



Monday, January 16, 2017

Geneticists produce laser-activated killer mice

Sunday, January 15, 2017

In research released on Thursday in *Cell*, scientists from Yale University report they managed to trigger instinctive hunting behaviour in mice using optogenetics, a manner of priming cells within an organism's brain to switch on when exposed to a laser.



These experiments were performed on laboratory mice.

Image: Ciotu Cosmin. (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The research team used an engineered virus to target and alter specific sets of neurons. Then they fitted the mice with intracranial optical fibres so they could expose their brains to blue light at will. The system excited two different sets of neurons, both located in the amygdala, which is the part of the brain associated with emotion and aggression. One set stimulated prey pursuit behaviour, such as stalking, and the other stimulated the animal to use its jaw and neck muscles. When exposed to the laser, the primed mice would first stalk and then pounce on and bite any object in their enclosure, even objects without any food scent or prey value, like sticks and bottle caps.

"We'd turn the laser on and they'd jump on an object, hold it with their paws and intensively bite it as if they were trying to capture and kill it," says lead investigator and Yale Associated Professor of Psychiatry Ivan de Araujo. The mice behaved normally at all other times.

The work was inspired by Araujo's desire to study natural feeding behaviour, as opposed to animals passively munching on food pellets. The study covered many parts of the brain already known to be associated with feeding, and the results suggested some areas are associated with both hunting and feeding and others only with just one behaviour. Stimulation of the periaqueductal gray (PAG) portion of the brain controlled stalking and stimulation of the reticular formation controlled biting. The researchers say this shows the amygdala is likely to control hunting and biting behaviour across many or all jawed vertebrates. The experiments were funded by national research organisations in the United States and China and the government of Brazil.

The findings inspired comparisons by the research team and the press to zombies from *The Walking Dead*, especially since the behaviour was more pronounced when the animals were hungry. Researchers noted the subjects did *not* attack any of the other mice. The scientists say this shows they were stimulating specifically predatory behaviour specifically and not making the animals generally more angry or aggressive.

However, the study did not state whether the laser resembled the light of a full moon.

This news article is available in [Português](#) language.

Man charged over motorway bridge collapse in Kent, England

Saturday, January 14, 2017

Reports yesterday indicated a 63-year-old man has been charged in connection

with the collapse of a pedestrian bridge onto the M20 motorway in Kent, England last year.



Overlooking the M20, from file.

Image: David Anstiss/Geography.org.uk (CC BY-SA 2.0)

The unidentified man has been summonsed to appear at Maidstone Magistrates' Court on February 17. As well as dangerous driving and causing serious injury by dangerous driving he also faces three counts of criminal damage covering the bridge and damaged vehicles. The nonfatal accident left an elderly motorcyclist with broken ribs after he came off his bike avoiding the 170 tonnes of falling debris.

Two lorries were partially crushed by the collapse, which was triggered when a digger on the back of a lorry struck the concrete bridge. Kent Police continue to investigate; Highways England have said they will await that probe's results before deciding if they will launch their own.

The August 27 collapse caused millions of pounds of damage, and closed a major route for more than 24 hours. Police sent several vehicles to the scene and 25 firefighters attended. An air ambulance also responded.

Workers with cranes toiled overnight to clear the road, which provides access to London as well as the Channel Tunnel and Port of Dover. The road was again closed one week later to collect the fallen bridge sections, which were sent to Highways England depots for investigators.

The collapse occurred on one of the busiest days of the year for the local road network.

Late-night vote sets Obamacare up for filibuster-free repeal

Saturday, January 14, 2017

At 1:30 a.m. on Thursday morning the United States Senate voted to include the repeal of the Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare, as part of a budget blueprint. This procedural measure allows most of Obamacare to be repealed by a simple majority rather than the usual requirement of 60 out of the senate's 100 votes and effectively prevents the use of filibuster.



The Capitol Building, home to the Senate.
Image: Scrumshus. (CC0 1.0/Public Domain)

"We're working with legislative leaders at this very moment to begin to craft legislation that will repeal the most corrosive elements of Obamacare — the individual mandate, the taxes, the penalties — but at the same time, moving separate legislation that will allow us to introduce the kind of reforms in American health care that'll lower the cost of health insurance without growing the size of government," said Vice President-elect Mike Pence.

