

America

No-go for Joe Exotic

Trump 'leaves' office with legacy of chaos

WASHINGTON, Jan 20, (AP): Donald Trump will walk out of the White House and board Marine One for the last time as president Wednesday morning, leaving behind a legacy of chaos and tumult and a nation bitterly divided.

Four years after standing on stage at his own inauguration and painting a dire picture of "American carnage," Trump departs the office twice impeached, with millions more out of work and 400,000 dead from the coronavirus. Republicans under his watch lost the presidency and both chambers of Congress. He will be forever remembered for the final major act of his presidency: inciting an insurrection at the Capitol that left five dead, including a Capitol Police officer, and horrified the nation.

Trump will be the first president in modern history to boycott his successor's inauguration as he continues to stew about his loss and privately maintains the election that President-elect Joe Biden fairly won was stolen from him. Republican officials in several critical states, members of his own administration and a wide swath of judges, including those appointed by Trump, have rejected those arguments.

Still, Trump has refused to participate in any of the symbolic passing-of-the-torch traditions surrounding the peaceful transition of power, including inviting the Bidens over for a get-to-know-you visit.

By the time Biden is sworn in, Trump will already have landed at his private Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, to face an uncertain future, but not before giving himself a grand sendoff — with a red carpet, a military band and even a 21-gun salute.

Guests have been invited, but it is unclear how many will attend. Even Vice President Mike Pence plans to skip the event, citing the logistical challenges of getting from the air base to the inauguration ceremonies. Washington has been transformed into a security fortress, with thousands of National Guard troops, fencing and checkpoints to try to stave off further violence.

Salvage

Aides had urged Trump to spend his final days in office trying to salvage his legacy by highlighting his administration's achievements — passing tax cuts, scaling back federal regulations, normalizing relations in the Middle East. But Trump largely refused, taking a single trip to the Texas border and releasing a video in which he pledged to his supporters that "the movement we started is only just beginning."

Trump will return to Florida with a small group of former White House aides as he charts a political future that looks very different now than just two weeks ago.

Before the Capitol riot, Trump had been expected to remain his party's de facto leader, wielding enormous power as he served as a kingmaker and mulled a 2024 presidential run. But now he appears more powerless than ever — shunned by so many in his party, impeached twice, denied the Twitter bullhorn he had intended to use as his weapon and even facing the prospect that, if he is convicted in his Senate trial, he could be barred from seeking a second term.

For now, Trump remains angry and embarrassed, consumed with rage and grievance. He spent the week after the election sinking deeper and deeper into a world of conspiracy, and those who have spoken with him say he continues to believe he won in November. He continues to lash out at Republicans for perceived disloyalty and has threatened, both publicly and privately, to spend the coming years backing primary challenges against those he feels betrayed.

Some expect him to eventually turn completely on the Republican Party, perhaps by flirting with a run as a third-party candidate as an act of revenge.

For all the chaos and drama and bending the world to his will, Trump ended his term as he began it: largely alone. The Republican Party he co-opted finally appeared to have had enough after Trump's supporters violently stormed the Capitol, hunting for lawmakers who refused to go along with Trump's unconstitutional efforts to overturn the results of a democratic election.

But although Washington may have had enough, Trump retains his grip on the Republican base, with the support of millions of loyal voters, along with allies still helming the Republican National Committee and many state party organizations.

The city he leaves will not miss him. Trump rarely left the confines of the White House, except to visit his own hotel. He and his wife never once ate dinner at any other local restaurant; never ventured out to shop in its stores or see the sites. When he did leave, it was almost always to one of his properties: his golf course in Virginia, his golf course in New Jersey, his private club and nearby golf course in Palm Beach, Florida.

The city overwhelmingly supported Biden, with 93% of the vote. Trump received just 5.4% of the vote — or fewer than 18,600 ballots — not enough to fill the Washington Capitals hockey arena.

Meanwhile, one name missing in Trump's flurry of pardons is "Tiger King" Joe Exotic.

His team was so confident in a pardon that they'd readied a celebratory limousine and a hair and wardrobe team to whisk away the zookeeper-turned-reality-TV-star, who is now serving a 22-year federal prison sentence in Texas. But he wasn't on the list announced Wednesday morning.

Innocence

Joe Exotic, whose real name is Joseph Maldonado-Passage, was sentenced in January 2020 to 22 years in federal prison for violating federal wildlife laws and for his role in a failed murder-for-hire plot targeting his chief rival, Carole Baskin, who runs a rescue sanctuary for big cats in Florida. Baskin was not harmed.

Maldonado-Passage, who has maintained his innocence, was also sentenced for killing five tigers, selling tiger cubs and falsifying wildlife records. A jury convicted him in April 2019.

In his pardon application filed in September, Maldonado-Passage's attorneys argued that he was "railroaded and betrayed" by others. Maldonado-Passage, 57, is scheduled to be released from custody in 2037, but his attorneys said in the application that "he will likely die in prison" because of health concerns.

Trump has commuted the prison sentence of former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, who has served about seven years of a 28-year sentence for corruption.

