been found, Garcetti said.

Goldman, his family said, wasn't romantically involved with Mrs. Simpson. Reports indicated he fought valiantly for his life.

Orenthal James Simpson is known to many as the nimble and powerful running back for the Buffalo Bills, for whom he set a single-season NFL rushing record with 2,003 yards in 1973. He helped make USC a national champion in 1967 and won the Heisman Trophy in 1968.

He also was widely seen as a television sports commentator and in advertisements for Hertz rental cars. He also produced several television movies and had featured roles in such productions as "Roots" and "The Naked Gun" comedies.

After the warrant was announced, Hertz dropped Simpson.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida addresses Congress amid skepticism about US role abroad

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida addressed U.S. lawmakers at the Capitol on Thursday, urging them to consider the importance of global commitments at a time of tension in the Asia-Pacific and deep skepticism in Congress about U.S. involvement abroad.

Kishida is in Washington this week visiting President Joe Biden as the White House completes hosting each leader of the Quad — an informal partnership between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India that is seen as important to countering China's growing military strength in the region. Kishida highlighted the value of the U.S. commitment to global security and offered reassurances that Japan is a strong partner.

On Capitol Hill, his audience included many Republicans who have pushed for the U.S. to take a less active role in global affairs as they follow the "America First" ethos of Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee. The Republican-controlled House has sat for months on a \$95 billion package that would send wartime funding to Ukraine and Israel, as well as aid to allies in the Indo-Pacific like Taiwan and humanitarian help to civilians in Gaza and Ukraine.

"As we meet here today, I detect an undercurrent of self-doubt among some Americans about what your role in the world should be," Kishida told Congress.

He sought to remind lawmakers of the leading role the U.S. has played globally since World War II. After dropping two nuclear weapons on Japan to end the war, the U.S. helped rebuild Japan, and the nations transformed from bitter enemies to close allies.

"When necessary, it made noble sacrifices to fulfill its commitment to a better world," Kishida said of the U.S.

Japan has taken a strong role in supporting Ukraine's defense against Moscow as well as helping humani-

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tarian aid get to Gaza. It is also seen as a key U.S. partner in a fraught region where China is asserting its strength and North Korea is developing a nuclear program.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said in a floor speech Thursday, "The best way the House can heed Prime Minister Kishida's words is to pass the national security supplemental as soon as possible, to approve defense funding not just for Ukraine but also for the Indo-Pacific."

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell also said earlier this week that he hoped Kishida's visit would underscore "that we're in a worldwide situation here against the enemies of democracy — led by China, Russia and Iran."

Kishida offered reassurances that Japan is also committed to global security and human rights. He said that since recovering from the "devastation of World War II," Japan has transformed from a reticent ally to a strong partner "standing shoulder-to-shoulder" with the U.S.

The prime minister called China's stance "unprecedented" and "the greatest strategic challenge, not only to the peace and security of Japan but to the peace and stability of the international community at large."

Kishida was also attending a U.S.-Japan-Philippines summit on Thursday in another effort to bolster regional cooperation in the face of China's aggression. The United Kingdom also announced Thursday that it would hold joint military exercises with Japan and the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific next year.

Beijing has pushed back strongly on those actions during Kishida's visit.

Mao Ning, the Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman, said, "Despite China's serious concerns, the U.S. and Japan attacked and smeared China on the Taiwan question and maritime issues, grossly interfered in China's domestic affairs and violated the basic norms in international relations."

Meanwhile, Kishida cast the future of the conflict in Ukraine as having far-reaching consequences. He emphasized that Japan has committed to providing Kyiv with \$12 billion in wartime aid, including anti-drone detection systems.

"Ukraine of today may be East Asia of tomorrow," Kishida told lawmakers, and later added: "Japan will continue to stand with Ukraine."

The statements drew standing ovations from much of the chamber but a group of hardline conservatives remained seated. Other lawmakers skipped the speech and Capitol staff filled empty chairs with congressional aides.

Those moments encapsulated the pressure that House Speaker Mike Johnson is facing as he searches for a way forward for the foreign security package. It will be a difficult task to navigate the deep divides among Republicans. Making matters worse for the Republican speaker, he is already facing the threat of being ousted from the speaker's office.

In a statement after the address, Johnson praised the U.S. partnership with Japan and said, "We will not let tyrants disrupt the prosperity and security we all enjoy."

Kishida, who was elected in 2021, arrived in Washington while facing political problems of his own in Japan. Polls show his support has plunged as he deals with a political funds corruption scandal within his ruling Liberal Democratic Party. The nation's economy has also slipped to the world's fourth-largest last year, falling behind Germany.

This is the first time a Japanese prime minister addresses Congress since Shinzo Abe traveled to Capitol Hill in 2015. Kishida is the sixth foreign leader to address Congress during Biden's presidency.

He relished the moment and highlighted his ties to the U.S. He told lawmakers how he spent his first three years of elementary school in New York City while his father worked there as a trade official. Lawmakers applauded and laughed as he recalled American pastimes like attending baseball games and watching the Flintstones.

"I still miss that show," Kishida told them. "Although I could never translate, 'Yabba dabba doo.'"

The Biden administration will require thousands more gun dealers to run background checks on buyers

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands more firearms dealers across the United States will have to run background checks on buyers at gun shows or other places outside brick-and-mortar stores, according to a Biden administration rule that will soon go into effect.

The rule aims to close a loophole that has allowed tens of thousands of guns to be sold every year by unlicensed dealers who do not perform background checks to ensure the potential buyer is not legally prohibited from having a firearm. Gun rights groups are expected to fight it in court.

It's the administration's latest effort to combat gun violence. But in a contentious election year, it's also an effort to show voters — especially younger ones for whom gun violence deeply resonates — that the White House is trying to stop the deaths.

"This is going to keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers and felons," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "And my administration is going to continue to do everything we possibly can to save lives. Congress needs to finish the job and pass universal background checks legislation now."

The rule, which was finalized this week, makes clear that anyone who sells firearms predominantly to earn a profit must be federally licensed and conduct background checks, regardless of whether they are selling on the internet, at a gun show or at a brick-and-mortar store, Attorney General Merrick Garland told reporters.

Biden has made curtailing gun violence a major part of his administration and reelection campaign, creating the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention overseen by Vice President Kamala Harris. Biden also has urged Congress to ban so-called assault weapons — something Democrats shied from even just a few years ago.

The rule is likely to be challenged in court by gun rights activists who believe the Democratic president is unfairly targeting gun owners. The National Rifle Association said in a statement that it is "already working to use all means available to stop this unlawful rule."

The National Shooting Sports Foundation, an industry trade group, also has warned of a court challenge if the rule was finalized as written. Lawrence Keane, the foundation's senior vice president and general counsel, said Thursday that the organization was reviewing the regulation after contending previously that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives was overstepping its legal authority.

Biden administration officials said they are confident the rule, which drew more than 380,000 public comments, would withstand lawsuits.

The administration first proposed the rule in August, after the passage of the most sweeping gun violence bill in decades, a bipartisan compromise in response to the massacre of 19 students and two teachers at a Uvalde, Texas elementary school.

That law expanded the definition of those who are "engaged in the business" of selling firearms, and are required to become licensed by the ATF and therefore run background checks. The rule, which implements the change in the law, will take effect 30 days after it is published in the Federal Register.

There are already roughly 80,000 federally licensed firearms dealers. Administration officials believe the new rule will impact more than 20,000 dealers who have gotten away with selling firearms without a license and performing background checks at places like gun shows and over the internet by claiming they aren't "engaged in the business" of firearm sales.

"Everybody can see that people are not following the law in significant numbers," ATF Director Steve Dettelbach said in an interview. "And it's just wrong for public safety, it's wrong for fairness when all these licensed dealers are out there following the rules, for people to think that they don't have to all play by the same set of rules."

The rule makes clear there are instances when a license is not be needed, such people who occasionally resell firearms to a family member or liquidate their personal collection.

Republican Sens. John Cornyn of Texas and Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who were instrumental in the

passage of the gun law, have started an effort to block the rule from going into effect. But that is unlikely to succeed because the president would have the final say.

It comes a week after the ATF released new data that shows more than 68,000 illegally trafficked firearms in the U.S. came through unlicensed dealers who aren't required to perform background checks over a five-year period. The ATF report also showed that guns trafficked through unlicensed dealers were used in nearly 370 shootings between 2017 and 2021.

Gun control advocates who have long pushed to close the so-called gun show loophole praised the regulation as a big step toward their goal of universal background checks for gun buyers — a Democratic priority that has been blocked by Republicans in Congress.

"Expanding background checks and closing the gun seller loophole is a massive victory for safer communities — and it was made possible thanks to the tireless advocacy of our grassroots movement," Angela Ferrell-Zabala, executive director of Moms Demand Action, said in an emailed statement.

Reaction to the death of O.J. Simpson

By The Associated Press undefined

Reaction to the death of O.J. Simpson after prostate cancer. He was 76. Simpson's family announced the news on his X account. Relatives said he died Wednesday.

"I feel that the system failed Nicole Brown Simpson and failed battered women everywhere. I don't mourn for O.J. Simpson. I do mourn for Nicole Brown Simpson and her family and they should be remembered." — Attorney Gloria Allred, who once represented Nicole's family, on ABC News.