Democratic Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington had a different view, going so far as to call this "stealing health care from Americans."

The filibuster is a last-ditch tactic in which parties opposed to a certain motion refuse to relinquish the floor until their opponents give in or compromise.

Although the 51-48 vote was mostly along party lines, some Republicans have expressed uncertainty about repealing Obamacare before a replacement system is worked out.

Although president-elect Donald Trump has called for a "repeal and replace" plan, saying that a new health care system would be enacted "almost simultaneously," many in government and the press have expressed doubts about whether this would actually happen.



Donald Trump (left) and Mike Pence together, from file.
Image: Gage Skidmore. (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Senator Susan Collins of Maine said she would like to at least see a well-constructed plan before voting and Senator Johnny Isakson of Georgia said repealing Obamacare without replacing it was "unacceptable." These concerns were shared by members of the House of Representatives. "We need to be voting for a replacement plan at the same time that we vote for repeal," added Representative Mark Meadows of North Carolina. Representative Tom MacArthur of New Jersey agreed, saying, "We're loading a gun here. I want to know where it's pointed before we start the process."

Anna Merlan of *Jezebel* and Anthony Taylor of the Associated Press dismiss Trump's timeline as "impossible" given the complicated nature of U.S. congressional workings. Senator Collins agreed, saying "I don't see any possibility of our being able to come up with a comprehensive reform bill that would replace Obamacare by the end of this month. I just don't see that as being feasible."

The Affordable Care Act, which is often cited as a key accomplishment of the Obama administration, has had a mixed reputation, and many conservatives believe a market-based health care system would be more flexible and efficient and less costly, and many believe that the Affordable Care Act only passed because of Obama's later discredited pledge that no one who liked their current health plan would have to switch. Matt O'Brien of *The Washington Post* claims a large tax cut that would result for the wealthiest 1% of citizens if

Obamacare funds were not converted to other purposes, estimated at about \$32,820 annually per person by the Tax Policy Center, is also a significant motive.

Republican Senators set a date of January 27 to repeal Obamacare, according to *NBC News*. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California says legislation repealing Obamacare and replacing it could be ready by late February. According to Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, as many as 30 million people could lose their health insurance if the ACA is repealed.

Fighter jet crashes during Children's Day airshow in Thailand

Saturday, January 14, 2017

A fighter jet crashed, killing the pilot, at Hat Yai International Airport, Songkhla, Thailand this morning during an annual Children's Day airshow.



Three Thai JAS 39C Gripens in flight, from file.
Image: Pia Ericson/Försvarets Materielverk (My News Desk). (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The JAS 39C Gripen crashed onto a runway at around 9:30 am local time (0230 UTC) and exploded, closing the airport to commercial flights. The pilot was identified as Squadron Leader Dilokrit Pattavee. Local media reports an airport fire vehicle rolled over while responding.

Children screamed in video footage of the crash. The Royal Thai Air Force asked that images of the accident not be shared, but this has not deterred the press. Air Force spokesperson Pongsak Semachai said an investigatory commission would be formed. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha offered his sympathies to Pattavee's relatives.

Thailand began purchasing the Swedish-built Gripen jets in 2008 and has twelve. None of its neighbours have similar aircraft, which cost the nation around 2.5 billion baht (US\$70 million) each.

This news article is available in [Català](#), [Español](#), [Français](#) and [Português](#) language.

Putin calls US troops in Poland 'a threat'

Friday, January 13, 2017

Reports yesterday indicated Russian President Vladimir Putin views the arrival of US troops in Poland as "a threat".



US troops and tanks in Poland in 2015, as part of an earlier deployment under Operation Atlantic Resolve. Image: Sgt. Christina Dion (US Army). (CC0 1.0/ Public Domain)

Earlier this week around a quarter of 4,000 troops earmarked for Poland crossed into Poland from Germany. Also included were trucks, tanks, and Humvees. Many are set to be based in Żagań, where Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło and Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz are scheduled to ceremonially welcome them tomorrow.

Part of Operation Atlantic Resolve, the deployment is set to include Abrams tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, and Paladin artillery. It is the largest deployment of US troops to Europe since the Cold War ended. The presence of US assets "threatens our interests and our security," according to Putin. "It's a third country that is building up its military presence on our borders in Europe," he told the BBC. "It isn't even a European country."

