

### GOP Congress Ready With Reality Check

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's not just the State of the Union speech that President Barack Obama is turning on its head. It's the whole notion of a lame-duck president. The president is barreling into the final two years of his presidency determined to hold his own and then some against resurgent Republicans. He's rejecting any notion that he should be cowed by the midterm election results that gave the GOP a resounding victory. And while Obama has spoken of the need to find common ground with Republicans, in the 11 weeks since the November elections he's dished out seven veto threats — two of them just before Tuesday's speech — and has shown little sign of moving closer to the Republicans on specific policy proposals. Breaking with tradition, the president dispensed with suspense and released the details of his State of the Union proposals well in advance of Tuesday night's speech to a joint session of Congress and millions of television viewers. With TV audiences for the annual speech shrinking, the White House decided to reinvent the State of the Union as weeks-long campaign rather than cede the spotlight for much of January to the Republicans. In excerpts of his speech released ahead of Tuesday's address, the president — whose party suffered a stinging defeat in the November elections — painted a rosy picture of this moment in time, speaking of "a growing economy, shrinking deficits, bustling industry and booming energy production." He enthused that "middle-class economics works. Expanding opportunity works. And these policies will continue to work, as long as politics don't get in the way."

### Japan Weighs Whether To Pay Ransom

CAIRO (AP) — The Islamic State group threatened to kill two Japanese hostages within 72 hours, demanding a \$200 million ransom in a video posted online Tuesday that showed a knife-brandishing masked militant standing over the two kneeling captives. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who was traveling in the Middle East, vowed to save the men. But with his military only operating in a self-defense capacity at home, Abe faces a hard choice: openly pay the extremists or ask an ally like the United States to attempt a risky rescue inside Syria.

Tuesday's video, released via militant websites associated with the Islamic State group, mirrored other hostage threats the extremists have made. In it, the captives, 47-year-old Kenji Goto and 42-year-old Haruna Yukawa, were shown in orange jumpsuits with a rocky hill in the background, a black-clad militant standing between them. The scene resembles others featuring five hostages previously beheaded by the Islamic State group, which controls a third of Iraq and Syria.

Speaking in English with a British accent, the militant demanded \$200 million for the men's release and appeared to link the ransom to a pledge Abe made Saturday of non-military aid to help the government of Iraq and to assist Syrian refugees who have fled the Islamic State's brutality. "To the prime minister of Japan ... you willingly have volunteered to take part in this crusade," said the masked man, who looked and sounded like the militant shown in other filmed beheadings.

### Jury Selection Starts In Shooting Case

CENTENNIAL, Colo. (AP) — The first time James Holmes appeared in court, he wore chains and a jail jumpsuit and looked dazed, with his hair dyed a comic-book shade of orange. As the first day of jury selection ended Tuesday in the Colorado theater shooting case, it was a far different Holmes at the defense table: The jail uniform was replaced by khaki slacks, a light-colored dress shirt and a blue blazer. His hair, now a dark brown, was neatly trimmed. The former graduate student, whose attorneys acknowledge opened fire at a midnight "Batman" movie back in 2012, also had a curly, medium-length beard and wore oval-shaped reddish glasses. No restraints were visible, though the judge had ordered him to be tethered to the floor in a way the public couldn't see for the trial. Holmes' more conventional appearance was an indication that the case was drawing closer to the time when a jury would see the defendant accused of killing 12 people and wounding 70 others at a suburban Denver theater. But first attorneys have to sort through thousands of potential jurors.

Court officials initially summoned a jury pool of 9,000 people, the largest in the nation's history. But that figure later fell to about 7,000 after some summons could not be delivered and some people were excused. The pool will be winnowed to a handful in the weeks ahead.

### Free-Speech Crackdown Linked To War

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A man is given 50 lashes in a public square for "insulting Islam" on a liberal blog. Another is arrested for filming and uploading a woman's public beheading. Two females are imprisoned and put on trial for writing on Twitter in support of women driving. These cases have thrust Saudi Arabia's record on human rights back into the spotlight, with international concern mounting over the limits of free speech in the Arab monarchy. Human rights activists and lawyers say the cases are part of a sweeping clampdown on dissent that has intensified in Saudi Arabia since the region's 2011 Arab Spring upheaval. They say acts that offend the country's religious hard-liners or open up the kingdom to criticism — like the video of the execution of a woman convicted of murdering her stepson — have landed people in jail as a warning to others. The case of Raif Badawi, a 31-year-old father of three who was flogged this month, has attracted the most attention in recent days, particularly in the aftermath of the deadly attack in Paris against a satirical weekly that caricatured the Prophet Muhammad. Badawi was arrested in 2012 after writing articles critical of Saudi Arabia's clerics on his Free Saudi Liberals blog, which has since been shut down. Hard-liners wanted him charged with apostasy, which carries the death sentence in Saudi Arabia, but he was instead found guilty of the lesser charge of insulting Islam.