"The only thing I have to say is it's just further reminder of Ron being gone all these years. It's no great loss to the world. It's a further reminder of Ron's being gone." — Fred Goldman, father of Ron Goldman, to NBC News.

"O.J. Simpson was the first player to reach a rushing mark many thought could not be attained in a 14-game season when he topped 2,000 yards. His on-field contributions will be preserved in the hall's archives in Canton, Ohio." — Pro Football Hall of Fame President Jim Porter, in a statement.

"He died without penance. We don't know what he has, where it is or who is in control. We will pick up where we are and keep going with it." — David Cook, a San Francisco attorney for the Goldman family who has been seeking since 2008 to collect the civil judgment in the Ron Goldman case, in a statement.

"Cookie and I are praying for O.J. Simpson's children ... and his grandchildren following his passing. I know this is a difficult time." — Magic Johnson, on X.

"R.I.P. Nordberg. 'His acting was a lot like his murdering: He got away with it, but no one believed him.'" — David Zucker, who directed Simpson in two "Naked Gun" movies, on social media.

"Good Riddance #OJSimpson" — Caitlyn Jenner, on X.

"Our thoughts are with his families during this difficult time, obviously with his family and loved ones, and I'll say this. I know that they have asked for some privacy and so we're going to respect that." — White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre to reporters.

"Foremost, I'd like to express my condolences to the children, to Sydney and Justin, to Jason and Arnelle. They lost their father, and that is never easy. I wish to express my love and compassion to the Goldmans, to Fred and to Kim. I hope you find closure. And finally, to the family of the beautiful Nicole Brown Simpson,

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may we always cherish her memories. Nicole was a beacon of light that burned bright, and may we never forget her." — Kato Kaelin, a struggling actor who lived in a guest house on OJ's property and testified at the criminal trial, on Instagram. _____

"I'm sad because, when people die you go 'Oh, God, that's terrible.' But what happened to him, and maybe he brought it upon himself, but he was an icon in the nation. And he meant a lot (to) people doing those commercials. He did a lot for the Black race even though he didn't know it. He wasn't Muhammad Ali or anything, but he was doing things for athletes and not just Black athletes, but he kicked us into a really big thing. That's what I think of him. He was a groundbreaker." — Joe DeLamielleure, Hall of Fame offensive lineman, Simpson teammate in Buffalo, by phone to The Associated Press.

"The Heisman Trophy Trust mourns the passing of 1968 Heisman Trophy winner OJ Simpson. We extend our sympathy to his family." — Official Heisman Trophy account on X.

"We really didn't get along in the beginning. But eventually we became roommates and everything. So we had an outstanding relationship. We did a lot of things together. We went through a lot when he had his good years in Buffalo." — Booker Edgerson, Simpson teammate in Buffalo, by phone to The Associated Press.

"OJ Simpson played an important role in exposing the racial divisions in America. His trial also exposed police corruption among some officials in the Los Angeles Police Department. He will leave a mixed legacy. Great athlete. Many people think he was guilty. Some think he was innocent." — Attorney Alan Dershowitz, an adviser on Simpson's legal "dream team," by phone to The Associated Press.

More aid is supposed to be entering the Gaza Strip. Why isn't it helping?

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Under heavy U.S. pressure, Israel has promised to ramp up aid to Gaza dramatically, saying last week it would open another cargo crossing and surge more trucks than ever before into the besieged enclave.

But days later, there are few signs of those promises materializing and international officials say starvation is widespread in hard-hit northern Gaza.

Samantha Power, administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, said this week she accepted "credible" reports that famine is now occurring in the area and urged Israel to take further steps to expedite humanitarian aid shipments.

Power's remarks echoed those of U.S. President Joe Biden, who said on Wednesday that Israeli efforts to increase aid were "not enough."

While Israel says it has dramatically increased the number of aid trucks entering the territory, U.N. workers report only a slight uptick — possibly because they count trucks differently.

Here's what we know about the aid entering Gaza, and why discrepancies in reporting persist:

HOW MUCH AID IS ENTERING GAZA?

Israel says that since Sunday it has transported an average of 400 trucks a day into Gaza and that aid is now piling up on the Palestinian side of the Kerem Shalom crossing, one of two major crossings into the territory.

But Juliette Touma, communications director for the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, said that while aid workers have noticed a slight increase in the amount of aid entering Gaza, it's nothing close to the surge Israel is claiming.

On Monday, UNRWA says 223 trucks of aid passed. On Tuesday, that number hit 246. On Wednesday, it was down to 141.

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Meanwhile, only trickles of aid are reaching northern Gaza.

WHAT HAS ISRAEL PROMISED?

After Biden said last week that future American support for the war in Gaza depends on Israel doing more to protect civilians and aid workers, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promised a series of steps. Biden spoke out after an Israeli airstrike killed seven aid workers delivering food to the strip.

Netanyahu pledged to immediately re-open Israel's Erez crossing into northern Gaza — a pedestrian crossing destroyed by Hamas militants when they stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7. Netanyahu also said he would allow Israel's port in Ashdod to process aid shipments and increase Jordanian aid packages through another land crossing.

But Israeli officials this week dropped the plan to open Erez. Instead, they say a new crossing will be built, though it is unclear when it will open. The Ashdod port, meanwhile, is not yet accepting aid shipments and Gaza aid groups report no significant increase in trucks received at their warehouses.

Before the latest Israel-Hamas war, some 500 trucks carrying food, fuel and other supplies entered Gaza daily. That was supplemented by fish and produce farmed within the territory.

Even that was barely enough in a crowded territory whose economy has been battered by a 17-year blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt. The blockade, meant to keep Hamas from arming, restricted the flow of goods in and out of Gaza and contributed to widespread poverty and unemployment.

Scott Anderson, the acting director of UNRWA in Gaza, said the low levels of aid since the war started have compounded an existing, pre-war nutrition deficit in the territory.

"You have to remember, this was not a nutrition-rich environment before the war. The resilience was not there," said Anderson.

WHY IS THERE A DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THE UN AND ISRAEL'S NUMBERS?

Israel and the U.N. count trucks arriving in Gaza differently.

Israel counts every truck it inspects and allows to pass into Gaza, according to Shimon Freedman, a spokesperson for COGAT, the Israeli defense body in charge of Palestinian civilian affairs.

At the Kerem Shalom crossing, once the trucks pass into Gaza, the pallets of aid they are carrying are deposited in a 1-kilometer-long (a half-mile) zone for Palestinian drivers to pick up.

UNRWA only counts the trucks, driven by a Palestinian contractor, returning from that zone, Anderson said.

He also said that sometimes the trucks arriving from Israel are not fully loaded. Palestinian drivers on the Gaza side of the crossing load their trucks fully before passing through the gate — something that could further account for truck count differences.

WHAT IS SLOWING AID TRANSFER?

Getting from Israeli inspection, through the corridor and past the gate into Gaza takes time — and is made more arduous by the way Israel uses the Kerem Shalom crossing, Anderson said.

Since the war began, Israel has kept the crossing partially closed, Anderson said. Palestinian drivers must also wait for the incoming trucks to be unloaded — further narrowing the window of time allowed for pickup.

Aid inspected by Israel sometimes sits overnight, awaiting pickup. The U.N. says it stops all operations at 4:30 p.m. for safety purposes due to a breakdown in public order and airstrikes at night. UNRWA says they used to use local Palestinian police to escort aid convoys, but many refused to continue serving after airstrikes killed at least eight police officers in Rafah. Israel says armed Hamas militants have tried to siphon off aid.

COGAT denied allegations that they restrict the crossing's hours or limit movement of trucks to pick up aid and blamed the U.N. for the backup, saying the agency does not have enough workers to move aid to warehouses for timely distribution.

WHAT HAPPENS MOVING FORWARD?

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Wednesday night that increasing aid efforts is a top priority.

"We plan to flood Gaza with aid and we are expecting to reach 500 trucks per day," said Gallant. He did not specify a time frame for reaching that goal.

But even if Israel meets its goal, slowdowns at the crossings and convoy safety concerns may continue to hamper distribution. The U.N. has called for a return to prewar procedures — with additional terminals open and a significant amount of commercial goods, in addition to humanitarian aid, able to pass through.

“Gaza has become very quickly dependent on relief handouts,” Touma said. “The market has been forced to shut. This is not sustainable.”

A journalist. An army sergeant. An 80-year-old patient. Haitian human rights group details gang toll

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — A photographer slain in a drive-by shooting. An 80-year-old patient executed in a hospital surgery room. A couple decapitated as they closed their small store for the day.

A new report released by a Haitian human rights group details the horrific violence unleashed this year by gangs who kill, rape and maim with impunity amid a political vacuum.

“This year it’s much worse, and it’s all about the gangs. They have much more power, and they occupy more space,” Pierre Espérance, executive director of the National Human Rights Defense Network, said Thursday.

The group seeks to hold those responsible accountable, and it relies on people on the ground to collect victims’ names, ages and occupations to ensure they don’t remain anonymous amid a surge in slayings. The killings are difficult to track and are not reported by an underfunded and under resourced police department overwhelmed by gangs.

Overall, more than 1,550 people have been killed across Haiti and more than 820 injured from January to March 22, according to the U.N.