Outgoing US President Barack Obama authorised the move in response to Russian intervention in Ukraine in 2014, in which Crimea was annexed. It was agreed at a NATO summit in Warsaw last year. Tomasz Szatkowski, Polish Undersecretary of State for Defence, noted "large exercises" by Russia near

the Polish border as another reason the troops were needed.

Szatkowski also mentioned Russian action in Ukraine, which he called "aggressive actions in our vicinity". Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Mechkov, however, said the incoming troops and vehicles were a "factor destabilising European security". Russian Presidential spokesperson Dmitry Peskov echoed Putin, saying the troops are "a threat. These actions threaten our interests, our security. Especially as it concerns a third party building up its military presence near our borders. It's [the US], not even a European state."

Ties between Russia and the US are strained. Last month the US expelled 35 Russian diplomats accused of espionage, and sanctioned Russian intelligence agencies. This was in response to a CIA report issued two weeks earlier that concluded the Russian government hacked servers belonging to the U.S. Republican and Democratic parties. The CIA report said this was to turn the 2016 presidential election toward president-elect Donald Trump.

Since Szydło took office in 2015, Poland has also suffered a decline in relations with Russia. Within a week of the Law and Justice Party coming to power in Poland, it removed web pages featuring the results of an investigation into the Smolensk air disaster in Russia in 2010. The cause of the crash, which killed dignitaries including Polish President Lech Kaczyński, is disputed.

A Polish probe concluded the Polish pilots put safety second in their determination to get their passengers through dense fog. It also placed blame on Russian controllers for failing to divert the aircraft. Russian investigators blamed the pilots alone. The flight was carrying high-profile political figures to attend a ceremony commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Katyn massacre, when thousands of Polish prisoners of war and civilians were killed by the Soviets.

Russia has refused to return wreckage, encouraging conspiracy theories about the crash. In 2015 Szydło said in response to the vanishing investigatory findings "the website has been closed and will simply remain closed."

In recent months tension has mounted further as Russia deployed missiles to Kaliningrad. The enclave, Russian territory lying between Poland and Lithuania, now has nuclear-capable Iskanders and anti-ship Bastion equipment. NATO considered these deployments a response to its own.

The US troops are set to rotate around the Balkans every nine months. Other planned host nations are Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. The rotation is due to a treaty with Russia preventing permanent deployment to any particular territory.

Russia-US relations face a potential thaw, as President-Elect Donald Trump moves towards office on January 20. Trump has made clear he intends to seek a closer relationship with Russia. Rex Tillerson, proposed Secretary of State for the Trump administration, implied the troops would be staying put. He said Russia had claimed Crimea "as an act of force" requiring the US to offer "a proportional show of force".

Trump's proposed Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, backed NATO before the US Senate yesterday. He said Putin aimed to weaken the NATO alliance. Witold Waszczykowski, Polish foreign minister, earlier this week remarked any improvement in US-Russia relations should avoid harming Polish interests.

Obama surprises 'brother' Joe Biden with Presidential Medal of Freedom

Friday, January 13, 2017

Yesterday afternoon United States President Barack Obama surprised his two-term vice president Joe Biden in the White House State Dining Room with the country's highest civilian honour, the Presidential Medal of Freedom with distinction.

In a ceremony described by the press as highly emotional, Obama cited his choice of Biden as a running mate as one of the best of his career and described their few arguments as the sort that

brothers would have and Biden himself as "a lion of American history."



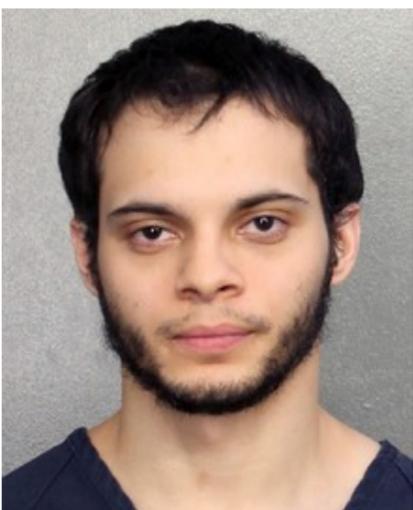
The Obamas and Bidens, pictured together from file, have enjoyed an unusually close and warm relationship.
Image: Daniel Schwen. (CC BY-SA 4.0)