The announcement Wednesday morning was part of a flurry of clemency action in the final hours of Trump's White House term that benefited more than 140 people, including rap performers, ex-members of Congress and other allies of Trump and his family.

A White House statement said that prominent members of the Detroit community had supported the former Democratic mayor's commutation and it noted: "During his incarceration, Mr. Kilpatrick has taught public speaking classes and has led Bible Study groups with his fellow inmates."

Kilpatrick, 50, also had asked for Trump's help to get out of prison.

US Attorney Matthew Schneider, who has long argued that Kilpatrick should not be released early, blasted the commutation decision, the Detroit Free Press reported. The top federal prosecutor in Detroit said Kilpatrick's original sentence "was very appropriately imposed."

"My position on the disgraced former mayor of Detroit has not changed. Kwame Kilpatrick has earned every day he served in federal prison for the horrible crimes he committed against the people of Detroit," Schneider said. "He is a notorious and unrepentant criminal."



Trump



President-elect Joe Biden and his wife Jill Biden are joined by Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris and her husband Doug Emhoff during a COVID-19 memorial event at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, on Jan 19, in Washington. (AP)



European Council President Charles Michel addresses European lawmakers during a plenary session on the inauguration of the new President of the United States and the current political situation, at the European Parliament in Brussels, on Jan 20. (AP)



Widodo



Ma

Asia

'Pompeo 'doomsday clown': China's Foreign Ministry described outgoing US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday as a "doomsday clown" and said his designation of China as a perpetrator of genocide and crimes against humanity was merely "a piece of wastepaper."

The allegations of abuses against Muslim minority groups in China's Xinjiang region are "outright sensational pseudo-propositions and a malicious force concocted by individual anti-China and anti-Communist forces represented by Pompeo," spokesperson Hua Chunying told reporters at a daily briefing.

"In our view, Pompeo's so-called designation is a piece of wastepaper. This American politician, who is notorious for lying and deceiving, is turning himself into a doomsday clown and joke of the century with his last madness and lies of the century," Hua said.

Pompeo's announcement Tuesday doesn't require any immediate actions, although the US must take the designation into account in formulating policy toward China. China says its policies in Xinjiang aim only to promote economic growth and social stability.

The US has previously spoken out and taken action on Xinjiang, implementing a range of sanctions against senior Chinese Communist Party leaders and state-run enterprises that fund repressive policies in the vast, resource-rich region. Last week, the Trump administration announced it would halt imports of cotton and tomatoes from Xinjiang, with Customs and Border Protection officials saying they would block products from there suspected of being produced with forced labor. (AP)

Ma ends silence with video: China's highest-profile entrepreneur, Jack Ma, appeared Wednesday in an online video, ending a 2 1/2-month absence from public view that prompted speculation about the future of the e-commerce billionaire and his Alibaba Group.

In the 50-second video, Ma congratulated teachers supported by his foundation and made no mention of his disappearance or official efforts to tighten control over Alibaba and other internet companies over the past six months. The video appeared on Chinese business news and other websites.

The normally voluble Ma disappeared from public view after he irked regulators by criticizing them in an Oct 24 speech at a Shanghai conference. Days later, regulators suspended the planned multibillion-dollar stock market debut of Ant Group, a financial

Inauguration

'Tonight, we grieve and begin healing together'

Biden marks COVID grief before pomp

WASHINGTON, Jan 20, (AP): Hours from inauguration, President-elect Joe Biden paused on what might have been his triumphant entrance to Washington Tuesday evening to mark instead the national tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic with a moment of collective grief for Americans lost.

His arrival coincided with the awful news that the US death toll had surpassed 400,000 in the worst public health crisis in more than a century — a crisis Biden will now be charged with controlling.

"To heal we must remember," the incoming president told the nation at a sunset ceremony at the Lincoln Memorial. Four hundred lights representing the pandemic's victims were illuminated behind him around the monument's Reflecting Pool.

"Between sundown and dusk, let us shine the lights into the darkness ... and remember all who we lost," Biden said.

The sober moment on the eve of Biden's inauguration — typically a celebratory time in Washington when the nation marks the democratic tradition of a peaceful transfer of power — was a measure of the enormity of loss for the nation.

During his brief remarks, Biden faced the larger-than life statue of Abraham Lincoln, the Civil War president who served as more than 600,000 Americans died. As he turned to walk away at the conclusion of the vigil, he faced the black granite wall listing the 58,000-plus Americans who perished in Vietnam.

Biden was joined by Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, who spoke of the collective anguish of the nation, a not-so-subtle admonishment of outgoing President Donald Trump, who has spoken sparingly about the pandemic in recent months.

"For many months we have grieved by ourselves," said Harris, who will make history as the first woman to serve as vice president when she's sworn in. "Tonight, we grieve and begin healing together."

Beyond the pandemic, Biden faces no shortage of problems when he takes the reins at the White House. The nation is also on its economic heels because of soaring unemployment, there is deep

political division and immediate concern about more violence following the Jan. 6 insurrection at the US Capitol.