The report released Wednesday by the rights group found that among those killed were seven people aboard a sailboat traveling west of Port-au-Prince that was providing public transportation; nine bus passengers traveling on the main road that connects Port-au-Prince to the central Artibonite region; and a sergeant at the headquarters of Haiti’s Armed Forces who was struck in the head by a stray bullet.

Other victims include a 7-year-old boy; a woman who was director of a girls’ school; a 28-year-old basketball player; the chief accountant for the Secretariat of State Literacy; and a 26-year-old sports reporter struck by a stray bullet while at home.

The report also detailed widespread armed attacks on multiple neighborhoods in which at least 67 people were killed as gangs set fire to homes, forcing survivors to flee. Some 17,000 people have been left homeless as a result, with many cramming into overcrowded, makeshift shelters.

Some of those fleeing sought refuge on the premises of the Social Welfare and Research Institute in early March, but police pushed back the crowd in a scuffle that ended with the death of a 14-year-old boy, the report found.

Gang rapes also are common during attacks on neighborhoods, with at least 64 reported rape survivors from January to March. The number, however, is believed to be much higher given the stigma around sexual assaults.

Among those injured was a woman whose jaw was crushed by a stray bullet, the report found.

As gang violence continues unabated, medical workers have struggled to help the wounded and ill. Haiti’s biggest public hospital remains closed, along with at least a dozen other smaller hospitals and clinics. Meanwhile, basic supplies like fuel, oxygen and medications, including pain killers, are scarce given that Haiti’s main seaport remains largely shut down and its main international airport closed for more than a month.

“Consequently, patients must pay for everything,” the report stated.

In one hospital, pregnant women must provide a document proving they bought fuel in order to receive care, according to the report.

“The situation described in this document, aggravated by the violation of the right to the free circulation of goods and services, risks leading to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis if no measures are adopted

immediately," the report said.

Many of the killings took place after gangs launched large-scale attacks on Feb. 29, burning police stations, opening fire on the main airport and storming Haiti's two biggest prisons, releasing more than 4,000 inmates. They also plundered several consulates and set fire to the home of Haiti's National Police chief, the report found.

The attacks were meant to prevent the return of Prime Minister Ariel Henry to Haiti. He was in Kenya at the time to push for a U.N.-backed deployment of a police force from the East African country and he now remains locked out of Haiti.

Henry has pledged to resign once a transitional council responsible for appointing a new prime minister and Cabinet is created. But the National Human Rights Defense Network said it was concerned about the council since some of the members come from sectors that "do not inspire confidence, due to their past or present behavior."

"It is the duty of the population to remain vigilant and monitor all the decisions and actions of the council in order to prevent the state's coffers from being plundered and acts of corruption from being perpetrated," the report stated.

The report also detailed at least 48 kidnappings for ransom. Among the victims: a judge, a priest, a mayor, a well-known doctor, a street vendor, six nuns and nearly a dozen bus passengers.

Espérance, with the human rights group, blamed what he called complicity between gangs and police and the country's elite for the current situation, noting that Haiti's national police are overwhelmed.

"They're unable to function," he said in a phone interview. "The gangs are much more comfortable."

On Thursday, activists and U.S. lawmakers held a news conference warning about Haiti's situation as they called for a halt on deportations of Haitian nationals living in the U.S., among other things.

"Anything less is a death sentence," said Democratic Rep. Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts.

Muslim leaders are 'out of words' as they tire of the White House outreach on the war in Gaza

By CHRIS MEGERIAN and JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Osama Siblani was sipping his morning coffee at the office when his phone buzzed with a message from one of President Joe Biden's advisers. As publisher of the Arab American News in Dearborn, Michigan, Siblani serves as an occasional sounding board, and the White House wanted to know what he thought of Biden's recent call with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

After months of mounting concerns over the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, Biden had publicly, albeit vaguely, threatened to cut U.S. assistance to Israel's military operations in the Hamas-controlled territory.

"This is baby steps," Siblani said he responded. "What we need is giant steps rather than baby steps."

The text exchange is an example of the behind-the-scenes communication that the White House has nurtured at a time of anger at the Democratic president over his support for Israel. Such informal contacts have become more important as some Muslim and Arab American leaders have turned down opportunities to talk with Biden or his advisers, frustrated by the sense their private conversations and public anguish have done little or nothing to persuade him to change course.

The White House says it is keeping an open door for difficult conversations, but it can be hard to get people to walk through.

"All they are trying to do is convince us that there is some kind of movement toward where we want," Siblani said. "But it's too slow and it's dragging. It's more death and casualties that are happening."

The highest-profile example of the stonewalling came last week when a Palestinian American doctor walked out of a meeting with Biden. But interviews with Muslim and Arab American leaders reveal how that face-to-face protest was only the most conspicuous case of a fracture that has damaged crucial relationships and closed avenues needed to repair them.

"What more can we tell the White House for them to change course? I've run out of words," said Michi-

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gan state Rep. Abraham Aiyash, who met with senior officials in February but has not had any contact with them since then.

Dan Koh, deputy director of the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, said the administration wants "to make sure we're as accessible as possible."

"We understand that some people do not want to engage. We respect that," he said. "But we think that the people who have engaged have felt that it was a fruitful discussion."

Top White House officials, including national security adviser Jake Sullivan, senior adviser Anita Dunn and chief of staff Jeff Zients, have been involved in the outreach. Biden is briefed on their conversations, and Vice President Kamala Harris has talked with Muslims, Arab Americans and Palestinian Americans.

The White House believes it still can find receptive audiences, such as a recent series of meetings with Lebanese Americans that focused on efforts to prevent the conflict from expanding along Israel's northern border, where Hezbollah operates.

But the situation presents a challenge for a president who believes in the political power of personal relationships and has prized his history of sitting down with opponents and critics. It could also jeopardize his reelection this year, with some Muslims warning they are unwilling to support Biden even if that risks returning Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, to the White House.

Salam Al-Marayati, who lives in Los Angeles and leads the Muslim Public Affairs Council, described the attitude as, "Forget them. They have to learn a lesson. And if they lose, that's the lesson they should learn."

His disillusionment with Biden began soon after the war started on Oct. 7, when Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis in a surprise attack. The president described himself as a Zionist during a trip to Israel later that month, emphasizing his belief in the importance of a Jewish state as a guarantee of security for people who have historically been persecuted around the world.

Al-Marayati heard the statement differently.

"What it meant was, he doesn't care for the Palestinian people and their displacement," he said.

Al-Marayati and members of his organization did participate in meetings with officials from the National Security Council and the State Department, but he soured on the conversations.

"We realized they were not listening," Al-Marayati said. "Maybe they were nodding when we were speaking, but they were continuing with the same policy."

With the war entering its seventh month, Israel has killed more than 33,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to the Gaza-based Ministry of Health, an agency in the Hamas-controlled government.

U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Democrat from Minnesota who is Muslim, said it's still important to support Biden as a shield against the return of Trump, saying "our democracy is on the line."

But when it comes to the war, Omar said, Biden "is not where we need him to be at the moment, and it is our job to push him, and to get him where we need him to be."

"It is incredibly hard to have any sort of conversation when there isn't any policy change coming out of the White House in regards to stopping weapons from being delivered into Israel," she said.

That is a step that Biden has been unwilling to take, though he has moved closer to that line. After Biden's most recent call with Netanyahu, the White House said the president "made clear that U.S. policy with respect to Gaza will be determined by our assessment of Israel's immediate action" to protect civilians and allow increased humanitarian assistance.

The conversation came two days after Biden met with Muslim leaders at the White House. Officials had originally tried to arrange an iftar meal, where Biden could join Muslims as they broke their daily fast for Ramadan after sunset. But too many people refused invitations, turned off by the thought of eating with Biden at the same time he is supporting Israeli military operations that have pushed Palestinians to the brink of famine.

The White House changed its plans and hosted a private meeting about the war. One of the guests was Thaer Ahmad, a Palestinian American doctor from Chicago who has volunteered in Gaza. Angry over the continued flow of U.S. weapons to Israel, Ahmad stood up during the meeting and told Biden he was

walking out.

Among the leaders who have kept talking with the administration is Wa'el Alzayat, who lives in the Washington, D.C.-area and heads the advocacy organization Emgage. The former U.S. State Department official said he texts or calls senior officials to relay sentiments from the Muslim and Arab American communities and push for a cease-fire.

Dearborn Mayor Abdullah Hammoud said he last met with administration officials in February, and they have reached out to ask his thoughts since then. His city has the largest Muslim population per capita in the country, and Hammoud said he always is willing to talk if "there's a conversation to be had that can lead to saving one life."

Some White House meetings have focused on Lebanese Americans, who fear how the war could spiral out of control. One conversation took place last month in the private basement dining room of a Lebanese restaurant in Detroit. The other was hosted by a Lebanese American businessman in Houston over the weekend.

Ed Gabriel, who helped organize the conversations as president of the American Task Force on Lebanon, said participants appreciated the opportunity to learn about U.S. efforts in the Middle East. But there is frustration over the situation in Gaza.

"At one point does the president say, 'Enough is enough, it has to be now?'" Gabriel said. "I know what they're trying to get done. But after 30,000 deaths, you can't expect people to understand. And that's the challenge the president has."

Homebuyers' quandary: to wait or not to wait for lower mortgage rates

By ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shop for a home now or hold out for the possibility of lower mortgage rates? That question is confronting many home shoppers this spring homebuying season.