This made only the fourth time in U.S. history that this modified form, the Medal of Freedom with distinction, has been awarded. Biden joined Pope John Paul II, then-former President Ronald Reagan, and former General and Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Early during the ceremony, Obama noted comically "this also gives the Internet one last chance to talk about our 'bromance.'" The hashtag "#BROTUS," a play on the acronym for President of the United States (POTUS), was a common sight on Twitter in 2016.

Fort Lauderdale Airport shooting suspect appears in court

Thursday, January 12, 2017



Esteban Santiago mug shot, January 7, 2017.
Image: Broward County Sheriff's Office, Florida. (CC0 1.0/Public Domain)

Esteban Ruiz Santiago, 26, appeared in federal court in Fort Lauderdale, Broward County, Florida this Monday. Santiago stands accused of a shooting at Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood

International Airport on Friday at 12:55 p.m. local time (1755 UTC) at the lower level baggage claim area in Terminal 2 of the airport. The incident killed five people and injured six, with roughly another 40 people injured in the crowd while hastily evacuating from the scene.

Police drove Santiago from the Broward County main jail to the court building in the morning. At the hearing, Santiago attended handcuffed and also cuffed at the ankles, guarded by at least eight police officers. The Magistrate, Judge Alicia Valle, questioned Santiago on his finances. The prosecutor also sought a detention order for public safety and flight risk. The hearing took about 20 minutes. The Judge ordered Santiago a public defender, and set a detention hearing for January 17, and the arraignment hearing for January 23. After the hearing, the police returned Santiago to the Broward County main jail.

At the hearing, Santiago had admitted to earning US\$2,100 a month as a security guard in Alaska, while only having about US\$10 of savings in a bank, and no other property. The Judge also informed Santiago of the penalties that may be imposed on him in the case he was convicted.

On Friday, authorities said, Santiago arrived from Anchorage, Alaska with only one baggage item — a suitcase with an unloaded Glock 9 mm semi-automatic handgun. Upon arriving at the airport, he picked up the suitcase at the baggage claim carousel and loaded it in a nearby bathroom. Then he walked out and started shooting people, at random according to a witness. People started to run and hide, and Santiago continued to shoot. Then Santiago stopped shooting, witnesses claiming he ran out of ammunition. The police arrested him. He did not resist the arrest.

According to officials, Santiago received a mental health evaluation in November, after he travelled to an FBI office and walked in alleging his head was controlled by the government and he heard voices urging him to watch ISIS propaganda. At the time of that incident he left his infant son and a gun in a car, and the infant was given to mother's care. His gun was seized at the time of that incident, but Santiago was given it back on December 8.

Santiago travelled from Anchorage, Alaska to Minneapolis to Fort Lauderdale Airport on a Delta Airlines flight. Investigations were ongoing to determine the motivation for the incident. No evidence was found of Santiago communicating with any other individual in relation to the incident; he seemed to be acting alone. In an interview, Santiago admitted to having planned the shooting in advance when purchasing the airline ticket. According to CNN, Esteban Santiago previously belonged to the Alaska Army National Guard, including a ten-month stint in Iraq where he was given a combat action badge. According to Santiago's family, his mental health issues started after his ten-month tour in Iraq, after which he began to tell them about auditory hallucinations.

All flights to and from Fort Lauderdale Airport were suspended by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) until Saturday morning, and roads in and out of the airport closed.

Santiago was born in New Jersey. He spent his childhood in Puerto Rico, an unincorporated US territory in the northeastern Caribbean Sea.

At the time of the incident, it was legal in the US to transport guns in a hard-sided and locked container by air. In Florida, it was also legal to carry a gun in an airport terminal without removing the gun from its case.

This article is available in [Português](#) language.

U.S. President Obama's farewell address focuses on accomplishment

Thursday, January 12, 2017

United States President Barack Obama gave his official farewell address on Tuesday night from McCormick Place in Chicago, reflecting on personal and national accomplishments. This is expected to be his last major speech before officially handing the reins to president-elect Donald Trump on January 20.

