

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, March 10, 2023 ~ Vol. 31 - No. 245 ~ 1 of 81

## Groton Area 2 Hours Late

Due to the road conditions, the Groton Area School District will be opening two hours late on Friday, March 10, 2023.

OST will be opening at 7:00 AM.

Buses will run where possible. Thank you to all of the parents who've taken the care to notify their bus drivers when roads are impassable. Your help has been appreciated!

The band bus to Watertown will load at 9:00 AM. We will re-evaluate this in the morning and post any changes as road conditions and forecast warrant.

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"IT'S A FUNNY THING ABOUT LIFE, ONCE YOU BEGIN TO TAKE NOTE OF THE THINGS YOU ARE GRATEFUL FOR, YOU BEGIN TO LOSE SIGHT OF THE THINGS THAT YOU LACK."

GERMANY KENT



**No Aberdeen American News to be delivered today.  
Roads too bad in the Sioux Falls area.**

## Groton Community Calendar Friday, March 10

Senior Menu: Potato soup, chicken salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, cinnamon apple sauce.

School Breakfast: Biscuits and Jelly.

School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.

Girls Basketball State Tournament in Watertown (GHS Pep Band plays in the afternoon)

## Saturday, March 11

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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

Girls Basketball State Tournament in Watertown

## **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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## The Life of Eddy Nehls

Edwin "Eddy" Walter Nehls 88 of Groton passed away peacefully March 8, 2023, surrounded by his family. Mass of a Christian Burial will be 11:00 am, Friday, March 17, 2023, at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Groton with Father Gregory Tschakert officiating. The burial will be at Groton Union Cemetery at a later date.

Visitation will be from 4-7 pm at Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel on Thursday, March 16, 2023 with the family being present 5-7pm. A prayer service with memory sharing will be at 7pm.

Eddy was born February 27, 1935 to Henry "Hank" & Mary Dwyer Nehls in Groton, SD. Eddy grew up and attended school in Groton. He graduated from Groton High School in 1953.

He met the love of his life, Virginia Fulker and they were married on September 18, 1955. Eddy was a loving husband of 67 years, a father to 5 children, a grandfather to 17 grandchildren, and a great-grandfather to 32 great-grandchildren.

He spent his life living in Groton. Eddy was actively involved in the community by wearing many hats. He served as Groton City Councilman for 8 years and was elected as Groton Mayor from 1973-1979. Eddy served as Groton Police Chief from 1981-1995 and continued acting as police officer for 2 more years after that. After retiring from the police department, he and Virginia stepped in the role of cemetery caretakers, along with being in charge of the ice skating warming house. The two continued to care for the Groton City Park from 1997-2014. Eddy also volunteered with the Groton Fire Department for 38 years with many of those years as Fire Chief. He was also an active member of the Groton Rescue Squad throughout his years.

Eddy enjoyed many hobbies and activities throughout his lifetime. He was an avid snowmobile and stock car racer spending many weekends with friends and family traveling to numerous races. Eddy enjoyed hunting and fishing and always had many stories to tell about these adventures. He loved being busy from owning and operating the Eddy's Sinclair, the Groton Farm Store, Eddy's Towing Service, S&N Sanitation, and repairing lawnmowers and numerous bicycles for people the community. Eddy was also involved in many more ventures too numerous to mention.

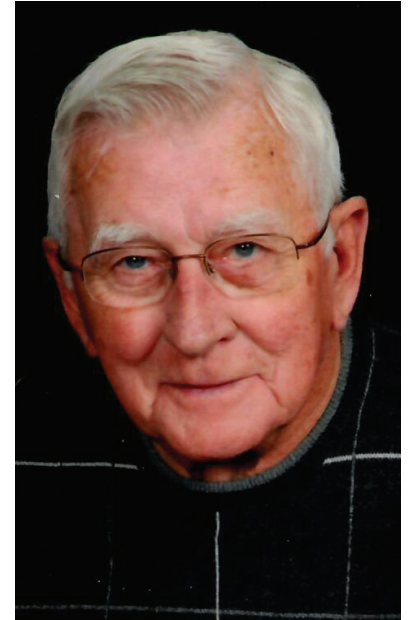
His greatest times though were spent with his family especially during the holidays. Eddy loved gathering with his family and his grandchildren were his pride and joy. He loved attending all their events and watching and cheering them on. He was the best storyteller sharing many stories of his life experiences with all his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Eddy always ended all his stories with "We had a BigTime"

Grateful for having shared Eddy's life are his wife, Virginia, and his children, Vicki (Bob) Walter, Mike (JoAnn) Nehls, Debbie (Chris) Gross, Carla (Justin) Schopp, and Kevin (Shana) Nehls along with 17 grandchildren, and 32 great-grandchildren.

Eddy was preceded in death by his parents Henry & Mary Nehls, his special aunt Pauline "Helen" Meyer, his son-in-law Glenn Sperry, and granddaughter Becky Diegel.

Honorary casketbearers will be his grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Casketbearers will be his grandsons, Ryan Sperry, T.J Sperry, Jordan Nehls, Tyler Sperry, Austin Gross, Lane Schopp, Garret Schroeder, Evin Nehls and Ben Woodward.



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## The Bulletin

by Newsweek

JANUARY 24, 2023

### World in Brief

on track to remain in power for the rest of his life.

- Actor Robert Blake, known for his role in the 1970s TV detective series Baretta and who was acquitted in the death of his wife, Bonny Lee Bakley, has died at the age of 89.
- The Mexican cartel responsible for the deadly kidnapping of four U.S. citizens last week has issued an apology letter for its role in the incident and has reportedly handed five of its members over to authorities. Read more about Mexico below.
- In the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Ukrainian military claimed that its troops had halted 102 attacks on the besieged city of Bakhmut in the past 24 hours and continue to thwart Russian efforts to take the city.

- Police are attempting to establish the motive behind a shooting at a Jehovah's Witnesses hall in the German city of Hamburg which left eight people dead on Thursday night.

- Joe Biden wants to restore the Child Tax Credit to its full 2021 amount, expanding the credit to \$3,000 per child, according to his budget unveiled yesterday.

- Alex Murdaugh is appealing his conviction in the killings of his wife and son, after he was sentenced to life in prison last week.

- The Communist Party of China has confirmed Xi Jinping's unprecedented third term as president, putting him

### Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #18 Results

**Team Standings:** Shihtzus – 11, Chipmunks – 10, Coyotes – 8, Cheetahs – 7, Foxes – 7, Jackelopes – 5

**Men's High Games:** Roger Spanier – 254, 253, Tony Waage – 236, Brad Waage – 179

**Women's High Games:** Nancy Radke – 186, Sam Bahr – 176, Darci Spanier – 172

**Men's High Series:** Roger Spanier – 635, Tony Waage – 528, Brad Waage – 518

**Women's High Series:** Nancy Radke – 462, Darci Spanier – 449, Sam Bahr – 446



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**Happily stuffing Easter Eggs are the Groton Area High School Lions Scholarship candidates, the Groton Girl Scout Troop, and Groton Lions members. The Groton Lions Easter Egg Hunt is scheduled for April 1st.** (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



**Girl Scouts Emery Blackwood and Rosalyn Block along with Lion and Mayor Scott Hanlon helping to stuff Easter Eggs Thursday evening.** (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



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## Gov. Noem Signs Bills into Law

PIERRE, S.D. – Thursday, Governor Noem signed the following 8 bills into law:

SB 8 revises provisions relating to addiction and prevention services professionals;

SB 18 revises the appropriation for the Dakota Events Complex (DEX) at the South Dakota State Fair;

SB 33 amends an appropriation for the revised construction costs of the Mineral Industries Building at the School of Mines and Technology;

SB 42 modifies power of attorney requirements for certain vehicle transfer authorizations;

SB 103 creates a pilot program in the Unified Judicial System for risk and lethality assessments for certain persons accused of assault or protection order violations;

SB 115 revises certain provisions regarding consideration of out-of-state convictions for driving under the influence;

SB 176 modifies certain requirements for removal from the sex offender registry; and,

HB 1196 makes an appropriation for improving the buildings and ground of the capitol complex.

Governor Noem has signed 126 bills into law and vetoed 3 this legislative session.

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## PUT WINTER IN ITS PLACE



### 3X 30" HD

Gear up for the worst of winter weather with the 3X 30" HD powered by a 420cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- LED light bar on auger housing plus dual LED in-dash headlights
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum gear box backed by 5-year limited warranty\*\*

MSRP  
**\$1,999\***



### 3X 26" TRAC

Clear it all with the strength of the 3X 26" Trac featuring a powerful 357cc Cub Cadet OHV engine.

- Track Drive ideal for slopes, inclines and gravel driveways
- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel auger housing and side plates
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- OVH crank chute control w/ high-arc steel chute
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- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty\*\*

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**\$2,099\***



### 2X 30" MAX

Tak on winter with the commercial-grade durability of the 357cc Cub Cadet 2X 30" MAX snow blower

- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- 14" augers and impeller
- Sealed ball bearings on auger and wheel shafts
- LED light bar on auger housing
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- 16"x6.5" X-Trac tires
- High-arc steel chute
- Heavy-duty cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty

MSRP  
**\$1,899\***

\* Indicates step-up feature

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\*\* See owner's manual for warranty details and information. Certain restrictions apply.

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## GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

### School Board Meeting

March 13, 2023 – 7:00 PM – GHS Library Conference Room

#### AGENDA:

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

#### POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

#### CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of February 13, 2023 school board meeting.
2. Approval of February 2023 District bills for payment.
3. Approval of February 2023 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.
4. Approval of February 2023 School Lunch Report.
5. Approval of February 2023 School Transportation Report.

#### OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Consider amendments to 2022-2023 school calendar regarding make-up snow days.
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

#### NEW BUSINESS:

1. Approve resignation from Jordan Kjellsen, MS Mathematics Teacher/JH Track Coach, at the end of the 2022-23 school year.
2. Approve resignation from Amanda Tarpein, Food Service Staff, effective immediately.
3. Executive session pursuant SDCL 1-25-2(1) personnel and SDCL 1-25-2(4) negotiations.

#### ADJOURN





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Lawmakers approve temporary sales tax cut worth an estimated \$104 million in first year

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 9, 2023 4:54 PM

PIERRE — With just hours left in the last regular day of business in the 2023 legislative session, lawmakers compromised to approve what some described as the largest tax cut in South Dakota history.

The plan would reduce the state sales tax from 4.5% to 4.2% for four years, saving taxpayers and costing the state budget an estimated \$104 million in the first year of implementation. The impact to consumers works out to a savings of 30 cents for every \$100 of taxable purchases.

Legislators also planned to adopted increased funding for the “Big Three” – education, state employees and community service providers, such as nursing homes – in the state budget later Thursday evening.

The House voted unanimously to approve the tax cut, and the Senate voted 31-2. The lone “no” votes were from Sens. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, and Shawn Bordeaux, D-Mission.

House Majority Leader Will Mortenson, R-Pierre, said the Legislature is taking care of the “Big Four” this year, with taxpayers as the fourth obligation.

“We are prepared for the notion that we need to take care of our obligations when we can, which is what we’re doing, and be prepared for rougher seas if they come our way,” Mortenson said during the Republican leadership press conference Thursday morning.

Legislators won’t return to Pierre until Veto Day on March 27. Gov. Kristi Noem previously threatened – without using the word “veto” – to withhold her support for the budget if lawmakers didn’t pass her proposal to eliminate the state sales tax on groceries. But she said nothing publicly for the past several days as legislators worked out a deal on tax relief, and her office said she had no immediate comment to offer Thursday.

#### ‘Largest tax cut in state history’

It was Noem’s reelection campaign promise to repeal the state sales tax on groceries that kick-started tax cut debates in September. That announcement by Noem, a Republican, surprised many politicians in both major parties. Democrats had been advocating a grocery-tax repeal for years, while many Republicans opposed it.

Since convening in January, the Legislature has whittled down several tax relief proposals, including the rejections of Noem’s proposal and a property tax rebate program.

The two chambers clashed over their expectations for the state’s fiscal future and whether to enact a sunset clause or a permanent state sales tax reduction. While Senate leaders pushed for a two-year sunset – about the same time the country will enter into a mild recession, some financial experts predict – House leaders were adamant the tax cut needed to be permanent.

But the two chambers agreed to a \$104 million cut with a four-year sunset clause on Thursday. Although it would apparently be the largest single tax cut in state history in terms of raw dollars, other historical tax cuts – including a 1978 repeal of personal property taxes, and a mid-1990s push to reduce real-estate property taxes – are larger if adjusted for inflation or considered over multiple years of implementation.

Senate Majority Leader Casey Crabtree, R-Madison, was a member of the conference committee that struck the tax-cut deal. He said both the House and Senate had to compromise to achieve a tax cut – and now Noem faces a similar situation as she decides whether to veto the bill.

“We are very satisfied with where we’re at,” Crabtree said. “And it’s certainly within the governor’s right

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to do that. But as you know, the process also allows for the Legislature to override that veto with a two-thirds vote. So we'll have a chance to play in that should we end up in that direction."

Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, was also a member of the conference committee and the original architect of the \$104 million tax cut bill.

He'd previously said implementing a sunset clause wasn't "good policy." But a sunset clause was necessary to get the Senate on board.

"I thought it creates way too much market disruption out there, especially in our business climates to have a two-year sunset. But a four-year sunset, I think we can work with that," Karr said.

He added that he hopes to continue looking at the tax cut and revisiting the sunset clause in future sessions. He said cautiously conservative lawmakers might come to agree with him that South Dakota's economy can handle a \$104 million tax cut and fulfill its state obligations.

Meanwhile, petitions are circulating to put a food-tax repeal on the ballot in 2024. Sen. Nesiba, another member of the conference committee on the tax bill, referenced the petition drive in a floor speech against the bill. He said there are only two other states – Mississippi and Alabama – with a full sales tax on food.

"It's wrong for us to be taxing formula out of baby bottles, and baby food off high chairs, and bread and beef off people's tables," Nesiba said. "If we pass this, I think it makes it really hard for us to repeal the sales tax on food."