Biden, an avid fan of Amtrak who took the train thousands of times between his home in Delaware and Washington during his decades in the Senate, had planned to take a train into Washington ahead of Wednesday's Inauguration Day but scratched that plan in the aftermath of the Capitol riot.

He instead flew into Joint Base Andrews just outside the capital and then motorcaded into fortress D.C. — a city that's been flooded by some 25,000 National Guard troops guarding a Capitol, White House and National Mall that are wrapped in a maze of barricades and tall fencing.

"These are dark times," Biden told supporters in an emotional sendoff in Delaware. "But there's always light."

Biden, who ran for the presidency as a cool head who could get things done, plans to issue a series of executive orders on Day One — including reversing Trump's effort to leave the Paris climate accord, canceling Trump's travel ban on visitors from several predominantly Muslim countries, and extending pandemic-era limits on evictions and student loan payments.

Farewell

Trump won't be on hand as Biden is sworn in, the first outgoing president to entirely skip inaugural festivities since Andrew Johnson more than a century and a half ago.

The White House released a farewell video from Trump just as Biden landed at Joint Base Andrews. Trump, who has repeatedly and falsely claimed widespread fraud led to his election loss, extended "best wishes" to the incoming administration in his nearly 20-minute address but did not utter Biden's name.

Trump also spent some of his last time in the White House huddled with advisers weighing final-hour pardons and grants of clemency. He planned to depart from Washington Wednesday morning in a grand airbase ceremony that he helped plan himself.

Biden at his Delaware farewell, held

at the National Guard/Reserve Center named after his late son Beau Biden, paid tribute to his home state. After his remarks, he stopped and chatted with friends and well-wishers in the crowd, much as he had at Iowa rope lines at the start of his long campaign journey.

"I'll always be a proud son of the state of Delaware," said Biden, who struggled to hold back tears as he delivered brief remarks.

Inaugural organizers this week finished installing some 200,000 U.S., state and territorial flags on the National Mall, a display representing the American people who couldn't come to the inauguration, which is tightly limited under security and Covid restrictions.

The display was also a reminder of all the president-elect faces as he looks to steer the nation through the pandemic with infections and deaths soaring.

Out of the starting gate, Biden and his team are intent on moving quickly to speed distribution of vaccinations to anxious Americans and pass his \$1.9 trillion virus relief package, which includes quick payments to many people and an increase in the minimum wage to \$15 an hour.

Biden also plans to unveil a sweeping immigration bill on the first day of his administration, hoping to provide an eight-year path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million people living in the US without legal status. That would be a major reversal from the Trump administration's tight immigration policies.

Some leading Republican have already balked at Biden's immigration plan. "There are many issues I think we can work cooperatively with President-elect Biden, but a blanket amnesty for people who are here unlawfully isn't going to be one of them," said Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., who is often a central player in Senate immigration battles.

Many of Biden's legislative ambitions could be tempered by the hard numbers he faces on Capitol Hill, where Democrats hold narrow majorities in both the Senate and House. His hopes to press forward with an avalanche of legislation in his first 100 days could also be slowed by an impeachment trial of Trump.

platform that grew out of Alibaba's payments service, Alipay.

That prompted speculation online about whether the 56-year-old Ma, China's biggest global business celebrity and a symbol of its tech boom, had been detained or might face legal trouble. Alibaba and the government haven't responded to questions about him. (AP)

'Compensation for crash': Indonesia's leader on Wednesday assured relatives of 62 people killed in a Sriwijaya Air plane crash that they will be compensated.

President Joko Widodo visited the command center at Jakarta's international container terminal where tons of plane debris hauled by divers from seafloor were collected for an investigation into what caused the Boeing 737-500 to nosedive into the Java Sea

shortly after takeoff from Jakarta on Jan 9. He also witnessed the first three relatives of the victims receiving money from the compensation fund.

Sriwijaya Air offered relatives an insurance payout of 1.25 billion rupiah (\$89,100), in line with the Indonesian law that stipulates compensation must be offered within 60 days of a crash. In addition, state-owned insurance company Jasa Raharja has provided 50 million rupiah (\$3,560) to each family of the victims.

"I assure you that all compensation will be completed immediately for all victims," Widodo said. A search is still ongoing for the crucial memory unit of the cockpit voice recorder. (AP)

Popular Thai politician charged: Thai officials on Wednesday filed criminal charges against a popular former politician, accusing him of defaming the monarchy by broadcasting criticism of government efforts to secure supplies of coronavirus vaccines.

The action against Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit came just a day after Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha told reporters that his government will prosecute anyone who shares false information about coronavirus vaccines.

Thanathorn, former leader of the dissolved Future Forward Party, accused the government of acting too slowly in procuring the vaccines. He also pointed out that the government's main contract for vaccine supply was made with a Thai company owned by the royal palace. The government and the company deny any wrongdoing. (AP)



Flags flutter in National Mall as events get underway for President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony, on Jan 20, in Washington. (AP)