Lower rates give home shoppers more financial breathing room, so holding out for a more attractive rate can make a big difference, especially for first-time homebuyers who often struggle to find an affordable home.

However, there's a potential downside to waiting. Lower rates can attract more prospective homebuyers, heating up the market and driving up prices.

Acting now would likely saddle a buyer with a rate of around 6.9% on a 30-year mortgage. In late October, the rate surged to a 23-year high of nearly 8%, according to mortgage buyer Freddie Mac. Economists generally expect the average rate on a 30-year mortgage to decline later in the year.

"If mortgage rates do in fact drop as expected, I would expect there to be more competition from increased demand, so that's one reason to potentially act now," said Danielle Hale, chief economist at Realtor.com. "And then those buyers, if mortgage rates do fall, would presumably have an opportunity to refinance."

Gagan Hegde, a software engineer in Durham, North Carolina, is leaning toward the proactive approach as he looks to buy his first home.

Hegde, 29, worries that delaying his search would eventually put him up against others also looking for lower rates in a market that's already plenty competitive.

Just recently, he matched the \$450,000 list price on a townhome, but another buyer offered more than what the seller was asking.

Rather than dwell too much on mortgage rates, he's now focusing on finding a three-bedroom, three-bath home he can afford. Once rates fall, he'll look to refinance.

"I'm just completely being agnostic to the financing prices because I think if you start paying too much attention to it, there's no clear answer," he said.

The rock-bottom mortgage rates that fueled a buying frenzy in 2021 and early 2022 are long gone. While an average rate on a 30-year home loan of just under 7% is not far from the historical average, that's

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little consolation to homebuyers who, prior to the last couple of years, hadn't seen average rates this high going back nearly two decades.

Combined with a nearly 44% increase in the national median sale price of previously occupied homes between 2019 and 2023, elevated mortgage rates have made buying a home less affordable for many Americans.

A recent analysis by Redfin found that the typical U.S. household earns about \$30,000 less than the \$113,520 a year it needs to afford a median-priced U.S. home, which the company estimated was \$412,778 in February. Redfin defines a home as affordable if the buyer spends no more than 30% of their income on their monthly housing payment. The analysis factored in a 15% down payment and the average rate on a 30-year loan in February, which was around 6.8%.

Lower mortgage rates would boost homebuyers' purchasing power. Financing a \$400,000 home with a 30-year mortgage with a fixed rate at last week's average of 6.82% works out to about \$215 more a month than if the rate was at 6%, for example. Monthly payments on the same loan two years ago, when the mortgage rate averaged 4.72%, would be \$534 less.

Many economists expect that mortgage rates will ease this year, but not before inflation has cooled enough for the Federal Reserve to begin lowering its short-term interest rate.

The Fed has indicated it expects to cut rates this year once it sees more evidence that inflation is slowing from its current level above 3%. How the bond market reacts to the Fed's interest rate policy, as well as other factors can influence mortgage rates. Current indications are mortgage rates will remain higher for a while longer.

For now, the uncertainty in the trajectory of mortgage rates is working in favor of home shoppers like Shelby Rogozhnikov and her husband, Anton.

The couple owns a townhome in Dallas and want more space now that they're planning on having their first child. They're looking for a house with at least three bedrooms that's priced within their budget of around \$300,000.

They're not feeling any urgency, but they are eager to avoid a surge in competition should mortgage rates decline in the coming months.

"I know interest rates will go down eventually, but I feel like when they go down housing prices might go back up again," said Shelby Rogozhnikov, 38, a dental hygienist. "I have the mortgage rate thing to worry about and my biological clock, which has less time on it than the mortgage rates, so it's now or never."

Real estate agents from Los Angeles to New York say bidding wars are still happening, though not as often as in recent years in some places.

"Overall, the bidding wars are not nearly as extreme as they were in markets' past," said Tony Spratt, an agent with Century 21 Real Estate Judge Fite Co., in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. "We're still in a sellers' market, but it's much more mild than it was."

Home shoppers also have more properties to choose from this spring than a year ago. Active listings -- a tally that encompasses all the homes on the market but excludes those pending a finalized sale -- have exceeded prior-year levels for five straight months, according to Realtor.com. They jumped nearly 24% in March from a year earlier, though they were down nearly 38% compared to March 2019.

The still-relatively tight inventory is helping give sellers the edge in many markets around the country, but not all.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, home listings are taking longer to sell, and that's made sellers more flexible on price or with helping cover repair costs, said Jordan Hammond, a Redfin agent.

"Before we saw sellers could really do what they wanted," she said. "They didn't have to contribute at all to the buyer's purchase. And now that's kind of flipped. I'm seeing more buyers pushing sellers."

Still, the thin inventory of properties on the market means home shoppers who can find a property for sale in their price range may want to put in an offer rather than wait, because there's no guarantee a better option will come along right away.

Those shopping in areas where new-home construction is more prevalent may have better luck this spring. In response to higher mortgage rates, more than one-third of builders cut home prices in 2023. Many

also offered buyers incentives like mortgage rate buydowns and below market-rate financing.

Builders also stepped up construction of smaller, less expensive homes, which helps explain why the median sale price of a new U.S. home fell nearly 8% in February from a year earlier to \$400,500. That's the lowest level since June 2021.

Home shoppers and sellers who wait until summer to test the market will also have to factor in how they may be affected by proposed changes to policies around real estate agent commissions.

Last month, the National Association of Realtors agreed to make policy changes in order to settle federal lawsuits that claimed the trade association and several of the country's biggest real estate brokerages engaged in business practices that forced homeowners to pay artificially inflated commissions when they sold their home.

The policy changes, which are set to go into effect in July, could lead to home sellers paying lower commissions for their agent's services. Buyers, in turn, may have to shoulder more upfront costs when they hire an agent.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg says Trump's hush money criminal trial isn't about politics

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — When he was elected two years ago as Manhattan's first Black district attorney, Alvin Bragg spoke candidly about his unease with the job's political demands. A former law professor, he's more comfortable untangling complex legal questions than swaggering up to a podium.

But when the first of Donald Trump's four criminal prosecutions heads to trial on Monday, about alleged hush money payments to cover up a sex scandal during the 2016 election, Bragg will be at the center of a political maelstrom with few precedents.

Even before announcing the 34-count felony indictment against Trump last year, Bragg was a lightning rod for conservative critics who said he wasn't tough enough on crime. The upcoming trial will test the Democrat's efforts to portray himself as apolitical in the face of relentless attacks from the Republican former president and his supporters, who say the prosecution is the epitome of partisanship.

Echoing the racist tropes he has deployed frequently against his legal adversaries, Trump has called Bragg a "thug" and a "degenerate psychopath," urging his supporters to take action against the "danger to our country."

Bragg, who declined to be interviewed for this story, has rejected that, comparing the prosecution against Trump to any other case of financial crime.

"At its core, this case today is one with allegations like so many of our white collar cases," Bragg said in announcing the indictment last year. "Someone lied again and again to protect their interests and evade the laws to which we are all held accountable."

The first-ever trial of a former U.S. president will feature allegations that Trump falsified business records while compensating one of his lawyers, Michael Cohen, for burying stories about extramarital affairs that arose during the 2016 presidential race.

The charges — which carry the possibility of jail time — threaten Trump's campaign schedule as he faces a general election rematch with President Joe Biden.

They have also turned a spotlight on Bragg, who since bringing the indictment has been the target of scores of racist emails and death threats, as well as two packages containing white powder.

"Because he is the first to get Trump to trial, and because he's been successful so far, the level of hate pointed at Bragg is staggering," said Norman Eisen, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who served as special counsel in the first impeachment trial against Trump. "The threat level is just off the charts."

Citing Trump's threatening and inflammatory statements, Judge Juan M. Merchan imposed a gag order last month that bars Trump from publicly commenting on witnesses, jurors or others involved in the case — though not Bragg or the judge personally. Attorneys for Trump have sought to reverse the order, seiz-

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ing on the issue as one of several arguments for delaying the trial.

The 50-year-old Harlem-raised Bragg got his early political education during visits to the city's homeless shelters, where his father worked. He said he was held at gunpoint six times while growing up — three times by overly suspicious police officers — and once had a knife held to his throat.

After graduating from Harvard Law School, Bragg began his career as a criminal defense and civil rights lawyer, later joining the federal prosecutor's office in Manhattan. As a top lawyer in the New York attorney general's office, he oversaw investigations into police killings and a lawsuit that shut down Trump's charitable foundation.

Though he said he had little interest in elected office, Bragg joined a crowded race for Manhattan district attorney in 2019, running on a platform of "justice and public safety."

Compared to many of his opponents, Bragg took a more measured tone in detailing his plans for the investigations into Trump and his businesses, which began under former District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr.

Once in office, Bragg surprised many by pausing the criminal investigation into Trump, leading to the resignation of two top prosecutors who had pushed for an indictment.

When he resurrected the case last April, the charges of falsifying records were raised to felonies under an unusual legal theory that Trump could be prosecuted in state court for violating federal campaign finance laws. Some legal experts say the strategy could backfire.

"It seems a bit of a legal reach, and the question is why are they doing it?" said Jonathan Turley, a professor at the George Washington University Law School. "It can be hard to escape the conclusion that this effort would not have been taken if the defendant was not Donald Trump."