## Substantial increases for Big Three

Karr also proposed bills to increase spending in the state, especially in regards to the Big Three.

In its budget decision on Thursday, the Legislature planned to approve increases of 7% for education and state employees, and an increase to a 100% cost reimbursement rate for community support providers that rely on government funding, such as nursing homes. Other Medicaid providers, such as hospitals, are set to receive a 5% increase.

Those increases are higher than the 5% increase for the Big Three and the increase for community service providers to 90% reimbursement that Noem proposed in her December budget address.

Such an increase will be the highest for education funding since the half-percentage-point increase in the state sales tax rate in 2016, Mortenson said, which was meant to support better teacher pay in the state. South Dakota remains 50th in the nation for average teacher pay.

"Education is our strongest tool for upward mobility of citizens or kids," Mortenson said. "We think it's important that we continue to make funding our teachers and schools a priority."

An increase in funding for state employees will ensure higher wages to stay competitive with other states and the private sector in attracting and retaining employees, said Senate Assistant Majority Leader Michael Diedrich, R-Rapid City.

## Help for health care providers

The increased Medicaid provider funding would be a welcome relief for community service providers across the state.

Mark Deak, executive director of the South Dakota Health Care Association, told legislators in the House Committee on Appropriations earlier in the session that 15 South Dakota nursing homes closed in the last five years, with seven closures in the past 12 months.

Deak explained to South Dakota Searchlight earlier this year that a reimbursement rate of 100% still wouldn't fully cover the costs of providers, because service costs aren't updated frequently enough to address inflation and other factors.

"I think the situation merits getting closer to 100% of methodology, because then you get closer to 92% or 93% of coverage," Deak said at the time. "Then I think folks would have a better shot of making a go of it."

Karr introduced a bill this session that would have required a yearly updated cost report for community service providers, and a bill that would have required lawmakers to reimburse community service providers at 100% every year.

Both were rejected by the Senate, but lawmakers have agreed to sign a letter of intent with the state



Department of Social Services and the Governor's Bureau of Finance and Management to annually update information to determine reimbursement rates for providers.

Karr said he'll work to prevent future legislators from reducing reimbursement rates below 100% "I'll be here every year, saying that is not an option," Karr said. "That is a service somebody provided on the state's behalf. They did that service, they gave us a bill, we need to pay that bill in full. That's going to be my stand going forward, and I hope other legislators remember that it's an obligation."

Mortenson emphasized that the Legislature used "conservative budgeting" during its decision-making process.

"Do we want tax cuts? Yes," Mortenson said. "It also means that if there're hard times coming, we need to be prepared for those, and I think this budget strikes that balance."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.*

## COMMENTARY

# 'Biggest tax cut ever'? Depends on how you slice it — and on Noem's reaction

SETH TUPPER - MARCH 9, 2023 4:53 PM

Some legislators are describing the \$104 million sales tax reduction they adopted Thursday as the "biggest tax cut in state history." But is that true?

The answer is complex. It might be more accurate to call the current proposal the state's largest single tax cut in raw, unadjusted dollars.

The qualifiers are necessary because of some big historical tax cuts that rival or surpass the current one.

In 1978, the state repealed its personal property tax on items such as household goods, appliances, sporting goods, farm machinery and livestock. Veteran journalist and columnist Terry Woster has said the personal property tax was known as the "liar's tax," because it relied on self-reporting. Selective amnesia was apparently widespread.

At the time, annual revenue from that tax totaled about \$40 million. Adjusted for inflation, that's equivalent to about \$180 million today, making it technically a bigger tax cut than the one legislators just passed. But lawmakers in the late 1970s also adopted other tax and fee increases to make up for the lost revenue.

In the mid-1990s, then-Gov. Bill Janklow and lawmakers passed legislation to drive real-estate property taxes down. Those efforts resulted in \$80 million of property tax savings initially, plus \$40 million more in further years as the effort continued. At a total of \$120 million, it was a bigger cut than the current one, although spread over multiple years. And there was some shifting around of the tax-and-fee burden to make up for some of the lost revenue.

There's another historical tax cut that wasn't as big as the ones mentioned above. That was South Dakota's short-lived income tax, which was bringing in about \$1 million annually when the Legislature repealed it in 1943. That's about \$17 million in modern, inflation-adjusted money.

All of those historical tax cuts continue to save South Dakotans money every year compared to the higher taxes they would otherwise pay, making it difficult for a new tax reduction to ever catch up in cumulative terms. The bill legislators passed Thursday is further hindered in that regard by a four-year sunset clause, which means it could ultimately save taxpayers about a half-billion dollars and then nothing more if it's allowed to expire. Lawmakers have not proposed raising other taxes or fees to make up for the lost sales tax revenue — not yet, anyway.

And there's one final, important consideration when determining which tax cut is biggest: The one legislators adopted Thursday hasn't actually been signed into law yet by Gov. Kristi Noem. She hasn't used the word "veto" in her public comments so far, but she's been clear about her displeasure that legislators pursued a general sales tax reduction instead of her targeted repeal of state sales taxes on food, which

would have saved taxpayers roughly the same amount of money overall.

Noem has said multiple times that her proposal would have been the biggest tax cut in state history. Legislators stand on the cusp of swiping away that achievement.

The only question now is whether Noem is willing to shift from being the governor who proposed the state's supposedly biggest-ever tax cut to the one who vetoed it.

*Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.*

## House and Senate deadlocked on tax relief deal with time running out

**Senator predicts 'high potential that there is no tax cut'**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 8, 2023 7:27 PM**

PIERRE — Lawmakers have just one regular day of business left in the 2023 legislative session to pass a tax cut for South Dakotans – and they still haven't reached a deal.

Five options to reduce the state sales tax remain in the mix among leaders in the Senate and House of Representatives, ranging from a \$70 million cut to \$140 million. Also undetermined is whether the tax cut will be permanent or temporary.

This comes after weeks of whittling down tax relief proposals, including the rejections of a Gov. Kristi Noem-backed grocery tax repeal and a property tax rebate program. It was Noem's promise to repeal the state sales tax on groceries that kick-started tax cut debates in September.

After reconvening at 5 p.m. Wednesday following hours of public and private talks, legislators agreed to postpone further work until 8 a.m. Thursday, the last regular day of the legislative session until lawmakers return March 27 to consider vetoed bills.

A budget cannot be adopted until legislators resolve their tax cut negotiations. And Noem has threatened – without using the word "veto" – to withhold her support for the budget if lawmakers don't pass her proposal to eliminate the sales tax on groceries.

House leaders so far have held out for a permanent, across-the-board state sales tax reduction from 4.5% to 4.2%, worth about \$104 million.

But senators proposed four other options, three of them within hours of each other, in hopes of convincing the House to agree to some sort of temporary tax cut.

The latest option suggested Wednesday night by the Senate Republican Caucus was a reduction to 4.2% paired with a formula. The formula would trigger a return to 4.5% if state revenues decline by \$15 million compared to the prior year. The last time that happened was in 2010, due to the Great Recession.

Rep. Chris Karr, R-Sioux Falls, described the proposals as an attempt to "see what sticks" with the House.

Karr is a member of the conference committee that's trying to work out a deal, and he's the architect of House Bill 1137, which is the main tax cut legislation still in play. He said this session is the right time to give South Dakotans a tax break. Implementing a sunset or trigger wouldn't be responsible, he said, because it's an automatic decision rather than a debated and analyzed decision from lawmakers to raise taxes again.

He said a tax cut should be permanent.

"We just need to implement good tax policy, and I think that is," Karr said. "And then we come back every year, we analyze and we appropriate accordingly."

Rep. Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, who isn't on the conference committee, criticized the trigger-formula proposal.

"I think this recession trigger is probably the worst tax policy idea that I've heard all session long," Hansen said. "I think when a recession kicks in is the last time to be taking more money out of the pockets of people and giving it to the government. I hope that it gets defeated soundly."



Senate Majority Whip Ryan Maher, R-Isabel, who introduced the trigger-formula amendment, predicted there won't be a tax cut at all because the two chambers won't agree on what is needed for South Dakota. He also expressed concern about the eventual loss of federal American Rescue Plan Act funding that has contributed to a state budget surplus.

"We know we're going to have a lot of the ARPA money leave the economy. We know we're bringing prisons online. We know Medicaid expansion's coming on and that's going to cost us money, and the potential for another sales tax repeal on food is out there," Maher said, referencing an ongoing petition drive to put a food tax repeal on the ballot in 2024. "You've got five different things that are going to happen that all affect our revenue in big ways."

He said the state will need \$200 million in additional ongoing revenue by 2026 to sustain state projects and obligations.

"There's a high potential that there is no tax cut," Maher said.

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan whose work has won national and regional awards. She's spent five years as a journalist with experience reporting on workforce, development and business issues within the state.*

## Norfolk Southern CEO apologizes for Ohio crash, but won't back bipartisan rail safety bill

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - MARCH 9, 2023 4:18 PM

The CEO of Norfolk Southern, the railroad operating the train that last month derailed and spilled toxic chemicals in East Palestine, Ohio, apologized for the derailment at a U.S. Senate hearing Thursday, but declined solicitations to endorse a bipartisan rail safety bill.

Norfolk Southern CEO Alan Shaw opened his testimony to the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee with an apology to residents of the community and pledged "to make this right," though he resisted senators' invitations to endorse policy specifics.

"I want to begin today by expressing how deeply sorry I am for the impact this has had on the residents of East Palestine and the surrounding communities," Shaw said.

"I am determined to make this right. Norfolk Southern will clean the site safely, thoroughly and with urgency. You have my personal commitment. Norfolk Southern will get the job done and help East Palestine thrive."

The railroad has announced direct investments of \$21 million and helped more than 4,000 families through an assistance center, Shaw said, calling that spending "just a down payment."

### Rail safety legislation

Senators on the panel, including those from Ohio and neighboring Pennsylvania, sought Shaw's endorsement for a rail safety bill and other policy proposals — but were rebuffed.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat, was among the three Democrats and three Republicans who introduced a bill last week that would increase civil penalties for railroad safety violations, increase inspections of wheel bearings and create other safety regulations.

The bill's sponsors from Ohio and Pennsylvania — Brown, Ohio Republican J.D. Vance and Pennsylvania Democrats Bob Casey and John Fetterman — all promoted it at Thursday's hearing, though Fetterman did so by sending written questions to committee Chairman Tom Carper. Republican Sens. Marco Rubio of Florida and Josh Hawley of Missouri were the measure's other original cosponsors.

"It'd be a good start by Norfolk Southern to tell us today, in addition to what more they're going to do for the people of Ohio and Pennsylvania ... that they support the bill," Casey said. "That would help, if a major rail company said we support these reforms, and we'll help you pass this bill."

Vance, a new senator who was elected on a populist message, also urged his fellow Republicans to support the rail safety bill. A political realignment over the past 30 years meant Republicans should not be afraid to establish additional regulations on the railroad industry, he said.

"I believe that we are the party of working people, but it's time to be the party of working people," he

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said. "We have a choice. Are we for big business and big government or are we for the people?"

Vance added that he had initially been frustrated with Norfolk Southern's response to the Feb. 3 disaster, but said the railroad had "finally started to do the cleanup in earnest."

Now, Vance said, the problem slowing down the cleanup was the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's delay in approving the removal of toxic materials.

"We need leadership," he said. "We need the EPA to get on the ground and aggressively get this stuff out of East Palestine into properly licensed facilities."

Fetterman, who has been absent from the Capitol as he receives medical treatment for depression, relayed to Carper, a Delaware Democrat, questions for Shaw.

In those questions, Fetterman asked if Shaw would support the bill.

Shaw said the company supported "the legislative intent to make railroads safer," and could support some provisions of the bill, but declined to offer an endorsement for the measure in its entirety.

## **Democrats blame greed, push for commitments**

Brown blamed the derailment on the railroad for prioritizing its executives' compensation and stock price over safety. Norfolk Southern spent \$3.4 billion on stock buybacks last year, he said, while it has cut 38% of its workforce in the last 10 years.

The money spent on stock buybacks could have gone to hiring track inspectors or safety equipment, he said.

"Norfolk Southern chose to invest much of its massive, massive profits in making its executives and shareholders wealthy at the expense of Ohio communities along its rail tracks," Brown said.

Shaw said a federal National Transportation Safety Board investigation showed no evidence that additional personnel would have prevented the derailment.

Oregon Democrat Jeff Merkley asked Shaw to commit to halt stock buybacks until the company finished making safety improvements.

Shaw declined, though he said the railroad would invest in safety.

Sen. Edward Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat, pushed Shaw to commit to compensate homeowners and small businesses for the loss in value of their real estate.

Shaw would say only that he was "committing to do what's right for the community."

Markey said Norfolk Southern would have to balance what's right for the community with what is in the best interest of the railroad, predicting the company would continue to offer stock buybacks and would sue to avoid paying for the harm to East Palestine residents.

## **Communication issues undermine trust**

The cleanup efforts, which involved federal, state and local authorities as well as Norfolk Southern, have been rife with communication mishaps, senators said.

U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat, said neither her office nor state officials, including Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and state environmental regulators, were notified that Norfolk Southern was bringing waste from the accident into Michigan.

Norfolk Southern and EPA officials could not tell where the toxic material was sent, ranking Republican Shelley Moore Capito of West Virginia said. That lack of communication made local residents more fearful, she said.

"What does that do to trust?" she said. "We just need to get some transparency of where this material is going, how long it's going to take to get out."

*Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.*

## **GOP bill mandating federal Parents Bill of Rights passed by U.S. House committee**

**BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - MARCH 9, 2023 12:20 PM**

WASHINGTON — A national “Parents Bill of Rights” is headed for a full U.S. House vote after the House Committee on Education and the Workforce early Thursday approved the measure designed to empower parents to inspect books and other teaching materials in schools.

Lawmakers on the committee debated the GOP-backed bill that would federally mandate parents’ rights and new reporting requirements at the tens of thousands of public schools across the nation.

Critics argue many of the proposed rights are already ensured by local and state law — for example, a parent’s right to view a school’s budget or speak at a public school board meeting.