Obama's speech was wide-ranging. He thanked his family and the nation, spoke of the need for unity, noted the country's accomplishments and need for improvement in areas like education and civil rights, and spoke about the need for pride in U.S. accomplishments, citing milestones of U.S. history and of his presidency specifically. "It's why GIs gave their lives at Omaha Beach and Iwo Jima; Iraq and Afghanistan – and why men and women from Selma to Stonewall were prepared to give theirs as well."



President Barack Obama in 2010.
Image: John Kees. (CC BY-SA 3.0)

The president also addressed his country's troubled history with race and racism, an issue many black citizens feel he has avoided. Despite this, Chauncy Devega of *Salon* described the president as "a role model of calm, cool reflective black masculinity: a man utterly at home in his own skin." Obama described the concept of a post-racial U.S. "unrealistic" and particularly cited the need for reform in education and the criminal justice system and greater acceptance of scientific evidence, particularly evidence supporting action to counteract climate change.

However, publications including *The Washington Post* and *Salon* have given particular focus to another aspect of the president's address: the country's increasing political tensions and controversies involving access to news and information, both accurate and inaccurate. "We become so secure and our bubbles," said Obama, "that we start accepting only information, whether it's true or not, that fits our opinions instead of basing our opinions on the evidence that is out there," calling this trend "a third threat to our democracy."

The *Washington Post* characterized Obama's comment, "If every economic

issue is framed as a struggle between a hard-working white middle class and an undeserving minority, then workers of all shades will be left fighting for scraps while the wealthy withdraw further into their private enclaves," as a "not-so-subtle jab" at the campaign tactics of President-elect Donald Trump. *The Telegraph* describes Obama's warnings about the need to protect democracy as "a thinly veiled slight to the divisive rhetoric of Donald Trump's election campaign, which included attacks on Muslims, the disabled, women and immigrants." The president went on to call on the public to "reject the first dawning of every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest or to enfeeble the sacred ties that make us one America. We weaken those ties when we allow our political dialogue to become so corrosive [...] We weaken those ties when we define some of us as more American than others when we write off the whole system as inevitably corrupt and when we sit back and blame the leaders we elect without examining our own role in electing them. It falls to each of us to be those anxious, jealous guardians of our democracy."

Despite this, when the mention of Donald Trump brought boos from the crowd, Obama reiterated the importance of the long history of peaceful transfers of power from one president to the next: "No no no no no. [...] I committed to President-elect Trump that my administration would ensure the smoothest possible transition, just as President Bush did for me." However, this was not unaccompanied by a call to action. Near the end of the speech, he insisted citizens dissatisfied with elected officials should "lace up your shoes, grab a clipboard, get some signatures and run for office yourself."

Overall, the departing president's speech focused on accomplishment, echoing the "Yes we can" slogan from his 2008 campaign: "If I have told you eight years ago, that America would reverse a great recession, reboot our auto industry, and unleash the longest stretch of job creation in our history. If I had told you, that we would open up a new chapter with the Cuban people, shut down Iran's nuclear weapons program without firing a shot, take out the mastermind of 9/11[...] If I had told you that we would win a marriage equality and secure the right to health insurance

for another twenty million of our fellow citizens. If I had told you all that, you might have said our sights were set a little too high. But that's what we did."

But when the crowd began shouting "Four more years! Four more years!" Obama, with a small laugh, answered, "I can't do that."

Artist who changed Hollywood sign to 'Hollyweed' surrenders to authorities

Thursday, January 12, 2017

On Monday, the person responsible for changing the Hollywood sign in California to read "Hollyweed" as a new year's prank turned himself in to local authorities. 30-year-old artist Zachary Cole Fernandez surrendered himself, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) said.



The Hollywood sign as it normally appears.
Image: Oreos. (CC BY-SA 2.5)

According to LAPD, Fernandez went to the police station accompanied by his lawyer, where he confessed to have changed the sign and was bailed out shortly thereafter for US\$1000. LAPD charged Fernandez with trespassing; earlier reports indicated vandalism charges were ruled out as he used black and white tarps to alter the letter "O" to read lowercase "e". The sign was not physically damaged.