Others have blessed the legal theory, including a federal judge, Alvin Hellerstein, who wrote in a decision last year that the law did not provide exceptions for election-related activities.

From his first days in office, Bragg found himself under a barrage of criticism over a memo instructing prosecutors not to seek jail time for some low-level offenses.

He walked back portions of the directive amid fierce protest from New York Police Department leaders, conservative media and some centrist Democrats, though he later said he regretted not pushing back more forcefully. For many on the right, the image of Bragg as a poster child for Democrat permissiveness stuck.

"When you're the district attorney, you are also a politician, and there's been a slight failure to grasp that," said Rebecca Roiphe, a New York Law School professor who taught alongside Bragg and previously worked in the Manhattan district attorney's office. "The fact that he's not attuned to what he needs to do politically to get things done is both a strength and a weakness."

Though most major crime rates in Manhattan remain lower than before Bragg took office, conservatives continue to accuse him of allowing rampant lawlessness. Republicans convened a congressional field hearing in New York to examine what they said were Bragg's "pro-crime, anti-victim" policies.

Bragg was pilloried on the right again earlier this year when he declined to seek pretrial detention for some men accused of brawling with police officers in Times Square.

The decision sparked criticism not only from conservatives but also Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, and top NYPD officials. Bragg defended himself, telling reporters, "the only thing worse than failing to bring perpetrators to justice would be to ensnare innocent people in the criminal justice system."

He later announced several men initially arrested played only a minor role or were not present at all.

In 2022, Bragg's office pressured the Trump Organization's longtime chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg, into pleading guilty to evading taxes on company perks like a luxury car and rent-free apartment. Later that year, it put Trump's company on trial, and won a conviction on similar tax charges.

After that, Bragg convened a new grand jury, securing the indictment accusing Trump of falsely recording payments to Cohen as legal expenses, when they were for orchestrating payoffs to porn actor Stormy Daniels and former Playboy model Karen McDougal, to prevent them from going public with claims they had extramarital sexual encounters with Trump.

Trump denies the accusations and says no crime was committed. Now, a jury is on the verge of being picked that will make a historic decision about whether Trump broke the law — or Bragg overreached.

A mission of mercy, then a fatal strike:

How an aid convoy in Gaza became Israel's target

By JACK JEFFERY, JULIA FRANKEL and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

DEIR AL BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — It was hours after sundown when the eight aid trucks drove from the makeshift jetty, cobbled together from tons of wreckage left across Gaza by months of war.

The trucks were escorted by three vehicles carrying aid workers from the World Central Kitchen, the relief organization that had arranged the massive food shipment. All seven aid workers wore body armor. The cars were marked, including on the roof, with the group's emblem, a multicolored frying pan.

After a grueling crawl along a beaten-up road, it seemed like mission accomplished. The convoy dropped off its precious cargo at a warehouse, and the team prepared to head home.

There wasn't much more than a sliver of moon that night. The roads were dark, except for occasional patches where light spilled from buildings with their own generators.

By a few minutes after 10 p.m., the convoy was moving south on Al Rashid Street, Gaza's coastal road.

The first missile struck a little more than an hour later.

Soon after, all seven aid workers were dead.

A CRUCIAL EFFORT TO WARD OFF FAMINE

The path to the April 1 attack started months ago, as aid groups desperately looked for ways to feed millions cut off from regular food deliveries. Gaza was sealed off by Israeli forces within hours of the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas militants that ignited the war. Since then, more than 33,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 80% of the enclave's 2.3 million people displaced.

Hunger has become commonplace. Famine, U.N. officials warn, has become increasingly likely in war-ravaged northern Gaza.

With the situation growing increasingly dire and deliveries through Gaza's land crossings with Israel and Egypt limited, World Central Kitchen pioneered an effort to deliver aid by sea.

The relief group, founded in 2010 by celebrity chef José Andrés, has worked from Haiti to Ukraine, dispatching teams that can quickly provide meals on a mass scale in conflict zones and after natural disasters. The group prides itself on providing food that fits with local tastes.

Its first ship arrived in mid-March, delivering 200 tons of food, water and other aid in coordination with Israel.

On March 30, three ships and a barge left Cyprus carrying enough rice, pasta, flour, canned vegetables, and other supplies to prepare more than 1 million meals, the group said.

Two days later, some of those supplies were ready to be trucked into the heart of Gaza.

APRIL 1, 10 P.M.

The eight-truck World Central Kitchen convoy turned south after leaving the pier, driving along the coast toward a warehouse about 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) away.

The World Central Kitchen team traveled in two armored cars and a third unarmored vehicle. They included a Palestinian driver and translator, Saifeddin Issam Ayad Abutaha, a young businessman whose mother was hoping to find him a wife; and security consultant Jacob Flickinger, a dual American-Canadian citizen saving to build a house in Costa Rica where he and his girlfriend could raise their 18-month-old son.

There were three British military veterans, an Australian beloved for her big hugs and relentless work ethic, and a Polish volunteer heralded by the group as "builder, plumber, welder, electrician, engineer, boss, confidant, friend, and teammate."

The team had established a "deconfliction" plan ahead of time with Israeli forces, so the military would know when they would travel and what route they would take.

Aid organizations use complex systems to try to keep their teams safe. Typically, they send an advance plan to COGAT, the Israeli defense agency responsible for Palestinian civilian matters, which then shares it with the Israeli army, said a military official. As deliveries unfold, the aid groups can communicate with the military in real time, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with army briefing rules.

Workers for World Food Kitchen carry GPS transmitters that track their locations, according to an orga-

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nization employee who spoke on condition of anonymity because he didn't have permission to talk to the media.

Many relief workers have expressed concerns about the deconfliction system.

"It hasn't been working well," said Chris Skopec, a Washington-based official with the aid group Project Hope, citing poor communication and coordination. "And when it doesn't work well, people die."

10:28 P.M.

Things began to go wrong a few miles from the pier.

An Israeli officer, watching from a drone, saw what he thought was a Hamas gunman climb on top of one truck and fire into the air.

Gunmen are a daily part of life in Gaza, which has been run by Hamas since 2007. They could be Hamas fighters, members of Hamas-supervised police or privately employed guards.

Some relief groups hire armed guards, aid officials said, often plain-clothed men who brandish guns or large sticks to beat back hungry Palestinians trying to snatch supplies.

The World Central Kitchen sometimes uses armed guards, the employee said, though it was not clear if they had been employed for the April 1 convoy. The employee and other aid officials insisted their guards were not part of Hamas or its militant ally, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, but did not elaborate on the guards' affiliation. Despite such denials, it is unlikely anyone riding on top of an aid truck wouldn't have at least tacit permission from Hamas.

Israeli military spokesperson Maj. Nir Dinar said soldiers try to distinguish between armed security guards and Hamas militants when determining targets. He said he could not rule out the possibility that the armed men accompanying the World Central Kitchen convoy were security guards.

10:46 P.M.

In grainy aerial footage that the Israeli military showed to journalists, people swarmed around the convoy when it arrived at a World Central Kitchen warehouse in the city of Deir Al-Balah. The military said two to four of the men were armed, though that was not clear in the aerial footage shown to journalists.

10:55 P.M.

The trucks remained at the warehouse but the three World Central Kitchen vehicles began driving south to take the workers to their accommodations. Another vehicle that had joined the convoy – which the Israelis say held gunmen – drove north toward another warehouse.

Planning messages sent by World Central Kitchen had made clear that the aid workers would not remain with the trucks but would travel on by car.

But Israeli officials say the soldiers monitoring the convoy had not read the messages. Then, an Israeli officer believed he saw someone step into a World Central Kitchen vehicle with a gun.

"The state of mind at that time was the humanitarian mission had ended and that they were tracking Hamas vehicles with at least one suspected gunman," said retired Gen. Yoav Har-Evan, who led the military's investigation into the strike.

Because of the darkness, Israeli officials said the World Central Kitchen emblems on the cars' roofs were not visible.

11:09 P.M.

The first missile struck one of the armored cars as it drove along the coastal road. Aid workers fled the damaged vehicle for the other armored car, which Israel struck two minutes later.

The survivors piled into the third vehicle. It, too, was soon hit.

Abdel Razzaq Abutaha, the brother of the slain driver, said other aid workers called him after the blasts, telling him to check on his brother.

He repeatedly called his brother's phone. Eventually a man answered, and said he'd found the phone around 200 meters (656 feet) from one of the bombed-out cars.

"Everyone in the car was killed," the man told Abdel Razzaq.

Abdel Razzaq had believed his brother's work would be safe.

"It is an American international institution with top coordination," he said. "What is there to fear?"

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THE AFTERMATH

When the sun rose the next morning, the burned husks of the three vehicles were spread along a mile or so of Al Rashid Street.

Israel quickly admitted it had mistakenly killed the aid workers, and launched an investigation.

"It's a tragedy," military spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari told reporters. "It shouldn't have happened. And we will make sure that it won't happen again."

On Friday, Israel said it had dismissed two officers and reprimanded three more for their roles, saying they had mishandled critical information and violated the army's rules of engagement, which require multiple reasons to identify a target.

In the wake of the deadly strike, Israel and COGAT have set up a special "war room" where COGAT and military officials sit together to streamline the coordination process.

Israel's promises have done little to quiet growing international anger over its offensive.