After a 16-hour markup — that also included debate and passage of a separate bill to regulate transgender girl athletes in schools — the panel approved the legislation in a party-line vote, 25-17.

“Parents nurture our future engineers, pilots, electricians, full time parents and, even, public-school employees. Unfortunately, their God-given right to make decisions for their children has been ignored, and at times, attacked. So, Republicans are taking a stand and advancing H.R. 5,” Committee Chair Virginia Foxx, a North Carolina Republican, said in her opening remarks.

Ranking member Bobby Scott, of Virginia, criticized the legislation, saying it “does not take any meaningful steps to increase or support parental engagement” and “would create unnecessary and burdensome reporting requirements on schools that would divert essential resources and personnel away from meeting families’ real needs without actually creating any new rights.”

H.R. 5, or the Parents Bill of Rights Act, aims to amend existing federal education laws to codify parents’ and guardians’ access to school curricula, library books and other materials, give parents advance notice prior to medical or mental health screenings, and mandate a standard number of parent-teacher meetings.

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana said Wednesday the bill could reach the House floor as soon as March 20, where a GOP majority is expected to pass it. The bill has garnered 106 Republican sponsors.

The bill’s forecast is less favorable in the U.S. Senate, where Democrats hold a slim majority.

### **Louisiana ties**

“This bill is about one simple and fundamental principle. Parents should always have a seat at the table when it comes to their child’s education,” said Louisiana Republican Rep. Julia Letlow, who reintroduced the bill this Congress in early March.

“In my home state of Louisiana, we have a parents bill of rights that passed in 2014 with broad bipartisan support, and we see it work every single day,” continued Letlow, who previously worked in post-secondary education.

“Now my colleagues on the other side of the aisle and some of their political allies have said that this (federal) bill is an attack on our hard-working teachers, that it will lead to Congress dictating curriculum to local schools, or telling librarians what they can and cannot have on their shelf. But in that argument, it’s very clear that their underlying message is that they don’t want schools to have to be accountable to parents.”

Democrats on the panel criticized the bill as unnecessary, vague and administratively burdensome, and also asked how enforcement at the federal level would be implemented.

“I know parental input is fundamental to children’s achievement, and all educators know that. However, much of what H.R. 5 poses has already been addressed through previous state and local legislation,” said Florida Democratic Rep. Frederica Wilson, a former educator and elementary school principal.

“This bill fosters a toxic relationship between educators and parents and continues the foolish, misguided games we’ve seen playing out in school board meetings across the country.”

Wilson called the bill “a bunch of bull” and “a cheap stunt.”

“Where in (this) bill of rights, does it say children have guaranteed access to broadband and must be



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issued a computer? Where does it say working parents should receive a before (school) care and after-care for their minor children? Where does it say to parents we guarantee a free hot breakfast, a nutritional lunch and a take home snack for children?" Wilson said, listing examples. "Stop wasting our time and come back with a bill of rights that will help American families survive and live out the American dream."

## State laws preceded federal push

The legislation comes as a wave of Republican-sponsored parents' bill of rights proposals are the focus of state capitals across the U.S. Many bills and laws, like Florida's, center on restricting any classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

The Sunshine State's law, enacted last year and famously referred to by critics as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, prohibits instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity from kindergarten to third grade. A proposal introduced last week to expand the law would widen that timeframe from Pre-K to eighth grade and would restrict the use by school personnel of students' "preferred pronouns."

Louisiana's law mandates parents' access to examine textbooks, curricula and supplemental instructional materials, and to inspect multiple categories of their children's school records within 10 days of requesting them, including any records of mental health counseling.

## What's in the federal Parents Bill of Rights?

The legislation passed by the U.S. House committee would add language to the federal Education and Secondary Education Act of 1965, stating that parents with children in publicly funded schools have the right to:

- Review curriculum.

- Know if a state changes educational standards.

- Review a school's budget.

- Review a list of books and materials in the school library.

- Address the school board.

- To be informed about violent activity at the school.

- To be informed of any plans to eliminate "gifted or talented programs," according to the bill.

- Meet with teachers twice a year.

The bill would also add language to the 1974 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act to:

- Require parental consent "for the use of technology in the classroom for purposes of educating the student," according to the bill.

- Make available to parents for inspection all instructional materials, teacher's manuals, books and films, among other items.

- Prohibit schools from using student information for marketing and other non-educational uses.

- Require notice and consent from parents for any school medical examinations, which is defined as a screening that "involves the exposure of private body parts, or any act during such examination or screening that includes incision, insertion, or injection into the body, or a mental health or substance use disorder screening," with the exceptions of hearing, vision or scoliosis screenings, the bill states.

## Hours of debate

More than 30 amendments to the bill were offered up by committee members until nearly 2:30 a.m.

Changes proposed by Democrats included funding more teacher training; protecting educational resources about women's, Asian American Pacific Islander, Black and Native American history; endorsing, via a nonbinding measure, school meals for low-income students; and removing new reporting requirements to the federal government.

Almost all were rejected by the GOP majority, though a Democrat-led amendment to prohibit federal involvement in the curriculum and a nonbinding measure to support broadband access received bipartisan support.

Rep. Tim Walberg, a Michigan Republican, received GOP backing for his amendment that would require parental consent for teachers to acknowledge a student's preferred pronouns or name at the elementary or middle school levels.

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"Parents have the right — no, they have the authority — to know when their children make major life changes," Walberg said.

Democrats pushed back on the amendment, expressing concern that the requirement could "out" a student's gender identity or expression to parents.

"I'm not questioning your intention but (I'm) just really concerned about those students who do not have supportive families and are afraid," said Oregon Democratic Rep. Suzanne Bonamici. "I just read a story about a trans student who was outed by a teacher who said her home (went) from unsupportive to a battlefield. We can't be doing that to trans students are already vulnerable."

## Republicans who voted for both bills:

Virginia Foxx of North Carolina  
Joe Wilson of South Carolina  
Glenn Thompson of Pennsylvania  
Tim Walberg of Michigan  
Glenn Grothman of Wisconsin  
Elise M. Stefanik of New York  
Rick W. Allen of Georgia  
Jim Banks of Indiana  
James Comer of Kentucky  
Lloyd Smucker of Pennsylvania  
Burgess Owens of Utah  
Bob Good of Virginia  
Lisa C. McClain of Michigan  
Mary E. Miller of Illinois  
Michelle Steel of California  
Ron Estes of Kansas  
Julia Letlow of Louisiana  
Kevin Kiley of California  
Aaron Bean of Florida  
Eric Burlison of Missouri  
Nathaniel Moran of Texas  
John James of Michigan  
Lori Chavez-DeRemer of Oregon  
Brandon Williams of New York  
Erin Houchin of Indiana

## Democrats who voted against both bills:

Bobby Scott of Virginia  
Joe Courtney of Connecticut  
Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan of Northern Mariana Islands  
Frederica Wilson of Florida  
Suzanne Bonamici of Oregon  
Mark Takano of California  
Alma S. Adams of North Carolina  
Mark DeSaulnier of California  
Donald Norcross of New Jersey  
Pramila Jayapal of Washington  
Susan Wild of Pennsylvania  
Lucy McBath of Georgia  
Jahana Hayes of Connecticut  
Haley M. Stevens of Michigan  
Kathy E. Manning of North Carolina  
Frank J. Mrvan of Indiana  
Jamaal Bowman of New York

*Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.*

## Biden budget asks for 25% tax on billionaires, boosts in domestic and defense spending

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - MARCH 9, 2023 11:27 AM

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Thursday he's ready to meet with U.S. House Speaker Kevin McCarthy to hash out federal spending as soon as House Republicans release their budget, a challenging task without a firm deadline.

"I'm ready to meet with the speaker anytime, tomorrow if he has his budget," Biden said during a rally in Philadelphia. "Lay it down. Tell me what you want to do. I'll show you what I want to do. See what we can agree on, what we don't agree on, we vote on."

He also rebuked Republicans for trying to tie the debt ceiling to the budget negotiations, saying that risking a default should be out of the question.

"Every single major economic institution — conservative to liberal — says that will cause a massive recession and put us in the hole for a long, long time," Biden said. "Instead of making threats about default, which would be catastrophic, let's take that off the table."

Biden's comments came just hours after he released his budget request for the fiscal year that's slated to start on Oct. 1.

The 184-page budget request calls on Congress to boost funding for defense and domestic programs and levy a 25% minimum tax on billionaires, setting up a significant contrast with House Republicans, who hope to cut spending to last year's levels and overwhelmingly oppose tax increases.

Biden calls on U.S. lawmakers to increase defense spending to \$885 billion and funding for non-defense accounts to \$1.015 trillion. That would increase both categories from the \$858 billion in defense spending and about \$773 billion in non-defense funding Congress approved in December when it wrapped up last year's process.

"My 2024 Budget is a blue-collar blueprint to rebuild America in a fiscally responsible way that leaves no one behind," Biden said in a written statement accompanying the budget release.

The budget request, Biden wrote, would lower "costs for families — with new measures to expand health coverage, cap prescription drug costs, invest in quality child care, build affordable housing, reduce home energy bills, make college more affordable, and more."

Biden's budget requests lawmakers extend "the solvency of the Medicare Trust Fund by at least 25 years, and invest in service delivery so that seniors and people with disabilities can access the benefits they have earned."

The tax section of the budget proposes Congress establish a 25% minimum tax on billionaires' income, including appreciated assets, with Biden writing that "no billionaire should ever pay a lower tax rate than a school teacher or a firefighter."

Biden also asks U.S. lawmakers to quadruple "the tax on corporate stock buybacks, so companies invest more in production to improve quality and lower prices, and less in buybacks that only benefit shareholders and CEOs."

"This Budget closes tax loopholes for the wealthy and cracks down on tax cheats, and it once again ensures that no one earning less than \$400,000 a year will pay a penny more in new taxes, period," Biden wrote.

### Congressional reaction

House Republican leadership — McCarthy, House Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana, Whip Tom Emmer of Minnesota and Conference Chair Elise Stefanik of New York — called Biden's budget request "unserious" and said the federal deficit is the result of "a spending problem, not a revenue problem."

Republicans are planning to release a budget of their own at some point, though the Budget Committee hasn't released a rough timeline of when that would happen.

Congress has a multistep government funding process where the budget resolution acts as a tax and spending blueprint, but doesn't actually change any laws or spend money.

Actual spending, instead, takes place through the appropriations committees.



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House Appropriations Chair Kay Granger, a Texas Republican, said Thursday the panel will review Biden's budget request "line-by-line to identify programs that do not require additional investments and to insert our own priorities."

"As we face growing threats at our border and around the globe, the President's proposal spends far too much on unnecessary programs at the expense of our national security," Granger said.

Senate Appropriations Chair Patty Murray, a Washington Democrat, and ranking member Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, said in a bipartisan joint statement they will move "forward with the work of writing our nation's spending bills as quickly as possible."

"We have a real opportunity — and an important responsibility — to work together to make our country safer, more competitive, and do some good for the people we all represent back home," Murray and Collins said.

"The Senate Appropriations Committee will be busy and moving full steam ahead with subcommittee hearings on the President's budget — providing an important opportunity to assess our country's needs for the coming year and for every appropriator to weigh in on the President's budget," Murray and Collins added.

"Shortly thereafter, we hope to draft and mark up — with input from all senators — each of the 12 appropriations bills in a bipartisan, timely way in order to bring them to the Senate floor."

## **Increases for agriculture, education**

The White House budget request's spending section calls on Congress to provide significant increases to several federal departments, including a 15% boost to the Treasury Department, a 14% increase to the Agriculture Department, a nearly 14% boost to the Education Department and an 11% increase to the Health and Human Services Department.

The National Science Foundation would get a nearly 19% increase in spending and the Environmental Protection Agency would see a 19% increase in its budget if Congress agrees to the request.

The Transportation Department would see a nearly 3% reduction in its budget while the Army Corps of Engineers would see its budget drop by 14%.

The budget request starts the fiscal 2024 spending process, which was supposed to begin the first Monday in February when the White House should have released the president's budget.

The president's budget is simply a request since Congress controls the ability to set tax policy and determines federal spending, but it shows the executive branch priorities.

The release of the president's budget on Thursday will kick off a flurry of activity on Capitol Hill, where the House and Senate spending panels will soon hold hearings with the vast majority of Cabinet secretaries and agency heads on their budget requests.

The House and Senate appropriations committees will then each draft the dozen annual government spending bills sometime this summer before heading to conference later this year.

*Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.*

## **National ban on transgender athletes in girls' sports passed by U.S. House panel**

**BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - MARCH 9, 2023 11:14 AM**

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House Education and Workforce Committee early Thursday passed a bill on a party-line vote that would block transgender girls from competing in school sports consistent with their gender identity, a reflection of a broader push in multiple states to curb the rights of transgender student athletes.

The bill, H.R. 734, introduced by Rep. Greg Steube, a Florida Republican, would amend Title IX to require student athletes to compete in sports in accordance with "a person's reproductive biology and genetics at birth," with the bill's language specifically targeting transgender girls.

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The bill would also make it a Title IX violation for facilities that receive federal funding to allow transgender female athletes to compete in sports designated for women.

After a more than 16-hour markup that lasted from Wednesday morning into early Thursday, the legislation passed 25-17.

Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex in education program or activities that receive federal funding. It is enforced by the U.S. Department of Education.

The sports legislation is part of a national campaign by Republican lawmakers and conservative groups in the states to restrict the rights of people in the LGBTQ community, particularly transgender youth.

The chair of the Education and Workforce Committee, Virginia Foxx, a North Carolina Republican, said the bill was the Republican Party's "commitment to America."

"Men are not women, women are not men," she said. "They certainly shouldn't compete against each other in any publicly funded arena."

The bill will likely pass a Republican-controlled House, but is expected to die in the Senate, where Democrats have a slim majority. There is currently no Senate sponsor for the bill in this Congress, but in the prior one, Sen. Mike Lee, Republican of Utah, introduced the Senate version of the bill.

During the markup, Democrats introduced five amendments, where they argued that several of them would strengthen Title IX, such as protecting athletes' privacy and providing resources for parents and students to report cases of discrimination.