A court hearing is scheduled for February 15. Fernandez said this act was an art project, and claimed he faces up to six months in prison if convicted. It took Fernandez two hours to alter the sign. Regarding conviction, he said, "I'm a person of integrity. If I do something wrong, I will own up to it."

Exactly 41 years ago, on the same date in 1976, then-university student Daniel

Finegood modified the sign to read "Hollyweed" for an art class assignment. Finegood returned to change the sign again in 1990, spelling out "Oil War" to protest against the First Persian Gulf War. Fernandez, on Tuesday, said his act was to "bring light and positivity and happiness". He said he was inspired by Finegood's modification to the sign.

City Councilman David Ryu said in a statement. "Pranks of this nature deplete the resources of our valuable public safety personnel".

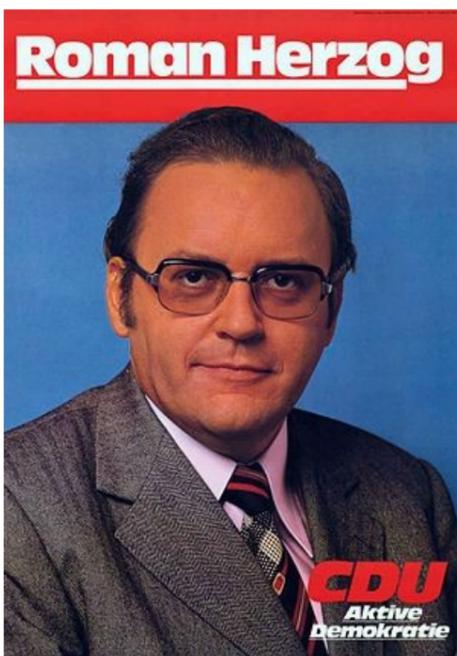
The term "weed" is an English slang term for cannabis, a banned drug in many countries. On November 9, a ballot for legalising recreational use of cannabis in California for the age group of 21 and above was passed. The law legalising recreational cannabis is due to come into effect in 2018.

This article is available in [Español](#) and [Português](#) language.

Roman Herzog, former German president, dies aged 82

Wednesday, January 11, 2017

Roman Herzog, seventh president of Germany, who was in the office from 1994 to 1999, died yesterday in Bad Mergentheim, current president Joachim Gauck confirmed. He was 82.



Herzog on a 1975 Rhineland-Palatinate state election poster.

Image: Christian Democrats. (CC BY-SA 3.0 DE)

Born on April 5, 1934 in Landshut, Bavaria, Herzog studied law at Munich University. His father worked in a snuff factory. Herzog joined the Christian Democrats (CDU) in 1970.

Herzog was appointed as Bonn's regional chief representative in 1973 by Rhineland-Palatinate's governor. He served as a judge in the Federal Constitutional Court from 1983 to 1987. He was promoted as the Chief Justice of the federal court in 1987, serving until 1994.

Four years after Germany's re-unification, Herzog was elected as the president of the country in 1994 though he was the second choice candidate of CDU. After the election, Herzog said, "I will try my best to lead this administration in such a way that you will regret not having given me your vote".

Herzog acknowledged Germany's reformation was slow. Germany faced economic crises in the 1990s. The president said, "Pessimism has become a normal mindset in our country. Those who want to delay or prevent major reforms need to be aware that our nation will pay a high price for this."

In 1994, Herzog visited Poland on the 50th anniversary of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. On August 1, 1994, he sought forgiveness from the Polish people in Warsaw, saying, "I ask for your forgiveness for all that was done to you by Germany". Herzog declared January 27 to be observed as the annual day of remembrance of the victims of the Nazi holocaust. On January 27, 1945, the death camp at Austwitz was liberated.

Herzog is credited with the improvement of Germany after the economic crises and the reformation. In one mid-90s speech he said "Germany needs a jolt to push through it" ["Durch Deutschland muss ein Ruck gehen"] as Germany's economy was at a standstill.

Herzog was succeeded by Johannes Rau in 1999. Upon retirement, Herzog said, "I'm merely retiring from office and not retiring from life". In 2015, he attended the funeral of Richard von Weizsäcker, who served as the president of Germany before Herzog succeeded him. Herzog is survived by his second wife.

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