More than 200 aid workers have been killed in Gaza since the war began, including at least 30 killed in the line of duty, according to the U.N. Many aid workers noted the convoy strike stood out only because six of those killed were not Palestinian.

Aid workers are, in many ways, a hard community to define. Some are experts who earn a good living traveling from disaster to disaster. Some are volunteers looking for a way to do some good. Some are driven by ambition, others by faith.

In Gaza, though, everyone understood the risks.

John Flickinger's son Jacob, a Canadian military veteran, was a member of the convoy's security team.

"He volunteered to go into Gaza, and he was pretty clear-eyed," Flickinger told the AP. "We discussed it, that it was a chaotic situation."

While World Central Kitchen and a few other aid groups suspended operations in Gaza after the attacks, many of the largest organizations, including Doctors Without Borders and Oxfam International, barely slowed down.

The convoy strike "wasn't outside of things that we could have predicted, unfortunately," said Ruth James, a UK-based Oxfam regional humanitarian coordinator. Except for one cancelled trip, Oxfam staff simply kept working.

"What keeps them going?" she asked. "I can only guess."

The Masters begins after weather delay, though high winds are still expected at Augusta National

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — The Augusta National that Jon Rahm, Scottie Scheffler and the rest of golf's greats played during their practice rounds for the Masters was a bit different than what greeted them Thursday after they drove down Magnolia Lane.

A storm system that raked the southeast with heavy rain, and had been dreaded all week, had tracked to the south and only sideswiped the course. But there was still enough precipitation to soften up, and substantially lengthen, a course that had been playing hard and fast, while wind whipping through the Georgia pines was poised to cause problems.

"Yeah, when the wind is swirling here it's very hard," said Shane Lowry, who had a later tee time Thursday. "Sounds like it's going to be a tricky Masters and scoring is going to be quite difficult. I don't mind that. Ready for the challenge."

Tournament officials were prepared for much worse weather Thursday, telling patrons as early as Wednesday evening the gates would not open on time. They wound up opening at 9:30 a.m. local time, giving patrons 40 minutes to speed walk — running, of course, is strictly forbidden at Augusta National — to get a prime vantage point for the ceremonial first shots.

Shortly after 10 a.m., Jack Nicklaus, Tom Watson and Gary Player stepped onto the tee box for Tea Olive, the uphill, dogleg right opening hole. And once they struck their shots down the wide first fairway,

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the tournament was underway.

"The key to this golf course is patience," said Patrick Reed, the 2018 Masters champion. "It's just going to be a grinding day. You got to get through the day, be patient and tear it up on the opportunities you get."

This is the sixth consecutive year that the weather has caused at least some delay during the Masters.

"It will be gusty, for sure," said National Weather Service forecaster Brad Carlberg, who predicted gusts up to 45 mph into the early evening. "Those wind speeds could easily knock down branches here and there."

Last year, torrential rains and wind sweeping through the course Friday knocked down three towering pines.

The conclusion of that second round had to be pushed into the weekend, and leaders were still on the course when the third round was suspended Saturday. That produced a marathon final day at Augusta National, where Rahm rallied from a four-shot deficit to Brooks Koepka over the course of 30 holes for a four-shot victory and the green jacket.

At least the storms this year came Thursday, making it easier to make up lost time.

Erik van Rooyen and Jake Knapp were the first competitors off at 10:30 a.m., but most of the heavy hitters had tee times that pushed into the afternoon. Rahm was joined by Matt Fitzpatrick and Nick Dunlap at 1 p.m., and the power trio of 2022 Masters champion and world No. 1 Scottie Scheffler, Xander Schauffele and Rory McIlroy followed them off.

Five-time champion Tiger Woods, Jason Day and Max Homa weren't due to begin their rounds until 3:45 p.m., while 2020 champ Dustin Johnson along with Collin Morikawa and Tommy Fleetwood were in the last group at 4:30 p.m.

The delay means those players with late starting times are unlikely to complete their opening rounds before dark. They would need to return early Friday to finish them, then head out for their second rounds after a short break.

The weather this weekend is expected to be warm, dry and ideal.

"Just makes it harder," Fleetwood said of the changing conditions. "The course is already been playing pretty firm, I think, in practice. The rain might soften it up a little bit. The wind just makes it harder. It swirls so much in these trees and, yeah, the course just hits you hard, really. But no, I look forward to it. Everybody's got to go out there and play.

"I think, again, it's a major and a very special one and I think it should test every aspect of your game."

Breaking from routine with a mini sabbatical or 'adult gap year' can be rejuvenating

By COLLEEN NEWVINE Associated Press

If you daydream about getting a break from stress, you might picture a restful week of vacation or a long weekend away. But some people opt for something bigger, finding ways to take longer or more varied time away from the routine.

Mini sabbaticals. Adult gap years. Or just gap months. The extended breaks range from quitting a job to taking a leave to just working remotely somewhere new to experience a different lifestyle. It's about stepping out of the expected and recharging.

That's not entirely new, of course, but the pandemic's upheaval of work life caused more people to question whether they really wanted to work the way they had.

Barry Kluczyk, a public relations professional who lives in suburban Detroit, had long wanted to spend more time in Seattle. But it wasn't until COVID pushed him to fully remote work that he felt able to spend a month there, along with his wife and daughter.

"I wish we could have done it sooner," he said.

The Kluczyks liked it so much they went the opposite direction in 2022 for another mini sabbatical, in Portland, Maine.

AVOIDING BURNOUT

More companies are offering breaks as a low-cost way to address employee exhaustion, said Kira

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Schrabram, assistant professor of management and organization at the University of Washington. She is among leaders of the Sabbatical Project, which aims to create "a more humane relationship with work" by encouraging extended leaves.

"Companies are starting to realize burnout is an issue," she said.

American attitudes toward taking time off are very different from European ones, which tend to put more value on vacation time and rest, said Schrabram, who is German.

BETWEEN JOBS

Roshida Dowe took advantage of the time she suddenly had when she got laid off. She wanted a break before looking for her next position, and was struck by how many people asked how she could take time away to travel. So she decided to hang out her shingle as a career-break coach.

Dowe partnered with Stephanie Perry to launch ExodUS Summit, a virtual conference and community for Black women "interested in developing your Location Freedom, Financial Freedom and/or Time Freedom plan." They bring in experts to talk about practical issues surrounding extended travel, like finances, safety and health care, and more philosophical topics like the value of rest and breaking free of intergenerational trauma.

"When I coach women who are looking to take a sabbatical, the main thing they're looking for is permission," said Dowe, who moved to Mexico City as part of her reinvention.

She said it's powerful to showcase women taking extended travel because, "A lot of us aren't open to possibilities we haven't been shown before."

Perry experienced that herself when she took a vacation to Brazil in 2014 and met people staying in her hostel who were traveling for months, not days.

"I thought for sure people who traveled long term were all trust fund babies," Perry said. She researched budget travel and found people making it work on \$40 a day.

DOLLARS AND CENTS

Cost is a common obstacle for people considering a break. There are creative ways around that, Perry said.

"Housesitting is the reason I can work very little and travel a lot," she said. She teaches an online class for travelers interested in getting started as a housesitter.

Alternatively, websites like HomeExchange, Homelink and Holiday Swap connect travelers who would like to trade homes.

Ashley Graham took a break from her work at a non-profit in Washington, D.C., and planned a road trip through the South. She visited friends along the way who could give her a free place to stay.

"It was a great way to connect with my past life," said Graham, who subsequently relocated to New Orleans after loving the city during her sabbatical tour.

ONE TIME, OR A WAY OF LIFE

Eric Rewitzer and Annie Galvin put two employees in charge of their 3 Fish Studios art gallery in San Francisco to spend the summer in France and Ireland.

"It was terrifying," said Rewitzer, who described himself as having been a workaholic and control freak. "It was a huge exercise in trust."

When they returned to San Francisco, Rewitzer saw his hometown differently. He felt his life had been out of balance, too much work and too little time in nature.

That shift in perspective led the couple to buy what they thought would be a weekend home in the Sierra Nevada mountains. It turned into their full-time home when they shut down their gallery during the pandemic. Now they're considering getting a studio space in San Francisco again.

"It all comes back to that same place of being willing to take chances," Rewitzer said.

For Gregory Du Bois, one break from college to be a ski bum in Vail, Colorado, set him on a path of taking mini sabbaticals throughout his corporate IT career. Each time he took a new job, he negotiated for extended time off, explaining to his managers that to perform at his best, he needed breaks to recharge.

"It's such a way of life that I almost don't think of it as sabbaticals," said Du Bois, now retired from tech and working as a life coach based in Sedona, Arizona. "For me, it's a spiritual regeneration."

No inflation here: Affordable Masters' menu still includes \$1.50 pimento cheese sandwiches

By STEVE REED AP Sports Writer

AUGUSTA, Ga. (AP) — Jordan Janes knew when he arrived at the Masters for the first time a pimento cheese sandwich was a must-have.

He wanted to soak in the Augusta National experience, and that has long included the iconic staple on the affordable Masters menu.

And no, Janes was not worrying about the 556 calories and 35 grams of fat the sandwich contains, according to MyFitnessPal.com.

"I'm a healthy guy and I dial it in when I'm at home," said Janes, 42, from St. Louis. "But I'm going to let go a little while I'm here. And I've already done 17,000 steps today, so I'm not going to feel guilty about it for a minute. ... And it was worth it."