But three out of five of those amendments were blocked from a vote because Foxx and the House parliamentarian ruled that the amendments were outside the scope of the original bill.

## **Small numbers of transgender students**

The top Democrat on the committee, Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, said instead of addressing real issues in education such as student mental health, achievement gaps and declining math and science skills, Republicans have "chosen to use our first markup to advance a political agenda by politicizing students' education, scapegoat some of our most vulnerable students as a cause of inequity in athletics."

Scott, like nearly every Democrat on the committee during the markup, pointed out that transgender students are a small fraction of the population, and even a smaller population when it comes to youths in sports.

More than 8 million students compete in high school athletics, and more than 480,000 students compete as National Collegiate Athletic Association athletes, according to the NCAA.

There are currently only 32 transgender athletes who openly compete in college sports, Scott said, adding that there are more lawmakers on the committee than college transgender athletes.

There are 45 members of the committee.

"It's ludicrous to suggest that such a handful of athletes, who pose no evidentiary threat, justifies national congressional action," he said.

UCLA's School of Law Williams Institute estimates that there are about 1.6 million people ages 13 and up who identify as transgender in the U.S. Of that population, 300,000 are youth ages 13 to 17 and make up 1.4% of the U.S. population for that age group.

## **'Scapegoating in a cultural war'**

Democrats argued the legislation would harm transgender children.

"This is about scapegoating in a cultural war a group of trans kids and criminalizing their existence," Rep. Raúl M. Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat, said. "We are mired in this cultural war created and started by my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, and trans kids in this war, become mere collateral damage."

Conservative lawmakers and advocates at the state and federal level have seized upon issues pertaining to the LGBTQ community, particularly about gender studies in schools. They have also pushed back on efforts to teach about racism, accusing schools of teaching critical race theory, which is a college-level course of study that is not taught at the K-12 level.

It's resulted in state and local bills passed that place bans on transgender youth from using school facilities, such as bathrooms, that are consistent with their gender identity. Thousands of books from LGBTQ

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authors or stories that feature LGBTQ characters have been banned in schools.

House Republicans did not address any criticism from Democrats that the bill discriminated against transgender athletes. They instead focused on the argument that sports should be separated by biological sex and that this bill would protect girls.

One Republican, Bob Good of Virginia, said it was a moral issue.

"God does not make mistakes," he said. "He creates us perfectly unique as individuals, and all of us are either immutably male or immutably female."

Rep. Burgess Owens, a Utah Republican, introduced the only amendment by Republicans, which was a substitute for the bill's text. The original sponsor of the bill, Steube, did not speak on the issue.

Owens, a former professional football player, said sports had a profound impact on him as a student, and he's seen how sports can have a positive impact on women.

"I've seen how sports empower the women in my lives, including my five daughters, and have helped shape their character," Owens said. "I'm sad to think that the same opportunities might not be available in the future."

He said that this bill would ensure that girls are protected under Title IX.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, a Washington Democrat, introduced an amendment to change the title of the bill from the "Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act of 2023" to "The Stigmatizing Vulnerable Children Act."

"We need to be exactly clear about what this bill does and what the consequences of this bill would be," she said, noting that transgender kids have participated in sports for decades.

Jayapal said in 2004 the International Olympic Committee Executive Board announced that transgender athletes could compete in the Olympics, and in 2008 her home state became the first state to allow transgender children to compete in sports in accordance to their gender identity.

Her amendment was voted down in a voice vote.

Reps. Suzanne Bonamici, D-Ore., and Frederica S. Wilson, D-Fla., pushed back on the bill and said it would be harmful to transgender students and would weaponize Title IX.

"Unfortunately, these efforts join the wave of anti-trans legislation sweeping the nation, including in my state of Florida," Wilson said.

## States with bans

So far, 18 states with Republican-controlled state legislatures have banned transgender athletes from competing in sports that are consistent with their gender identity.

Those states that have passed bans on transgender youth in sports are Montana, Idaho, South Dakota, Iowa, Utah, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Indiana and Mississippi.

Some of those bans have not gone into effect yet and are on hold due to temporary injunctions such as those in Idaho, West Virginia, Indiana, Utah and Montana, where that injunction applies only to bans in higher education and not K-12.

Bonamici introduced an amendment which would prohibit institutions of higher education from requiring athletes to provide reproductive and sexual health information, including information about an athlete's menstrual cycle.

"It is never okay to ask for unnecessary menstrual and reproductive information from women and girls as a basis for determining eligibility for sports," she said.

Foxx said she disagreed with the amendment, because "this amendment strips out the underlying bill."

Foxx said it was a "radical attempt to erase women."

"H.R. 734 is about protecting women from discrimination and unfair playing fields," Foxx said. "This amendment prevents the achievement of both goals."

Bonamici's amendment was voted down in a voice vote.

The committee also marked up and passed a second bill, H.R. 5, the "Parents Bill of Rights Act" introduced by Rep. Julia Letlow, R-La. It also passed on a 25-17 party-line vote.

That bill would require public schools to provide materials for parents to review such as books in the



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school library, curriculum, budgets and teacher. If those schools do not comply, those institutions could lose federal funding.

The bill would also limit classwork and books that deal with issues related to race and sex.

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, Republican of Louisiana, is planning to bring the parents bill of rights to a floor vote as early as March 20, according to Politico.

## Republicans who voted for both bills:

Virginia Foxx of North Carolina  
Joe Wilson of South Carolina  
Glenn Thompson of Pennsylvania  
Tim Walberg of Michigan  
Glenn Grothman of Wisconsin  
Elise M. Stefanik of New York  
Rick W. Allen of Georgia  
Jim Banks of Indiana  
James Comer of Kentucky  
Lloyd Smucker of Pennsylvania  
Burgess Owens of Utah  
Bob Good of Virginia  
Lisa C. McClain of Michigan  
Mary E. Miller of Illinois  
Michelle Steel of California  
Ron Estes of Kansas  
Julia Letlow of Louisiana  
Kevin Kiley of California  
Aaron Bean of Florida  
Eric Burlison of Missouri  
Nathaniel Moran of Texas  
John James of Michigan  
Lori Chavez-DeRemer of Oregon  
Brandon Williams of New York  
Erin Houchin of Indiana

## Democrats who voted against both bills:

Bobby Scott of Virginia  
Joe Courtney of Connecticut  
Gregorio Killi Camacho Sablan of Northern Mariana Islands  
Frederica Wilson of Florida  
Suzanne Bonamici of Oregon  
Mark Takano of California  
Alma S. Adams of North Carolina  
Mark DeSaulnier of California  
Donald Norcross of New Jersey  
Pramila Jayapal of Washington  
Susan Wild of Pennsylvania  
Lucy McBath of Georgia  
Jahana Hayes of Connecticut  
Haley M. Stevens of Michigan  
Kathy E. Manning of North Carolina  
Frank J. Mrvan of Indiana  
Jamaal Bowman of New York

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

## **Powell signals higher interest rates.**

### **Here's why Friday's jobs report will affect Fed's decision.**

**BY: CASEY QUINLAN - MARCH 9, 2023 7:30 AM**

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said this week that interest rate increases could be higher and come faster if Friday's unemployment data shows the nation's labor market isn't cooling off. Stock indexes fell after his comments. That's been a familiar pattern over the past year as the federal bank has tried to combat inflation.

A hot jobs market — when people who want work can find it — would seem to signal a healthy economy, so why the concern over a positive jobs report?

It's not that the Fed is "anti-worker," said Joseph Gagnon, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and former visiting associate director for the division of monetary affairs for the Federal Reserve Board.

"If we could sustain 3% or 3.5% unemployment, a record low, the Fed would be delighted if we could stay there and inflation would come back down and everything would be fine," he said. " ... The worry is that the economy is just overheating, that too much spending is going on for what the economy can produce. And we see that in the labor market. It's not only the labor market that the Fed looks at, but it's the labor market that probably has the clearest signs of it, the ones that are easiest to interpret. ... It covers every worker who's doing anything economic, who is producing anything in the whole economy."

Federal Reserve members also will be looking at consumer price data, due on March 14, at their next meeting on March 21-22. The Consumer Price Index, an indicator for inflation, rose 6.4% in the past year, according to the January report, which was the smallest yearly increase since Oct. 21, but still higher than a Bloomberg survey of economists forecasted, according to The New York Times. That followed the January jobs report, on Feb. 3, which showed an unemployment rate of 3.4% — the lowest it had ever been since May 1969.

Andrew Korz, director of investment research for FS Investments, predicted the data was "running too hot for the Fed's liking," and Powell's comments this week indicate Korz was correct.

"The latest economic data have come in stronger than expected, which suggests that the ultimate level of interest rates is likely to be higher than previously anticipated," Powell told the Senate Banking Committee on Tuesday. "If the totality of the data were to indicate that faster tightening is warranted, we would be prepared to increase the pace of rate hikes."

The Fed's target rate for inflation is 2%, and the Fed has repeatedly said that it won't stop raising rates until it meets its goals.

"The Fed has really two things that it is trying to control and sometimes they can work against each other or in opposing directions," said Lara Rhame, chief U.S. economist and managing director for investment research for FS Investments. "One of them being inflation and keeping inflation low and the other one being, they call it full employment but you know a healthy level of employment and right now they see both of these objectives and they're weighing which one is more important to tackle and which one is further off course, and by far and away, inflation has been over the last year and a half, very far away from their targets — way too high."

The stock market has responded strongly to the labor market data in part because of the importance of those numbers to the Fed when it makes decisions about interest rates. After the January jobs report showed that the labor market was continuing to add more jobs than economists previously expected and that unemployment remained low, the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 0.38%, the S&P 500 dropped 1.04%, and the Nasdaq Composite slumped 1.59%. The stock market responded positively to a December jobs report with a low unemployment rate of 3.46% that also showed slower wage growth than what economists anticipated.

How the market reacts to the jobs report largely depends on what it thinks the news of the report is, said Gagnon of the Peterson Institute.

"If the jobs report comes in very strong, sometimes the stock market doesn't like it because it worries that the Fed is going to have to tighten," he said. " ... If everybody knows the economy is strong but they think the Fed doesn't know it and then the jobs report is news to the Fed, and the Fed is going to have to tighten, that makes sense. On the other hand, if nobody knew the economy was strong and the job market report tells you that it's strong and that was news to you, that should be good for stock prices because it means there's more sales and activity and profits."

People are right to be concerned about the potential impact on the economy if the Fed continues to raise rates, Gagnon continued. Although the Fed has said it hopes for a "soft landing" for the economy as it continues to raise rates, it has sparked fears of a possible recession.

"If you just look at history, it doesn't make you very optimistic," he said. "The Fed has rarely caused a soft landing and held inflation in check, let alone pushed it back down without a recession. ... To some extent, the Fed made mistakes in the past, and they might have raised rates too much, right? But also to some extent they made opposite mistakes, and they raised rates and they didn't get inflation all the way back, and so it ratcheted up each cycle and it went higher."

Gagnon said that he thinks there is a 30% to 35% chance of a recession as a result of the Fed raising rates too much.

Rhame, with FS Investments, said it's important to keep in mind that despite layoffs at some large companies, the overall trend is that companies are still talking about trying to find workers and needing to pay them more to hire them.

"We had several negative quarters of growth at the beginning of 2022 and a lot of people wondered why we weren't calling that a recession," she said. "And it's because we didn't have job losses during that period. In fact we were adding millions of jobs over those quarters because we were still in that recovery phase of the pandemic and still getting folks back to work. I often talk to people who say job losses cause a recession. Job losses are the recession. ... So folks should look out for job losses, which we have not seen yet."

*Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.*

## Trump 'White House in waiting' helped develop Ohio voting bill touted as model for states

**BY: ZACHARY ROTH - MARCH 9, 2023 7:00 AM**

A new bill announced by Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose to standardize and modernize state voting records is being welcomed by election administrators and some voter advocates, who say it could increase transparency and confidence in elections.

But the first-of-its-kind legislation was developed with help from a think tank that is leading the charge nationally for more restrictive voting rules and has been called a "White House in waiting" for a second Trump administration. The bill also is winning praise from conservative activists who have spread fear about illegal voting as part of an effort to pressure election officials to more aggressively purge voter rolls.

The measure, known as the Data Analysis Transparency Archive (DATA) Act, could offer a glimpse of a future conservative agenda on voting issues. At a Feb. 22 press conference announcing the bill, LaRose, a Republican, thanked the America First Policy Institute for "helping with the development" of the legislation. AFPI reportedly aims to create a policy platform for former President Donald Trump.

A spokesman for LaRose did not respond to an inquiry about AFPI's role in developing the bill. But Hilton Beckham, AFPI's director of communications, said via email that the group did not write the bill. Beckham said it came out of an AFPI report released last year, which found that many local election offices are failing to retain election data as required by law, and that in many counties, the total number of ballots cast



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doesn't match up with the total number of registered voters who cast ballots.

"Being able to analyze election results in real-time will help find out why this is happening immediately," Beckham added, "potentially catching unlawful activity, and eliminating distrust and conspiracy (theories) from voters caused by sloppy record keeping."

The AFPI report notes near the end that, after reviewing AFPI's findings, LaRose "spearheaded a national effort" to urge states to pass laws ensuring voter data is preserved.

Now, the two are teaming up to spread the word. On March 4, LaRose promoted the DATA Act alongside Hogan Gidley, a former Trump campaign spokesman who helps run AFPI's elections policy arm, on an elections panel at the Conservative Political Action Conference, a major confab for GOP activists and officials.

And in late February, LaRose tweeted a picture of himself meeting with members of Congress' "election integrity caucus" in Washington, D.C., "to share the Ohio model." The caucus was founded by Rep. Claudia Tenney, a New York Republican who appeared on an AFPI voting panel in July, and who has said of the 2020 election: "We don't know if it was stolen or not."

These collaborations with election deniers and other backers of restrictive voting rules raise the question: Is LaRose's bill a wonky and bipartisan measure — "something that should be embraced by both Republicans and Democrats," as he put it at the Ohio press conference — that has the potential to make genuine improvements to how election officials maintain and publish voting records? Or could it help advance the agenda of national Republicans working to lay the groundwork for new voting restrictions by stoking fear about fraud?