### Lawmakers To Pursue Right-To-Die

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California lawmakers are pursuing right-to-die legislation after the highly publicized death of a young woman with brain cancer who moved to Oregon to legally end her life. The proposal would allow doctors to prescribe life-ending medication nearly a decade after similar legislation failed. Terminally ill patients can legally take their lives in five states, including Oregon. Advocates for aid in dying are ramping up their efforts across the U.S. using the story of Brittany Maynard, a 29-year-old San Francisco Bay Area woman who moved with family to Oregon and ended her life in November. She argued in online videos and national media appearances that she should have had the right to die in California. "Why should someone who willingly wants to avail themselves of this option have to go to another state? It just adds to the suffering and challenge at an already difficult time," Democratic state Sen. Bill Monning said Tuesday. Opponents say some patients may feel pressured to end their lives if doctors are allowed to prescribe fatal medication. Religious groups have condemned aid-in-dying legislation as against God's will.

# Shiite Rebels Take Over Palace, Shell Yemen President's Home

BY AHMED AL-HAJ AND MAGGIE MICHAEL  
Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen — Shiite rebels shelled the residence of Yemen's leader and swept into the nearby presidential palace Tuesday in what a top army commander said was an unfolding coup. President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi — an important U.S. ally in the fight against the highly lethal Yemeni branch of al-Qaida that claimed responsibility for the newspaper-office attack in Paris — was unharmed, authorities said. But his grip on power appeared increasingly precarious.

The Shiite rebels, known as Houthis, took over the capital Sanaa in September as part of a long power struggle with Hadi and effectively govern several other cities as well.

It was unclear whether they intend to seize power altogether or allow the internationally backed president to remain in office.

In a lengthy speech aired by the group's TV network, rebel leader Abdel-Malek al-Houthi said that "all options are open" and that the escalation "has no ceiling" if Hadi does not speed up implementation of a U.N.-brokered peace deal.

That deal would grant the



A Shiite Houthi fighter walks on the street during clashes with presidential guards near the presidential palace in Sanaa, Yemen.

Houthi greater power over a commission that has been assigned to draft a new constitution and outline a new federal system. Critics of the Houthis say they are using the U.N. deal as a pretext to seize more power.

In Washington, U.S. officials said the rebel violence is undermining American military and intelligence operations against the al-Qaida branch, which claimed to have carried out the attack on the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo earlier this month that left 12 people dead in

Paris. Washington has long viewed the Yemeni branch, known as Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, as the global terror network's most dangerous affiliate.

On Tuesday, after an emergency meeting, the U.N. Security Council called for a lasting cease-fire and condemned the violence. In a statement approved by all 15 members, the council asserted that Hadi "is the legitimate authority."

The Houthis appear determined to redraw a 2012

road map backed by Arab Gulf states and the West that compelled then-President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down following months of Arab Spring-inspired protests against his three-decade rule.

The Houthis' expansion into Sunni-dominated areas of the country threatens to inject sectarianism into what until now has been mainly a struggle for power. Al-Qaida, which is at war with the Houthis and Hadi's forces, stands to benefit.

## Cuban Official: Diplomatic Ties With US Won't Immediately Lead To Full Relationship

BY BRADLEY KLAPPER AND MICHAEL WEISSENSTEIN  
Associated Press

HAVANA — A senior Cuban official said Tuesday that restoring diplomatic ties with the United States won't immediately lead to a full relationship between the Cold War foes after a half-century of enmity.

The message appeared designed to lower expectations hours before the arrival of the highest-level U.S. delegation to Cuba in decades.

The Havana talks start Wednesday morning, after President Barack Obama makes his case in the State of the Union Address for seizing the opening with Cuba by ending the U.S. trade embargo of the island. Alan Gross, whose release from Cuba in a prisoner exchange last month cleared the way for

a new relationship, was to sit next to Michelle Obama.

The high-ranking Cuban diplomat said Tuesday: "Cuba isn't normalizing relations with the United States. Cuba is re-establishing diplomatic relations with the U.S. The process of normalization is much longer and deeper." Reporters were briefed on condition the official not be quoted by name.

The U.S. has taken "steps in the right direction but there's still far to go," the official noted. He expressed optimism about the long-term prospects for U.S.-Cuban relations as long as Washington does not try to change Cuba's single-party government and centrally planned economy — tenets of Cuba's system the U.S. has long opposed.

American officials have repeatedly said they hope their new path of engagement will

empower Cubans and soften the government's control over the country.

Republican leaders in the House and Senate are opposed to the rapid rebuilding of relations with President Raul Castro still firmly in control of Cuba. Other obstacles include billions of dollars in economic claims against Cuba's government, American fugitives living freely in Cuba and the opposition of many Cuban-Americans.

But the biggest potential challenge is Castro's government itself, which needs a rapid infusion of cash into its stagnant economy but fears Obama's new policy merely repackages the longstanding U.S. goal to push him from power.

Leading the U.S. delegation to Havana is Roberta Jacobson, the most senior American official to visit Cuba in 35 years.

The rosters on both sides include officials well-known to one another from years of cautious efforts to improve cooperation.

"We always have tough things to say to them but nevertheless this is a professional discussion," said John Caulfield, who headed the U.S. Interest Section in Havana until last year. "You don't have to break the ice. People understand each other."

Wednesday's conversations start with a continuation of efforts by both sides in recent years to promote what the State Department calls "safe, legal and orderly migration," covering everything from the security of charter flights that travel regularly between Miami and Havana to rooting out fraudulent passports and partnering on potential search and rescue missions.

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