Jimmy Murray, 32 from Minneapolis, also tried the pimento sandwich — which consists of shredded cheese, mayonnaise, diced pimentos, and various seasonings on two slices of white bread — as well as the egg salad sandwich for the first time.

"It's fantastic, actually," Murray said of the pimento sandwich. "It has a really unique taste, and it's not something we have in the Midwest."

You can't beat the price — \$5 for a sandwich, chips and a soft drink.

Inflation may be driving up the food cost around the country, but patrons generally won't see those increases at Augusta National. The prices here have mostly remained fixed for years. A club sandwich or barbeque sandwich still goes for \$3, and can be topped off with a Georgia peach ice cream sandwich for \$3.

The price of a beer did increase to \$6 dollars this year, jumping up from \$5 in 2023.

"I kind of knew about the prices from seeing it on social media," Murray said. "I've had about everything on menu I could eat and I think I paid \$10.50."

That menu includes:

SANDWICHES

Egg salad sandwich: \$1.50

Pimento cheese: \$1.50

Pork Bar-B-Que: \$3

Masters club: \$3

Chicken salad on honey wheat: \$3

Classic chicken: \$3

BREAKFAST

Coffee: \$2

Chicken Biscuit: \$3

Breakfast sandwich: \$3

Fresh mixed fruit: \$2

BEVERAGES

Soft drinks: \$2

Water: \$2

Iced tea: \$2

Crow's Nest: \$6

Domestic beer: \$6

Imported beer: \$6

White wine: \$6

SNACKS

Chips plain/bbq: \$1.50

Peanuts: \$1.50

Southern cheese straws: \$2

Cookies: \$1.50

Georgia pecan caramel popcorn: \$2

Georgia peach ice cream sandwich: \$3

One thing still not on the menu are cell phones.

That unique aspect of Augusta National continues: cell phones are not allowed on the course. While some may find that annoying, others view it as a relief.

"It's great," Janes said. "I waited 45 minutes in line for some merchandise and I just talked (with people). It brings you back to the simple life and how life used to be," he said. "You're not checking your phone every five minutes."

As his trans daughter struggles, a father pushes past his prejudice. 'It was like a wake-up'

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

SMITHVILLE, Mo. (AP) — Before his transgender daughter was suspended after using the girls' bathroom at her Missouri high school. Before the bullying and the suicide attempts. Before she dropped out.

Before all that, Dusty Farr was — in his own words — "a full-on bigot." By which he meant that he was eager to steer clear of anyone LGBTQ+.

Now, though, after everything, he says he wouldn't much care if his 16-year-old daughter — and he proudly calls her that — told him she was an alien. Because she is alive.

"When it was my child, it just flipped a switch," says Farr, who is suing the Platte County School District on Kansas City's outskirts. "And it was like a wake-up."

Farr has found himself in an unlikely role: fighting bathroom bans that have proliferated at the state and local level in recent years. But Farr is not so unusual, says his attorney, Gillian Ruddy Wilcox of the American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri.

"It sometimes takes meeting a person before someone can say, 'Oh, that's a person and that's who they are, and they're just being themselves,'" she says. "And I do think that for Dusty, that's what it took."

Looking back, Farr figures his daughter, the youngest of five, started feeling out of place in her own body when she was just 6 or 7. But he didn't see it.

Farr said he didn't have "a lot of exposure to what I would consider the outside world" in the conservative Nebraska community where he was raised. "Just old farmers" is how he described it.

Moving to the Kansas City area, which has 20% more people than live in all of Nebraska, was a culture shock. "I had never seen the LGBTQ community up close, and I would still have my closed-minded thoughts." He said things then that he now regrets. "A lot of derogatory words. I don't want to go back to that place."

He settled on the outskirts in one of the more conservative enclaves, a community that is home to some of the troops stationed at nearby Fort Leavenworth. He worked as a service manager at a tractor repair facility.

His youngest — a smart, funny, loves-to-sing, light-up-a-room kind of kid — was his fishing and camping buddy. A competitive archer, she also joined her dad on trips to the shooting range.

"No parent has a favorite," Farr says, "but if I had a favorite, it would be my youngest."

But when she was 12, she started to steer away from him, spending more time with the rest of the family. It lasted for a few months before she came out to her family. He knows now how hard this was. "Growing up," he says, "my kids knew how I felt."

His wife, whom he described as less sheltered, was on board immediately. Him, not so much.

"Given the way I was raised, a conservative fire and brimstone Baptist, LGBTQ is a sin, you're going to hell. And these were things, unfortunately, that I said to my daughter," Farr says. "I'm kind of ashamed to say that."

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They bumped heads and argued, their relationship strained. In desperation, he turned to God, poring through the Bible, questioning teachings that he once took at face value that being transgender was an abomination. He prayed on it, too, replaying her childhood in his mind, seeing feminine qualities now that he had missed.

Then it hit him. "She's a girl."

"I got peace from God. Like, 'This is how your daughter was born. I don't make mistakes as God. So she was made this way. There's a reason for it.'"

The switch was almost instantaneous. "An overnight epiphany," he calls it. "It's uplifting when you can actually accept the way things are, and you're not carrying that unfounded hate and unfounded disgust."

His daughter, who is named only by her initials of R.F. in the lawsuit, was stunned. He had been, she recalls, "to say it nicely, very annoying." Now everything was different.

"There was this electricity in me that was just, it felt like pure joy. Just seeing someone I thought would never support me, just being one of my biggest supporters," she recalled as she played with her dog, a miniature Jack Russell terrier named Allie, at a park on an unseasonably warm February day. Her father was with her.

She, her father and her attorneys asked that she remain anonymous because she is unnamed in the lawsuit and to protect her from discrimination.

All those years, he had missed it. It is strange to him now.

"I don't know if it was my inner bigotry not wanting to see it or if I was just blind. I don't know," he says.

But the how, the why — these are not things he likes to dwell on much.

"Where we're at now is what matters," he says. "Me being a loving father. Me being accepting, me knowing that this isn't a choice. This is how she was born."

His daughter was diagnosed with gender dysphoria, or distress caused when gender identity doesn't match a person's assigned sex. A common treatment is to prescribe drugs to delay puberty.

That's what Farr's daughter did, along with growing out her hair. She had friends, and Farr says things returned to normal — for the most part.

But then came high school. "And," Farr says, "anything I did to her, school was 10 times worse."

The school knew about her gender dysphoria diagnosis, Farr says, describing it simply as a medical issue. Telling them about it was something he likened to talking about a case of chicken pox. The whole thing didn't seem like such a big deal now. "We were golden." After all, he says: "If we don't evolve, we die."

But the 2021-22 school year had just started when the assistant principal pulled his daughter aside. While remote learning persisted in some schools as the pandemic lingered, the high school was in person. According to the suit filed last year, the administrator said students must use the restroom of their sex designated at birth or a single gender-neutral bathroom. The district disputes that happened.

Another employee, the suit said, took it further and told her using the girls' bathroom was against the law. The district disputed that happened, too.

The thing is, there isn't a law — at least, not in Missouri.

While more than 10 states have enacted laws over bathroom use, Missouri is not one of them. What Missouri has done is impose a ban on gender-affirming care. For bathrooms, it leaves policy debate to local districts.

"Asinine" is how Farr described the whole wave of restrictions, while acknowledging in the same breath that he probably would have supported them a decade ago. "Kind of makes me dislike myself a little bit."

He figured it was all just a way to intimidate her. He thinks some people believe mistakenly that trans kids are trying to catch a glimpse of someone not fully clothed.

Some Republican legislators who have backed state-level bathroom laws have argued that they're responding to people's concerns about transgender women sharing bathrooms, locker rooms and other spaces with cisgender women and girls. But critics argue that restrictions cause harassment of transgender

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people, not the other way around.

"I don't think they get the severity of what just telling someone what restroom they can use — what kind of impact something that small can have on someone."

His daughter didn't understand: "It kind of just made me feel hopeless in my education," she recalls thinking. "Because how is this place that's supposed to teach me everything to be an adult, how are they going to teach me what I need to learn when they're dictating where I pee?"

The gender-neutral bathroom was far from her classes and often had long lines, the suit says. She, as a freshman, was missing class, and teachers were lecturing her. So she used the girls' restroom. Verbal reprimands were followed by a one day in-school suspension and then a two-day, out-of-school suspension, the suit says.

"Your policy is dumb," Farr recalled telling the school, which argued in its response to his lawsuit that his daughter was eating lunch in the girls' restroom and had unclean hands.

His daughter started using the boys' restroom. The suit said it was because she feared more discipline, but the district argued in its written response that she was "intentionally engaging in disruptive behavior in numerous bathrooms, perhaps to invite discipline." It didn't elaborate on what it meant by disruptive behavior.

One day, she was in the boys' restroom when a classmate approached and told another student, "Maybe I should rape her," the suit said. Farr said the student told his daughter he was threatening her because she looked like a girl.

Beyond angry now, Farr called not just the school but the ACLU. The district acknowledged the incident, saying a student made a "highly inappropriate" comment about rape and was disciplined. By now, Farr's daughter was afraid to go to school.

"If I use the restroom they say I have to, I'm going to get bullied. If I use the gender-neutral restroom, I'm going to be late to my classes," Farr says, illustrating his daughter's point of view. "So it's a damned if you do, damned if you don't situation."