Or both?

## A 'gold standard' for states

At the Ohio press conference announcing the bill, LaRose noted that he's also spoken to other secretaries of state around the country. "They are interested in bringing this model to their states," he said. "So something that's starting here in Ohio could end up becoming the gold standard, again, for what other states want to do."

The DATA Act would create standard definitions of key election data — for instance, how many people are registered, and how many voted on each day and by what method — for use by Ohio's 88 county election offices; clarify what data the counties must retain and for how long; and set up an automated process for the state to collect the data.

A central agency within the secretary of state's office would act as a clearinghouse, publishing easily accessible election data online, before, during, and after elections.

The result, backers say, would be to make it much easier for Ohioans — including those concerned about illegal voting, which remains extremely rare — to compare voting records across counties, and to ensure that both county-level and statewide numbers add up.

"When people look behind the curtain, what they're going to see is how well-run our elections are," LaRose said at the press conference. "The current lack of transparency in some ways breeds those conspiracy theories that are often not based in reality."

But LaRose's record on voting issues isn't helping to reassure those raising concerns about the bill. He said in an interview at CPAC he is "actively" considering a U.S. Senate run, and he has been accused of inconsistency as he has tried to appeal both to conservative Republicans worried about fraud and to more moderate voters.

LaRose has often said that Ohio's elections are secure, and when asked about 2020, he said: "I don't believe it was stolen" (though he added: "I do believe that bad things happen that should not have happened"). But last year, he tweeted an attack on the "mainstream media" for "trying to minimize voter fraud" in the state. The idea that "there's nothing to see here," he added, is "WRONG."

LaRose privately called Ohio's state legislative maps, which were challenged as a pro-GOP gerrymander, "asinine," not long before voting for them as a member of the state's redistricting commission.

And on March 6, the same day three Republican-led states announced they were leaving the Electronic Registration Information Center, a well-regarded interstate system for sharing voter registration data, LaRose told ERIC in a letter that he was considering pulling Ohio out as well. A few weeks earlier, LaRose

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had expressed confidence in ERIC.

## A 'clunky' system

Ohio's election administrators say streamlining the current low-tech process for counties to report election data to the state is badly needed.

For example, explained Aaron Ockerman, a lobbyist for the Ohio Association of Election Officials, during the state's four-week early-voting period, the secretary of state sends out a survey asking the counties for voting data, including how many people voted in person each day, and how many absentee ballots were received. The counties respond by putting the numbers into an email and sending it.

"It's clunky," said Ockerman. "If there's a way they can automate that process, that would make our lives easier and their lives easier."

It can help voter advocates, too. Jen Miller, the executive director of the League of Women Voters of Ohio, said her group has been calling for uniform data tracking and reporting making it easier to identify places where voters are facing access problems. Right now, she said, each county defines and reports the data in slightly different ways.

"We (currently) cannot compare election operations in one county to another cleanly," Miller said. "We're looking at apples and oranges."

Miller said the LWV of Ohio hasn't yet taken a formal position on the bill, but called it a "positive move."

But Collin Marozzi, the deputy policy director for the ACLU of Ohio, said that while his organization, too, likes the bill's data transparency provisions, AFPI's involvement raises concerns.

"I'm disappointed that Ohio would entertain a pretty significant change to election law and registration records retention from such an openly partisan organization, and one that has affiliated itself with a former president who has consistently put forward bogus election fraud claims," said Marozzi. "I'm not saying that on its face it's a negative. But it's having a hard time passing the smell test right now."

## Trump 'White House in waiting'

Founded by a former Trump White House policy adviser, AFPI has signed up big-name Trump allies like former White House advisers Larry Kudlow and Kellyanne Conway, former Energy Secretary Rick Perry, and former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi.

Trump's first trip back to Washington, D.C., after leaving office was to deliver the keynote address at AFPI's America First Agenda Summit last July. Trump hosted a black-tie fundraiser for AFPI at Mar-a-Lago in 2021, and his PAC has donated \$1 million to the group, according to Politico, which has reported that AFPI is often described as a "White House in waiting" for the former president.

AFPI has been a consistent advocate for stricter voting rules.

A 25-point AFPI policy document on elections lists almost every key priority of the "election integrity" movement, including requiring photo ID, restricting who can vote absentee, eliminating drop boxes, and banning the counting of ballots that arrive after election day.

The leadership of AFPI's elections policy arm, the Center for Election Integrity, appears well-suited to this agenda. Gidley, the former Trump campaign spokesman who serves as CEI's vice chair and top communications official, in 2020 warned about the potential for "massive fraud" from mail-in voting.

"It's getting more difficult in this country to elect (supporters of strict voting rules) if we have countless examples of irregularities, illegalities, anomalies, and yes, fraud, in our election system," Gidley declared at the CPAC panel with LaRose on March 4.

As Ohio Secretary of State, CEI chair Ken Blackwell made a string of decisions that restricted access to voting, especially for Democratic-leaning groups, in the 2004 presidential election's pivotal state, while also serving as an Ohio co-chair of President George W. Bush's re-election campaign.

Blackwell "saw his role as limiting the participation of Democratic voters," then-Rep. John Conyers, a Michigan Democrat who led a congressional probe of the fiasco, has said.

Blackwell later served as a member of Trump's voter fraud commission, which was disbanded without finding evidence of widespread voter fraud, after being sued by one Democratic commissioner who accused it of showing "troubling bias."

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The 2022 AFPI report that played a role in the DATA Act's conception cites a 1960 federal law requiring the retention of election records. AFPI researchers made public records requests for voter data from the 100 most-populated counties in 14 swing states, including Ohio, and found that very few had the actual voter files from the 2020 election.

"This critical record-keeping shortcoming reduces election integrity and restricts researchers from doing a proper analysis post-election and to identify registration and voting discrepancies," the report noted.

At the Feb. 22 press conference, LaRose echoed AFPI in referencing the 1960 law — which in fact was a civil rights measure aimed at making it harder for local election officials and citizens to keep minority voters off the rolls — to argue that counties are legally required to retain data.

## Conservative activists pleased

Another group cheering the Ohio bill is the Public Interest Legal Foundation, a group of conservative legal activists that has frequently sued election officials for not purging voters from the rolls aggressively enough. PILF's executive director and founder, J. Christian Adams, a veteran election lawyer, served on Trump's voter fraud commission alongside Blackwell.

"This is exactly the best practices that the Public Interest Legal Foundation encourages states to adopt that make post election auditing easier," Lauren Bis, a spokeswoman for the group, said via email, adding that the bill will allow Ohioans "to hold their election officials accountable."

PILF has drawn criticism for using misleading data in some of its efforts to raise concerns about illegal voting. In 2019, it was forced to issue an apology to a group of Virginia voters who sued for defamation after a PILF report, "Aliens Invasion," alleging large-scale illegal voting in the state, wrongly described them as non-citizens. The report included the voters' names, phone numbers, addresses, and, in some cases, Social Security numbers.

In the current climate of heightened partisan tensions over voting, some voter advocates worry that by giving self-appointed fraud watchdogs more material to work with, the DATA Act could make it easier for them to issue sweeping challenges to large numbers of voters — or even to election results — on flimsy evidence, or to pressure election officials to more aggressively pare the rolls.

Other Republican-run states and conservative activists have recently sought to encourage voter challenges.

In the lead up to Georgia's 2021 U.S. Senate runoff elections, which would determine Senate control, the activist group True the Vote challenged 364,000 Georgia voters, drawing a voter intimidation lawsuit. Months later, the state passed a sweeping voting law that empowered individual people to make an unlimited number of voter challenges.

Both PILF and True the Vote recently launched their own interactive databases aimed at allowing users to find inaccuracies in state voter rolls.

Kayla Griffin, the Ohio director for the voter access group All Voting Is Local, said that in addition to concerns about individual voter challenges, her group also worries that requiring election offices to produce voter data immediately after election day could lead to interference with the certification process, in which results are confirmed and declared official.

In recent years, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico all have seen efforts by GOP activists or officials to block or delay certification of local or statewide results — in the Michigan case, the outcome of the state's 2020 presidential election were at issue — based on unfounded claims about irregularities. Though none have succeeded in subverting results, they have stoked further distrust in elections.

"We want those ballots to be protected, and we want certification to go off smoothly, without public pressure to cave and not certify an election," said Griffin. "So there needs to be some guardrails around that as well."

## Details pose questions

Buried in the DATA Act's fine print are details that exacerbate some worries.

The bill requires local election offices to send the state a list of registered voters each day, starting 45 days before an election and ending 81 days after. Why 81 days? Marozzi, of the ACLU, said that's how long the counties have by law to change their final canvass of results — something, Marozzi said, that "adds

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to our concerns.”

David Becker, the founder and executive director of the Center for Election Innovation and Research, and a leading expert on election administration, said he sees “a lot of good things” in the bill’s transparency and record-keeping provisions, but flagged another little-noticed danger: While some other states’ laws requiring public disclosure of voter data withhold voters’ birthdates, the Ohio bill doesn’t.

That’s not only a privacy concern, said Becker. Studies have found that efforts to use birthdates to identify people voting illegally have often generated false positives, because it’s not rare for different people to have the same first name, last name, and birthdate. That means the data made accessible by the Ohio bill could lend itself to being misused by anti-fraud activists, who often have more zeal than data expertise.

“Any match based on first name, last name and birthdate is a bad one,” said Becker.

Details aside, LaRose argued at the press conference that the DATA Act is needed to restore faith in elections, which he said has been badly damaged in part by false claims about fraud.

“There is a crisis of confidence — that’s not hyperbole,” LaRose said.

But Griffin expressed frustration that Ohio’s decision-makers have rushed to draft measures that respond to false public perceptions — she cited both the DATA Act and Ohio’s controversial new voter ID law — while often ignoring concrete problems of access, including a lack of drop boxes and early-voting locations in many counties, that her group has long been raising the alarm about.

“We have pushed through bills quickly off of perception,” Griffin said. “But we have been telling you for years of the actual things that are broken in our election system.”

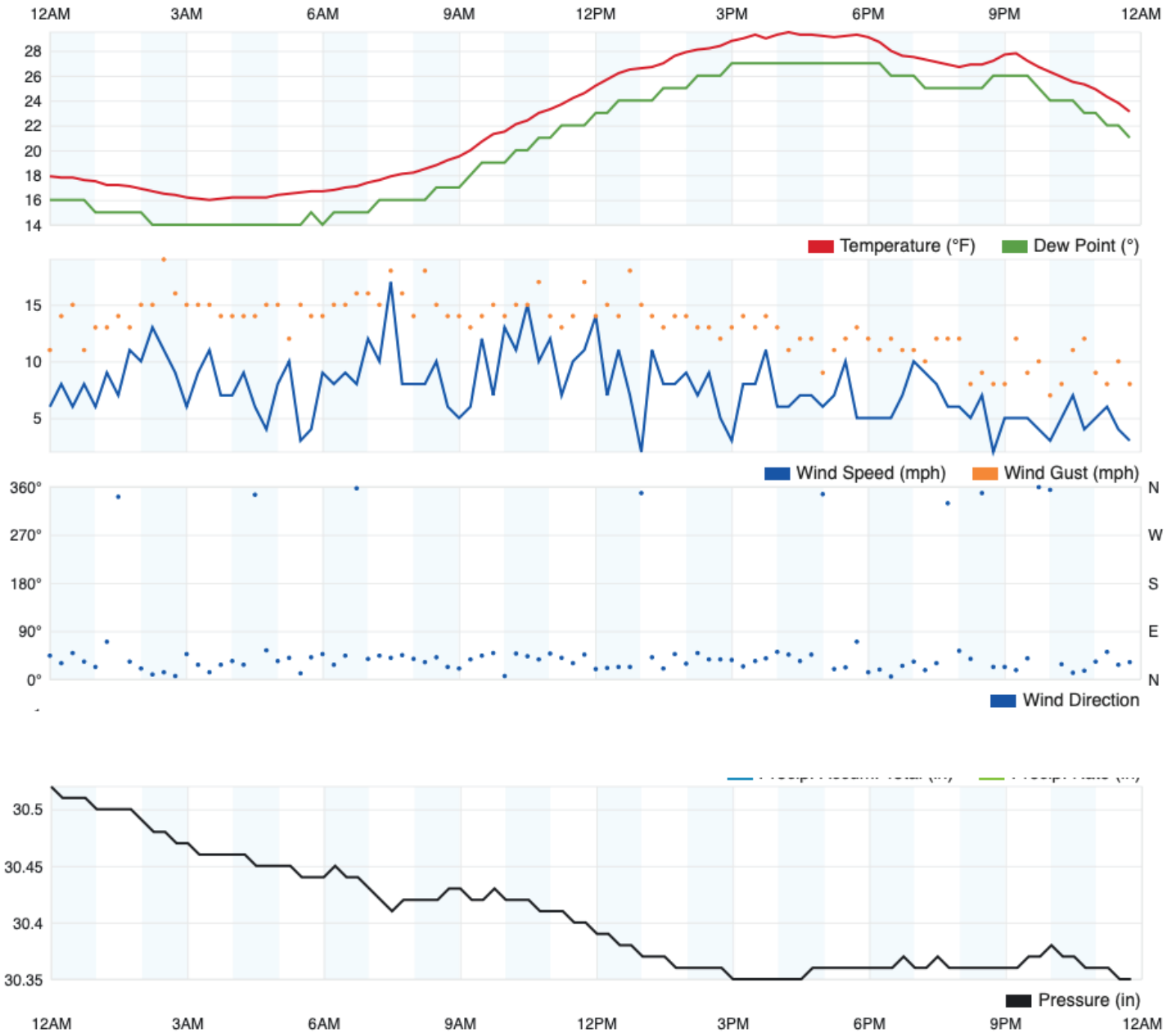
*Zachary Roth is the National Democracy Reporter for States Newsroom.*



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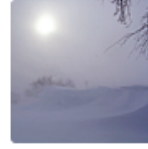


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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
						
20%	30% → 90%	80%				
Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Heavy Snow and Blowing Snow	Snow and Areas Blowing Snow then Partly Sunny	Patchy Blowing Snow and Windy	Patchy Blowing Snow and Windy	Patchy Blowing Snow and Blustery then Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny
High: 31 °F	Low: 26 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 17 °F	High: 23 °F	Low: 6 °F	High: 20 °F

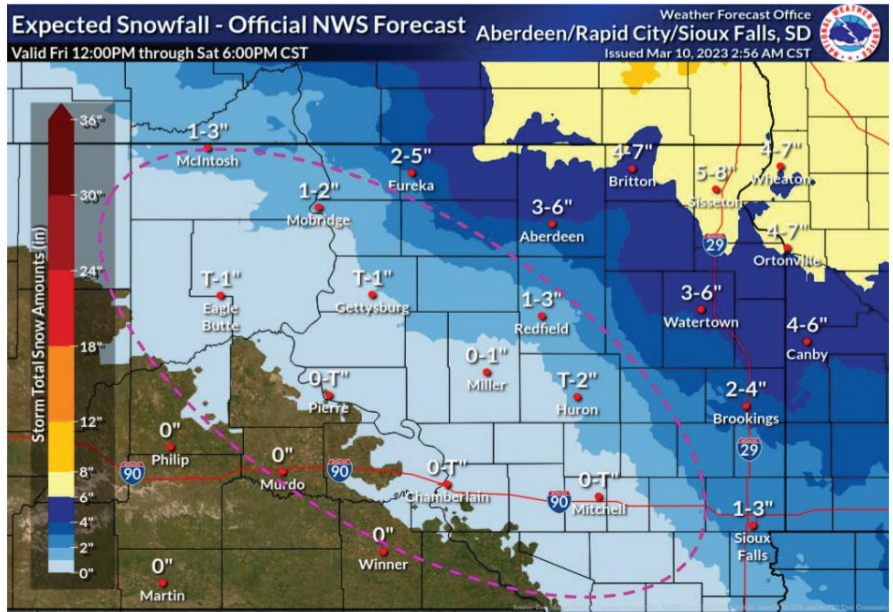
## Snow Forecast Overnight Through Saturday

March 10, 2023 5:11 AM

Mixed precipitation, accumulating snow, & strong wind/blowing snow likely



- Expect steady precipitation overnight, before ending west to east during the day Saturday.
- Accumulating snow likely over north central to northeastern SD. A wintry mix possible across mainly central SD overnight.
- Strong winds will create **areas of blowing and drifting snow** this afternoon through Saturday morning, and again Sunday.
- Areas within the **pink oval** could experience 0.01" - 0.10" of ice overnight into early Saturday morning due to freezing rain.





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## Wind Forecast

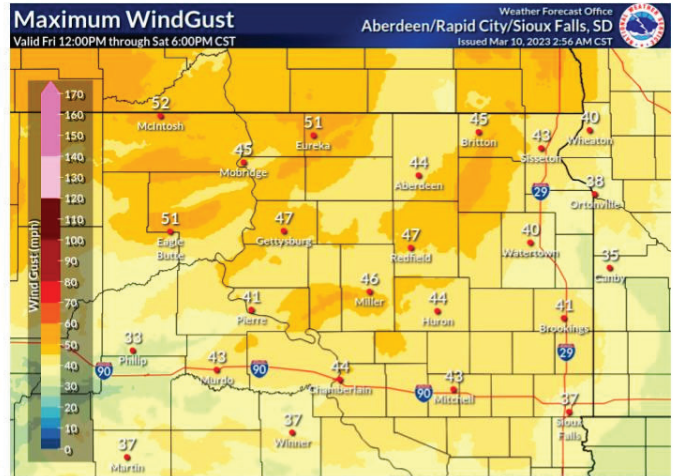
March 10, 2023  
5:15 AM

- Strong winds out of the southeast this evening into Saturday morning.
- Lull in winds Saturday late morning/afternoon as system passes north.
- Winds shift out of the west-northwest Saturday afternoon/evening and increase in strength, continuing into Sunday.
- Significant blowing snow possible with **near-blizzard conditions** where snow is falling.

	3/10		3/11		3/12							
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	5am	11am	5pm	11pm
<b>Aberdeen</b>	13	24	35	44	39	21	41	45	48	43	35	23
<b>Britton</b>	10	23	37	45	45	28	32	36	41	39	33	25
<b>Eagle Butte</b>	26	43	51	49	29	37	48	49	46	33	26	15
<b>Eureka</b>	21	37	46	51	35	32	46	54	52	38	30	17
<b>Gettysburg</b>	22	38	47	47	30	32	47	51	51	37	30	21
<b>Kennebec</b>	20	35	41	41	28	28	41	49	49	40	31	23
<b>McIntosh</b>	25	41	51	52	29	41	52	53	46	30	21	12
<b>Milbank</b>	8	16	28	38	39	25	25	35	36	40	38	36
<b>Miller</b>	14	29	41	46	43	22	39	52	51	40	33	23
<b>Mobridge</b>	21	35	43	45	24	33	45	47	45	30	25	12
<b>Murdo</b>	25	38	43	39	29	30	46	47	47	36	26	20
<b>Pierre</b>	20	36	41	40	22	31	43	46	44	32	26	20
<b>Redfield</b>	13	25	40	47	43	18	37	49	48	41	37	25
<b>Sisseton</b>	9	20	32	43	43	26	29	32	37	37	36	32
<b>Watertown</b>	9	20	29	40	39	28	26	41	41	39	36	28
<b>Webster</b>	13	25	36	47	46	29	38	44	46	43	39	30
<b>Wheaton</b>	12	16	26	38	40	32	20	21	32	37	33	29

\*Table values in mph

Don't see your city? Check out [weather.gov/forecastpoints](http://weather.gov/forecastpoints)



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD



## Blowing Snow Potential

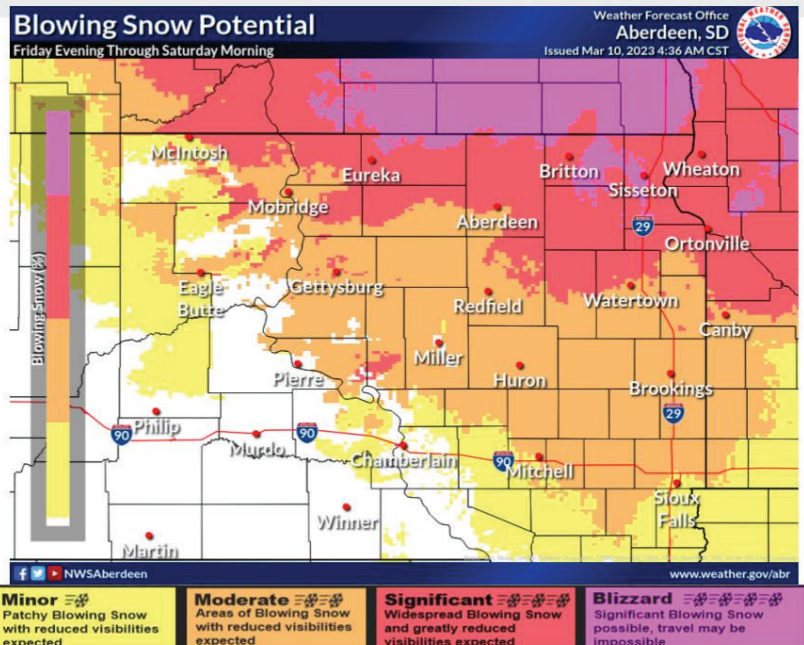
March 10, 2023  
5:20 AM

### Overview

- Minor to Significant blowing snow will impact the area this evening through Saturday afternoon.
- Significant blowing snow possible with **near-blizzard conditions** where snow is falling (see blowing snow potential map).
  - ◆ Uncertainty remains over central SD due to warmer temperatures and mixed precipitation.
- Though less, the blowing and drifting snow potential continues into Sunday afternoon before winds diminish Sunday evening.



**HAZARDOUS TRAVEL**  
Limited visibilities



**Minor** ☁️☁️☁️  
Patchy Blowing Snow with reduced visibilities expected

**Moderate** ☁️☁️☁️☁️  
Areas of Blowing Snow with reduced visibilities expected

**Significant** ☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️  
Widespread Blowing Snow and greatly reduced visibilities expected

**Blizzard** ☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️☁️  
Significant Blowing Snow possible, travel may be impossible



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

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## Safety Message

March 10, 2023  
5:18 AM

Black Ice  
Black Ice  
Black Ice

Black ice is difficult to see and makes roads very slippery, especially bridges and overpasses

Please drive slowly



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

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

## Winter Weather Advisory

**URGENT - WINTER WEATHER MESSAGE**

**National Weather Service Aberdeen SD**

**250 AM CST Fri Mar 10 2023**

Brown-Marshall-Day-  
Including the cities of Aberdeen, Britton, and Webster  
250 AM CST Fri Mar 10 2023

...WINTER WEATHER ADVISORY IN EFFECT FROM MIDNIGHT TONIGHT TO NOON CST SATURDAY...

\* WHAT...Total snow accumulations of 3 to 5 inches. Winds gusting up to 40 to 50 mph, strongest east of the James River.

\* WHERE...Brown, Marshall and Day Counties.

\* WHEN...From midnight tonight to noon CST Saturday.

\* IMPACTS...Travel could be very difficult. Widespread blowing snow could significantly reduce visibility.

PRECAUTIONARY/PREPAREDNESS ACTIONS...

Slow down and use caution while traveling.

The latest road conditions can be obtained by calling 5 1 1.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 4:14 PM

Low Temp: 16 °F at 3:26 AM

Wind: 19 mph at 2:26 AM

Precip: : 0.00 (Total from last 2 snows: 0.80 moisture)

Day length: 11 hours, 40 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 65 in 1913

Record Low: -24 in 1948

Average High: 38

Average Low: 17

Average Precip in March.: 0.24

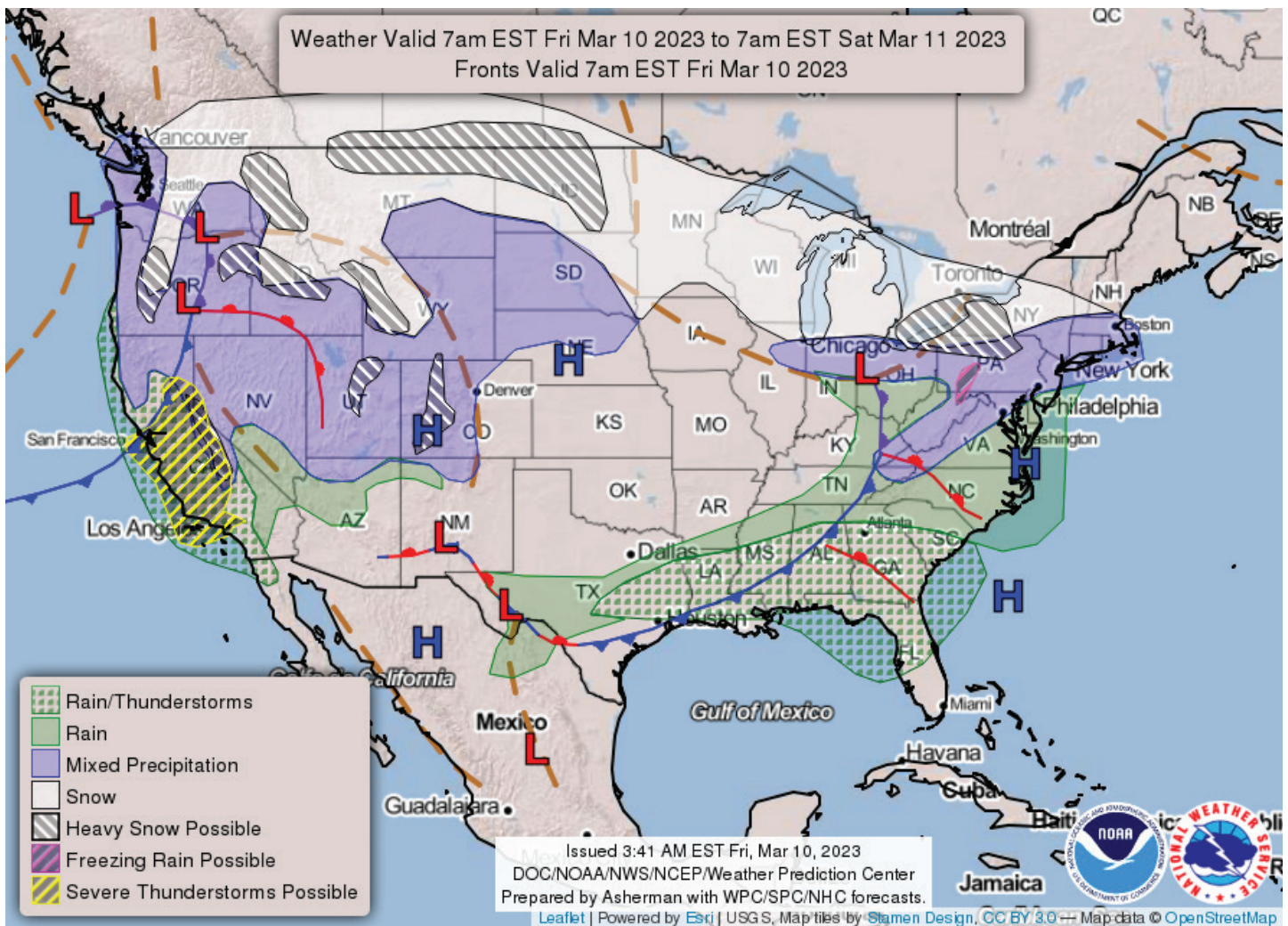
Precip to date in March.: 1.00

Average Precip to date: 1.41

Precip Year to Date: 2.58

Sunset Tonight: 6:32:42 PM

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:50:43 AM



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## Today in Weather History

March 10, 2005: High winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts of near 70 mph occurred across central and northeast South Dakota from early morning to early evening. The high winds overturned a semi-truck near Mound City; knocked a large branch down onto a pickup truck in Selby; blew a glass door of a store in Clark off; tore a sign down in Aberdeen, and ripped the roof off a mobile home in South Shore.