The district sees it differently, writing in a court filing that "there were numerous factors and circumstances in R.F.'s life, unrelated to school, which may have caused emotional harm, depression and anxiety."

Ultimately, her parents got the school to agree to let her finish her freshman year online. But she missed three weeks of classes before the switch was approved. Typically an A and B student, she plummeted to D's and F's. Worse to Farr, his daughter was withdrawing, losing friends and isolating herself in her room.

He describes it as "a dark rabbit hole of depression." Twice she tried to kill herself and was hospitalized. Everything from butter knives to headache medicine was locked up.

She returned in person to start her sophomore year, hoping things would be better. She made it only a few weeks before returning to online school.

At semester's end, Farr and his family moved out of the district. Bathroom access remained a source of friction in her new school, so again she switched to online school. When she turned 16 last spring, Farr and his wife agreed to let her drop out. He says they chose to focus on her mental health and describes it as "probably the best decision we've made." Still, it feels strange.

"I never would have guessed that I would — I don't want to use happy — but would be OK with one of my kids quitting school," he said.

She is in counseling now, taking hormone replacement therapy, leaving her room and watching TV with Farr. She is interviewing for a job and considering an alternative high school completion program. She'd like to go to college one day, and study psychology, maybe law.

With the lawsuit filed, customers have approached Farr, telling him they support his fight. He was expecting they would scoff. Even his own parents are on board, which he says "surprised the hell out of me."

"These aren't the people who raised me, let me tell you," he says.

Sometimes Farr's daughter yells at him, and he admits that he missed the teen attitude. That spirit and fight had faded.

"Being a teenager is hell," he says. "Being a trans teen is 10 kinds of hell. She's the brave one. I'm just her voice."

He feels he has changed enough to fill this role — that being her voice can help other parents and kids avoid what his family endured. "Our kids," he says, "are dying." He thinks that because of where he came from, maybe people will listen when he raises alarms. Maybe.

"It's almost like a transgender person," he says of his transformation. "There's the dead me. And then there's the new me."

South Korea's prime minister and top presidential officials offer to resign after election defeat

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's prime minister and senior presidential officials offered to resign Thursday after their ruling party suffered a crushing defeat in parliamentary elections in a blow to conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol.

The results of Wednesday's elections mean the liberal opposition forces will prolong their control of parliament until after Yoon completes his single five-year term in 2027. That will likely set back Yoon's domestic agenda and weaken his grip on the ruling party as he faces the opposition's intensifying political offensive during his remaining three years in office, experts say.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo and all senior presidential advisers to Yoon, except those in charge of security issues, expressed their intentions to resign, according to Yoon's office. It didn't immediately say whether Yoon accepted their resignations.

Executive power in South Korea is heavily concentrated in the president, but the prime minister is the No. 2 official and leads the country if the president becomes incapacitated.

Yoon said he will "humbly uphold" the public sentiments reflected in the election outcome and focus on improving people's economic situations and reforming state affairs, said presidential chief of staff Lee Kwan-seop, in a televised briefing. Lee said he also offered to quit.

In a separate news conference, ruling People Power Party leader Han Dong-hoon said he would step down as well to take responsibility for the election defeat.

"I apologize to the people on behalf of our party, which wasn't good enough to win the people's choices," he said.

With all the votes counted, the main opposition Democratic Party and its satellite party won a combined 175 seats in the 300-member National Assembly. Another small liberal opposition party obtained 12 seats under a proportional representation system, according to the National Election Commission.

Yoon's People Power Party and its satellite party won 108 seats, the election commission said.

The final voter turnout for South Korea's 44 million eligible voters was tentatively estimated at 67%, the highest for a parliamentary election since 1992, according to the election commission.

Regardless of the results, Yoon will stay in power and his major foreign policies will likely be unchanged. But the elections were widely seen as a midterm confidence vote on the former top prosecutor who took office in 2022.

Yoon has pushed hard to boost cooperation with the United States and Japan as a way to address a mix of tough security and economic challenges. But he has been grappling with low approval ratings at home and a liberal opposition-controlled National Assembly that has limited his major policy platforms that require legislative approvals.

Hong Sung Gul, a public administration expert at Seoul's Kookmin University, said Yoon will likely find it more difficult to implement business-friendly policies and tax reforms, as the opposition parties are likely to aggressively flex their legislative muscles.

"When it comes to policies, important ones like tax system reforms require legislation. I think there is a high possibility for the opposition parties to put a break on Yoon's such policy agendas," Hong said.

Yoon's critics have accused him of failing to resolve livelihood issues such as soaring prices, refusing to

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quickly fire some top officials implicated in scandals, and lacking efforts to communicate with opposition leaders for policy coordination.

Earlier this year, Yoon briefly enjoyed rising approval ratings over his strong push to drastically increase the number of medical students despite vehement protests by incumbent doctors. But the doctors' walk-outs eventually left Yoon facing growing calls to find a compromise, with patients and others experiencing delays of surgeries and other inconveniences.

The rival parties' campaigning ahead of the elections deepened South Korea's already serious conservative-liberal divide as they exchanged toxic rhetoric.

Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung lost the 2022 presidential election to Yoon in the country's most closely fought presidential contest. During that race, Yoon and Lee and their supporters spent months demonizing each other.

Lee is eyeing another presidential bid. His main potential conservative rival is Han, who also served as Yoon's justice minister. Lee faces an array of corruption investigations that he argues are politically motivated and pushed by Yoon's government.

"The results of the parliamentary elections are not the victory by the Democratic Party, but the great victory by our people," Lee said Thursday. "Now, the elections are over. Both the ruling and opposition political parties must pull together all their strength to resolve economic and public livelihood problems."

The incoming parliament is to begin meeting on May 30 for a four-year term. Of the 300 seats, 254 were elected through direct votes in local districts, and the other 46 by the parties according to their proportion of the vote.

Today in History: April 12 Civil War begins with gunfire at Fort Sumter

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, April 12, the 103rd day of 2024. There are 263 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 12, 1861, the U.S. Civil War began as Confederate forces opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina.

On this date:

In 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Warm Springs, Georgia, at age 63; he was succeeded by Vice President Harry S. Truman.

In 1955, the Salk vaccine against polio was declared safe and effective.

In 1961, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first man to fly in space, orbiting the earth once before making a safe landing.

In 1963, civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, charged with contempt of court and parading without a permit. (During his time behind bars, King wrote his "Letter from Birmingham Jail.")

In 1981, former world heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, 66, died in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In 1985, Sen. Jake Garn, R-Utah, became the first sitting member of Congress to fly in space as the shuttle Discovery lifted off.

In 1988, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office issued a patent to Harvard University for a genetically engineered mouse, the first time a patent was granted for an animal life form.

In 1990, in its first meeting, East Germany's first democratically elected parliament acknowledged responsibility for the Nazi Holocaust, and asked the forgiveness of Jews and others who had suffered.

In 1992, after five years in the making, Euro Disneyland (now called Disneyland Paris) opened in Marne-La-Vallee, France, amid controversy as French intellectuals bemoaned the invasion of American pop culture.

In 2015, Hillary Rodham Clinton jumped back into presidential politics, announcing in a video her much-awaited second campaign for the White House.

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In 2018, the Screen Actors Guild issued new guidelines calling for an end to auditions and professional meetings in private hotel rooms and residences in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal.

In 2020, Christians around the world celebrated Easter Sunday isolated in their homes by the coronavirus. St. Peter's Square was barricaded to keep out crowds. Pope Francis celebrated Easter Mass inside the largely vacant basilica, calling for global solidarity in the face of the pandemic.

In 2022, actor and standup comic Gilbert Gottfried died at age 67.

Today's Birthdays: Playwright Alan Ayckbourn (AYK'-bohrn) is 85. Jazz musician Herbie Hancock is 84. Rock singer John Kay (Steppenwolf) is 80. Actor Ed O'Neill is 78. Actor Dan Lauria is 77. Talk show host David Letterman is 77. Author Scott Turow is 75. Actor-playwright Tom Noonan is 73. R&B singer JD Nicholas (The Commodores) is 72. Singer Pat Travers is 70. Actor Andy Garcia is 68. Movie director Walter Salles (SAL'-ihs) is 68. Country singer Vince Gill is 67. Model/TV personality J Alexander is 66. Rock musician Will Sergeant (Echo & the Bunnymen) is 66. Rock singer Art Alexakis (Everclear) is 62. Country singer Deryl Dodd is 60. Folk-pop singer Amy Ray (Indigo Girls) is 60. Actor Alicia Coppola is 56. Rock singer Nicholas Hexum (311) is 54. Actor Retta is 54. Actor Nicholas Brendon is 53. Actor Shannen Doherty is 53. Actor Marley Shelton is 50. Actor Sarah Jane Morris is 47. Actor Jordana Spiro is 47. Rock musician Guy Berryman (Coldplay) is 46. Actor Riley Smith is 46. Actor Claire Danes is 45. Actor Jennifer Morrison is 45. Actor Matt McGorry is 38. Actor Brooklyn Decker is 37. Contemporary Christian musician Joe Rickard (Red) is 37. Rock singer-musician Brendon Urie (Panic! at the Disco) is 37. Actor Saoirse (SUR'-shuh) Ronan is 30.