March 10, 2009: A low-pressure system tracked across the panhandle of Oklahoma into the Great Lakes region produced moderate to heavy snow across northeast South Dakota from the morning to the evening of the 10th. Strong north-to-northwest winds gusting to 45 mph resulted in blizzard conditions. Travel became difficult, if not impossible, across northeast South Dakota. Interstate 29 between Watertown and the North Dakota border was closed for several hours. Several minor accidents occurred, along with some injuries. Snowfall amounts included; 3 inches near Milbank; 4 inches near Columbia, Summit, and Sisseton; 5 inches at Waubay and Wilmot; 6 inches 10 miles northeast of Sisseton, Britton, and Roy Lake; 7 inches in Webster and Westport.

Bitter cold air filtered in behind the low-pressure system bringing record cold to the area. On the 11th, Aberdeen and Sisseton broke their record low highs for the date, with afternoon highs only reaching zero. The record at Aberdeen had been in place since 1896. Sisseton also set a record low of 14 degrees below zero on March 12.

1884: John Park Finley issued the first experimental tornado prediction. Finley studied the atmospheric parameters that were present during previous tornadoes. Many of these same criteria are still used by operational forecasters today. But the use of tornado forecasts would be banned just a few years later and remain forbidden until 1952.

1912 - The barometric pressure reached 29.26 inches at Los Angeles, CA, and 29.46 inches at San Diego CA, setting all-time records for those two locations. (David Ludlum)

1922 - Dodge City, KS, reported a record 24 hour total of 17.5 inches of snow. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Strong northwesterly winds ushered arctic air into the eastern U.S. Gales lashed the middle and northern Atlantic coast. Winds gusted to 50 mph at Manteo NC and Cape Hatteras NC. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1986: Severe thunderstorms and tornadoes hit Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio. A total of 19 tornadoes occurred. Three of the tornadoes in Indiana reached F3 intensity. A densely populated subdivision of Southeast Lexington, Kentucky, was heavily damaged by a tornado. Twenty people were injured, and 900 homes were destroyed or demolished. A very strong thunderstorm downburst hit the Cincinnati area. At the Greater Cincinnati Airport, windows were blown out of the control tower, injuring the six controllers on duty. At Newport, Kentucky, 120 houses were destroyed by winds estimated from 100 to 140 mph.

1988 - A winter storm produced snow and high winds in the Central Rocky Mountain Region. Snowfall totals in Utah ranged up to 42 inches at Alta, with 36 inches reported at the Brian Head Ski Resort in 24 hours. Winds gusted to 72 mph at La Junta CO and Artesia NM. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thirty-four cities in the central and southwestern U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date. The high of 85 degrees at Hanksville UT was a record for March, and Pueblo CO equalled their March record of 86 degrees. Hill City KS warmed from a morning low of 30 degrees to an afternoon high of 89 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along a warm front produced severe weather from southeast Iowa to central Indiana and north central Kentucky. Thunderstorms produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Fort Knox KY, and hail two inches in diameter west of Lebanon IN. Evening thunderstorms over central Oklahoma deluged Guthrie with 4.5 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010 - As many as four people are injured, one is killed and homes were damaged in Center Hill and Pearson, AR, by an EF2 tornado.



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Daily Devotionals

## Seeds of Hope

### STRENGTH FOR THE RACE

Few people have ever heard of the runner, John Baker. His name is not known the world over. But once, while running a race, he studied the runners who were ahead of him. He began to wonder, "Am I doing my best?" He was not sure, so he decided to try harder.

First he focused on the runner in front of him. After a few strides, he realized that he could run harder and pass him. When he did, he immediately set another goal and passed the next runner, then the next. Finally, he was in first place, won the race and set a record.

What a great lesson for all of us. If we only focus on where we are and what we are doing, we may never achieve the potential that God has invested in us. If we "accept what is" we may well end up "as is." A self-satisfied life never becomes a God-glorifying life.

Paul says that we "can do everything with the help of Christ who strengthens us." Not anything, but everything that God has planned for us to do, He will empower us to do. The power we receive from our relationship with Christ will strengthen us to overcome any obstacle that would keep us from doing His will, His way, in His world. He will never give us a superhuman power to accomplish goals for our own purposes. If He asks us to do something in His name, for His sake that will glorify Him, there are no pressures or problems, trials or troubles that will be able to keep us from winning the race He has set before us.

Prayer: Give us Your strength and will, power and determination, Lord, to do our best to run and win the race You have set before us. All things through You, for You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I can do all this through Him who gives me strength. Philippians 4:13



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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## 2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Golf Tournament
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/02/2023 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/09/2023 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9-11am



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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.07.23

15 22 25 28 69 21

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$203,000,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 55 Mins 33  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

3 7 29 31 49 10

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$39,580,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 55  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.09.23

28 39 43 44 47 18

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 25 Mins 33  
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

9 11 26 30 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$84,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 55  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

13 20 29 41 45 19

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 54  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
03.08.23

26 27 43 61 69 4

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$45,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 54  
DRAW: Mins 33 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## News from the Associated Press

### Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A SoDak 16=

St. Thomas More 52, McLaughlin 34

Class B SoDak 16=

Faith 75, Northwestern 64

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

SDHSAA Playoffs=

Class A State=

Quarterfinal=

Hamlin 42, Flandreau 32

Red Cloud 76, Lakota Tech 55

Sisseton 58, Sioux Falls Christian 47

Wagner 67, Rapid City Christian 47

Class AA State=

Quarterfinal=

Harrisburg 53, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 41

Pierre T F Riggs High School 42, Rapid City Stevens 34

Sioux Falls Jefferson 50, Mitchell 34

Sioux Falls Washington 48, Watertown 24

Class B State=

Quarterfinal=

Ethan 55, Castlewood 53, OT

Viborg-Hurley 64, Howard 46

Wall 58, Sully Buttes 50

Wolsey-Wessington 53, Jones County 42

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

### South Dakota to cut sales tax by \$104M annually for 4 years

By AMANCAI BIRABEN Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's Republican-dominated Legislature passed a general sales tax cut of \$104 million per year, lowering the taxes on groceries but not eliminating them entirely as Gov. Kristi Noem had urged.

The cut that cleared both chambers Thursday reduces the state's overall sales tax from 4.5% to 4.2%. It has a four-year sunset clause and removes a mechanism known as the Partridge amendment, which gradually reduced the state's sales tax as more money was collected from Internet sales.

Tax cuts were high on the agenda as the state opened the session with a \$423 million surplus.

The Republican governor, who is seen as a potential contender for the 2024 presidential nomination, made repealing the grocery tax the centerpiece of her reelection campaign.

South Dakota is one of a few states that tax groceries at the same rate as general sales.

Democrats had long supported the grocery tax cut. In fact, Democratic Senate Leader Reynold Nesiba was only in support of cutting the food tax and hoped to retain the general sales tax to fund education,

community support providers and state employees.

But that plan's tumultuous journey came to a final end on Tuesday, after it was rejected a second time.

"The governor's prerogative is the governor's prerogative," Republican Rep. Chris Karr said. "All we can try to do is work with her."

Lawmakers also toyed with property tax cuts designed to help retirees struggling with inflation but ultimately opted for the general sales tax cut, favoring its general scope of relief.

The debate then turned to how steeply to trim the sales tax, whether to put a time limit on it and how to address the Partridge amendment.

"You make it a priority to cut taxes, or you make it a priority to cut taxes exactly the way that you want to," Republican House Leader Will Mortenson said. "We're proud of the product we wound up with."

## Medicaid coverage for new moms gaining support in GOP states

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After years of refusing to expand Medicaid benefits for new moms, Republican officials in more than a half-dozen states are now reversing course and trumpeting that coverage as central to their conservative, anti-abortion agenda.

The shift in GOP support for postpartum Medicaid coverage is occurring in some states that have severely limited or outlawed abortion access since the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to an abortion last June. The effort also comes as federal protections guaranteeing people stay continuously enrolled in Medicaid during the COVID-19 pandemic is set to expire in a few weeks.

Deep-red Mississippi on Tuesday became the latest state to require Medicaid to provide a full year of coverage for low-income mothers after giving birth. Days earlier, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves declared the policy was part of the state's "new pro-life agenda."

Extended postpartum coverage had been rejected three times by the state's lawmakers since 2021 but a push for the measure succeeded after most abortions became illegal in Mississippi, following the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling.

In Wyoming, where an abortion ban remains in legal limbo, Republican Gov. Mark Gordon echoed a similar refrain when he signed a bill extending postpartum Medicaid coverage into law on Friday, calling it a "signature piece of pro-life legislation."

The Biden administration is encouraging all states to extend postpartum Medicaid coverage to a full year, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Administrator Chiquita Brooks-LaSure said in a statement.

"Postpartum care is crucial for the health and wellbeing of women, and can have benefits for their babies and their growing families," she said. "In addition to comprehensive pregnancy and postpartum care, reproductive health care is essential to support the health of women and families."

Republicans, however, have long criticized efforts to expand Medicaid, a taxpayer funded program that provides health care coverage to roughly 84 million of the country's poorest people.

Roughly 40% of births are covered by Medicaid, and states are required to keep women enrolled for up to two months after giving birth. Most states have already extended Medicaid coverage, guaranteeing access to the program for up to a year after a woman gives birth.

That coverage can be crucial in a country where maternal deaths — many of which occur in the days or months following a delivery — are rising. Research has found that women are less likely to be hospitalized during the postpartum period if they live in a state that has broadened Medicaid coverage to those with slightly higher incomes.

Mothers who are cut off from Medicaid after 60 days might not only lose access to their insurance, but the doctors they developed relationships with throughout their pregnancy as well, noted Laura Wherry, a New York University economics professor who researches Medicaid expansion.

"A lot of those maternal deaths occur after this period when pregnancy Medicaid coverage ends," Wherry said. "There are a number of different ways that expanding coverage could effect women and their health outcomes and their mortality outcomes."



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But 13 states have held out on expanding postpartum coverage for up to a year, a decision that has been met with intensified criticism when some of those states restricted or banned abortions last year.

Texas, Wisconsin, Missouri, Iowa, Idaho and South Dakota are among the states that have mostly banned abortion and only offer women 60 days of postpartum Medicaid coverage.

Wisconsin's Democratic Gov. Tony Evers' proposed a budget last month that would extend the postpartum coverage period to a year, but the Republican-controlled Legislature has expressed little interest in supporting the plan.

Republicans in other states, however, are now quickly pushing to expand the coverage.

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a Republican who has long opposed expanding the income eligibility threshold for Medicaid to those who make up to \$18,800 annually, announced in February that she'd seek to extend the postpartum Medicaid coverage period to 12 months.

In Alaska, where abortion is still legal, Republican Gov. Mike Dunleavy introduced legislation earlier this year that would do the same. Meanwhile, Idaho state representative Megan Blanksma, a Republican, proposed a similar law for her state in February.

Last week, Missouri's Senate signed off on a plan to expand the postpartum coverage for a year. The bill will now be considered by the House.

The proposal would have had little support from Republican Senate Majority Leader Cindy O'Laughlin in years past, the lawmaker told reporters just last week.

"Prior to now I would have probably said, 'I don't want to expand welfare,'" O'Laughlin said. But she's since changed her tune saying that without Medicaid coverage, the "person that might suffer the most would be the child or the children."

## Shiffrin leads giant slalom, closes in on 86th World Cup win

ARE, Sweden (AP) — Mikaela Shiffrin made a strong start in her pursuit of a record-tying 86th World Cup victory on Friday by taking a big lead in the first run of a giant slalom.

Shiffrin was more than half a second faster than her highest-ranked rivals with a smooth and fluent run in the sunshine at the lakeside resort in Are.

The second run is later Friday.

Clearly pleased with her skiing in the opening run, Shiffrin smiled and said "yeah" to herself after seeing her time in the finish area.

"It's one of the few runs in my life where, while I was skiing it, I was thinking, 'This is good,'" Shiffrin told Swedish broadcaster TV6.

The 27-year-old American can move even with Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark with a victory. Stenmark won a record 86 World Cup races in the 1970s and 80s.

"I'm trying to block it out of my mind actually," Shiffrin said of the record, adding her target for the second run is "to bring it back to that gear and have another really good run."

Valerie Grenier, whose first World Cup victory in January ended Shiffrin's winning streak in giant slalom, was 0.58 seconds back in second. Franziska Gritsch was third fastest with 0.93 to make up in the afternoon run. All other racers trailed Shiffrin by more than a second.

Shiffrin can equal another record with a victory Friday. It would be her 20th career win in World Cup giant slaloms — six of them this season — matching the women's mark held by Vreni Schneider.

Schneider got her wins between 1984 and 1992. The Swiss racer, like Shiffrin, also has Olympic and world championship gold medals in both giant slalom and slalom.

Shiffrin also will clinch the season-long World Cup giant slalom title with a top-three finish on Friday. Her closest challenger, Lara Gut-Behrami, failed to finish the first run.

Shiffrin already is sure to win the overall and slalom titles this season, and a giant slalom title would secure her 15th career crystal globe trophy.

Shiffrin won her first World Cup race in Are, a slalom in December 2012, and then earned two gold medals at the 2019 worlds at the Swedish resort. It was also where she was due to race again in March 2020

after the death of her father the previous month, but the races were called off because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"I've had a quite a few different experiences here," Shiffrin said. "I have felt everything you can feel here so it's special to be back."

## Sexual assault reports increase at US military academies

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Reported sexual assaults at U.S. military academies shot up during the 2021-22 school year, and one in five female students told an anonymous survey that they had experienced unwanted sexual contact, The Associated Press has learned.

A Pentagon report on reported assaults at the Army, Navy and Air Force academies shows an overall 18% jump in assaults reported by students compared with the previous year. The increase was driven largely by the Navy, which had nearly double the number of reported assaults in 2022, compared with 2021. It's unclear whether the phasing out of COVID-19-related restrictions contributed to the increase, including at the U.S. Naval Academy, which is directly adjacent to bars in downtown Annapolis, Maryland.

An anonymous student survey accompanying the report shows increases in all types of unwanted sexual contact — from touching to rape — at all the schools. And it cites alcohol as a key factor.

The military services and the academies have struggled for years to combat sexual assault and harassment, with a myriad of prevention, education and treatment programs every year. But despite reams of research, recommendations and a shift to more independent prosecutions, the numbers continue to grow.

The increases have triggered outrage on Capitol Hill and a steady stream of legislation. But as yet, the changes have not appeared to make a dent in the problem, although officials argue that improved treatment programs have encouraged more victims to report the crimes.

According to U.S. officials, 155 students reported assaults during the 2022 school year, compared with 131 the previous year. Of those, students at the U.S. Naval Academy reported 61 — nearly double the school's total for the previous year, when there were 33, which was by far the lowest of all the academies for that year.

Cadets at the Air Force Academy in Colorado reported 52, the same as the previous year, and those at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York reported 42, a slight decrease from last year's 46.

Not all of the assaults included in the report happened while the students were enrolled in the academies. Because students at the academies are encouraged to report assaults, they sometimes will come forward to talk about events that happened in the years before they started school there. As a result, 16 students reported an assault in the 2021-22 school year that occurred prior to joining the military.

Another 35 cases involved civilians, active-duty service members and prep school students who allegedly were assaulted by someone who was a student. All together, the total number of reported assaults with any connection to a student was 206 — about 28% higher than last year's total of 161.

U.S. officials provided details about the findings on the condition of anonymity because the report had not yet been publicly released. The report was expected to be released later Friday.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a brief dip in cases at the academies during the shortened 2019-20 school year, when in-person classes were canceled and students were sent home in the spring to finish the semester online.

At the start of the 2020-21 school year, students faced a number of restrictions due to the ongoing pandemic. But those were reduced a bit over time, and bars and restaurants reopened. By the end of that year, the numbers began to increase again, and officials said it's hard to tell what, if any, impact COVID-19 had on the 2021 school year.

The Pentagon puts out two reports every year on the number of sexual assaults reported by military academy students and by U.S. service members. But because sexual assault is such an underreported crime, the department also conducts anonymous surveys every two years to get a clearer picture of the problem among both the students and the active duty population. Pentagon leaders believe the survey

provides a more accurate depiction of the assaults and the contributing factors.

Based on the surveys, students at the academies are also less likely to report an assault than service members who are out of school. Students may worry more about the impact on their military career or even on the career of their attacker.

According to the latest survey of academy students, 21.4% of women said they experienced unwanted sexual contact in the 2022 school year, compared with about 16% in 2018, the last year the survey was done, due to COVID-19 restrictions. For men, the rate went from 2.6% in 2018 to 4.4% in 2022.

Based on the survey, attacks against women were most often by a male who was usually in the same class year and more than half the time knew them from school or other activities. Attacks on men were more often — 55% of the time — by a female who was in the same class year and knew them.

Alcohol use was involved in well more than half of the cases reported in the survey, with a high of 65% at the Naval Academy. The report recommends additional alcohol use policies.

The report also found that sophomores and junior men were most at risk. And women are still far more likely to actually report an assault than men.

Pentagon leaders have for years pushed public campaigns urging students to report any attacks, and they argue that an increase in assault reports suggests that students feel more comfortable coming forward to seek help.

According to the report, the rates of unwanted sexual contact reported in the survey are “at or above civilian rates” based on 2014 and 2018 statistics from the American Association of Universities. No other more recent statistics were available, so it’s difficult to accurately compare the military academies with other non-military universities.

## **German police: 8 dead in Jehovah’s Witnesses hall shooting**

By PIETRO DE CRISTOFARO and GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

HAMBURG, Germany (AP) — A shooting at a Jehovah’s Witnesses hall in the German city of Hamburg left eight people dead, including apparently the perpetrator, police said Friday. An unspecified number of other people were wounded, some of them seriously.

There was no word on a possible motive for Thursday night’s attack, which stunned Germany’s second-biggest city. Chancellor Olaf Scholz, a former Hamburg mayor, described it as “a brutal act of violence.”

Police said earlier that they believed there was only one shooter, and that the person could be among the dead.

Officers apparently reached the hall while the attack was ongoing — and heard one more shot after they arrived, according to witnesses and authorities. They did not use their own firearms, a police spokesman said.

The head of Germany’s GdP police union in Hamburg, Horst Niens, said he was convinced that the swift arrival of a special operations unit “distracted the perpetrator and may have prevented further victims.”

Germany’s gun laws are more restrictive than those in the United States, but permissive compared to some European neighbors, and shootings are not unheard of.

Last year, an 18-year-old man opened fire in a packed lecture at Heidelberg University, killing one person and wounding three others before killing himself. In January 2020, a man shot dead six people including his parents and wounded two others in southwestern Germany, while a month later, a shooter who posted a racist rant online killed nine people near Frankfurt.

In the most recent shooting involving a site of worship, a far-right extremist attempted to force his way into a synagogue in Halle on Yom Kippur, Judaism’s holiest day, in October 2019. After failing to gain entry, he shot two people to death nearby.

The German government announced plans last year to crack down on gun ownership by suspected extremists and to tighten background checks. Currently, anyone wanting to acquire a firearm must show that they are suited to do so, including by proving that they require a gun. Reasons can include being part of a sports shooting club or being a hunter.

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On Friday morning, forensic investigators in protective white suits could be seen outside the Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Hall, a boxy, three-story building next to an auto repair shop, a few kilometers (miles) from downtown Hamburg. As a light snow fell, officers placed yellow cones on the ground and windowsills to mark evidence.

David Semonian, a U.S.-based spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, said in an emailed statement early Friday that members "worldwide grieve for the victims of this traumatic event."

"The congregation elders in the local area are providing pastoral care for those affected by the event," he wrote.

Police spokesman Holger Vehren said police were alerted to the shooting Thursday night and were at the scene quickly.

He said that the officers found people with apparent gunshot wounds on the ground floor, and then heard a shot from an upper floor, where they found a fatally wounded person who may have been a shooter. They did not fire their weapons.

Student Laura Bauch, who lives nearby, said there were around four periods of shooting, German news agency dpa reported. "There were always several shots in these periods," she said.

Bauch said she looked out her window and saw a person running from the ground floor to the second floor of the Jehovah's Witnesses hall.

Gregor Miebach, who lives within sight of the building, heard shots and filmed a figure entering the building through a window. In his footage, shots can then be heard from inside. The figure later apparently emerges from the hall, is seen in the courtyard and then fires more shots through a first floor window before the lights in the room go out.

Miebach told German television news agency NonstopNews that he heard at least 25 shots. After police arrived, one last shot followed, he said.

His mother, Dorte Miebach, said she was shocked by the shooting. "It's really 50 meters (yards) from our house and many people died," she said. "This is still incomprehensible. We still haven't quite come to terms with it.

Jehovah's Witnesses are part of an international church, founded in the United States in the 19th century and headquartered in Warwick, New York. It claims a worldwide membership of about 8.7 million, with about 170,000 in Germany.

Members are known for their evangelistic efforts that include knocking on doors and distributing literature in public squares. The denomination's practices include a refusal to bear arms, receive blood transfusions, salute a national flag or participate in secular government.

## Xi awarded 3rd term as China's president, extending rule

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese leader Xi Jinping was awarded a third five-year term as the nation's president Friday, putting him on track to stay in power for life at a time of severe economic challenges and rising tensions with the U.S. and others.

The endorsement of Xi's appointment by the ceremonial National People's Congress was a foregone conclusion for a leader who has sidelined potential rivals and filled the top ranks of the ruling Communist Party with his supporters since taking power in 2012.

The vote for Xi was 2,952 to 0 by the NPC, members of which are appointed by the ruling party.

Xi, 69, had himself named to a third five-year term as party general secretary in October, breaking with a tradition under which Chinese leaders handed over power once a decade. A two-term limit on the figurehead presidency was deleted from the Chinese Constitution earlier, prompting suggestions he might stay in power for life.

No candidate lists were distributed, and Xi and those awarded other posts were believed to have run unopposed. The election remains almost entirely shrouded in secrecy, apart from the process in which delegates to the congress put four ballots into boxes placed around the vast auditorium of the Great Hall of the People.



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Xi was also unanimously named commander of the 2 million-member People's Liberation Army, a force that explicitly takes its orders from the party rather than the country.

In other voting, the party's third-ranking official, Zhao Leji, was named head of the National People's Congress. The vast majority of the body's legislative work is headed by its Standing Committee, which meets year-round.

Zhao, 67, a holdover from the previous party Politburo Standing Committee, the apex of political power in China headed by Xi, won Xi's trust as head of the party's anti-corruption watchdog, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, pursuing an anti-graft campaign that has frozen all potential opposition to Xi.

Former Shanghai party boss and member of the last Politburo Standing Committee Han Zheng was named to the largely ceremonial post of state vice president.

Xi, Zhao and Han then took the oath of office with one hand on a copy of the Chinese Constitution. The session also swore in 14 congress vice chairpersons.

Wang Huning, a holdover from the last Politburo Standing Committee, was later named head of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the NPC's advisory body that, in coordination with the party's United Front Department, works to build Xi's influence and image abroad. Wang has been a top adviser to three Chinese leaders and has authored books critiquing Western politics and society.

Xi's new term and the appointment of loyalists to top posts underscores his near-total monopoly on Chinese political power, eliminating any potential opposition to his hyper-nationalistic agenda of building China into the top political, military and economic rival to the U.S. and the chief authoritarian challenge to the Washington-led democratic world order.

While six others serve with him on the Politburo Standing Committee, all have longstanding ties to Xi and can be counted on to see to his will on issues from party discipline to economic management.

The standing committee has only men and the 24-member Politburo, which has had only four female members since the 1990s, also has no women after the departure of Vice Premier Sun Chunlan.

Second-ranked Li Qiang is widely expected to take over as premier, nominally in charge of the Cabinet and caretaker of the economy. Li is best known for ruthlessly enforcing a brutal "zero-COVID" lockdown on Shanghai last spring as party boss of the Chinese financial hub, proving his loyalty to Xi in the face of complaints from residents over their lack of access to food, medical care and basic services.

Former head of the manufacturing powerhouse of Guangdong province, seventh-ranked Li Xi has already been appointed to replace Zhao as head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection.

The congress is also expected to pass a measures intensifying party control over national level government organs as part of Xi's campaign of centralizing power under the party.

At the opening of the annual congress session on Sunday, outgoing Premier Li Keqiang announced plans for a consumer-led revival of the struggling economy, setting this year's growth target at "around 5%." Last year's growth in the world's second-largest economy fell to 3%, the second-weakest level since at least the 1970s.

Separately, the Ministry of Finance announced a 7.2% budget increase in the defense budget to 1.55 trillion yuan (\$224 billion), marking a slight increase over 2022. China's military spending is the world's second highest after the United States.

In the days then, Xi and his new Foreign Minister Qin Gang have set a highly combative tone for relations with the U.S., amid tensions over trade, technology, Taiwan, human rights and Beijing's refusal to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

On Tuesday, Qin warned in unusually stark terms about the possibility of U.S.-China frictions leading to something more dire.

"If the United States does not hit the brake, but continues to speed down the wrong path, no amount of guardrails can prevent derailing and there surely will be conflict and confrontation," Qin said in his first news conference since taking up his post last year.

That echoed comments at a small group meeting of delegates from Xi on Monday, in which he said that "Western countries led by the United States have implemented all-round containment, encirclement and

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suppression of China, which has brought unprecedented grave challenges to our nation's development." Xi followed up on Wednesday by calling for "more quickly elevating the armed forces to world-class standards."

China must maximize its "national strategic capabilities" in a bid to "systematically upgrade the country's overall strength to cope with strategic risks, safeguard strategic interests and realize strategic objectives," Xi was quoted as saying to a meeting of delegates by the official Xinhua News Agency.

Asked about China's future foreign relations under Xi, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning struck a relatively mild tone.

Beijing maintains an "independent foreign policy of peace" and will "continue to view and develop China-U.S. relations in accordance with the principles of peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and win-win cooperation," Mao said at a daily briefing.

"We hope the U.S. side can also meet us halfway and push China-U.S. relations back on the track of sound and stable development," she said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, with whom Xi has formed close ties, issued his congratulations, saying Xi's new term is an "acknowledgement of your achievements as the head of state, as well as wide support of your policy focused on China's socioeconomic development and protection of its national interests on the global stage."

Under Xi, China and Russia announced a "no limits" relationship and China has pointedly refused to criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine while echoing Moscow's claim that the U.S. and NATO were to blame for provoking the Kremlin. Beijing has also blasted sanctions imposed on Russia after it invaded Ukraine, while Russia has staunchly supported China amid tensions with the U.S. over Taiwan.

"We will continue to coordinate our joint work related to the most important issues on the regional and international agenda," Putin said, according to the Kremlin.

## Is inflation still surging? Jobs report will provide clues

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A month ago, the government dropped a bombshell jobs report that showed that America's employers added a sizzling half-million-plus positions in January — twice the December gain and far more than economists had expected.

The February jobs report, to be released Friday, will be closely watched by economists who are eager to know whether the January blowout was a one-time blip or some sign of a strengthening economy.

The answer could heavily influence what the Federal Reserve does in the coming months. A second month of robust hiring could amplify fears that inflation is re-accelerating after months in which it had appeared to be steadily easing. The Fed, in response, would likely pursue a more aggressive pace of rate hikes beginning with its next policy meeting in two weeks.

Some economists say they think the central bank will announce a substantial half-point increase in its key short-term interest rate, rather than a quarter point hike as it did at its meeting in February. In testimony to Congress this week, Chair Jerome Powell made clear that the Fed would increase the size of its rate hikes if evidence continued to point to a robust economy and persistently high inflation.

When the Fed raises its benchmark rate, it typically leads to higher rates on mortgages, auto loans, credit card borrowing and business loans. The goal in raising loan rates is to cool borrowing and spending and slow inflation.

Economists have estimated that employers significantly slowed their hiring in February, with a gain of 208,000 jobs, according to a survey by the data provider FactSet. Though that figure would be far below January's gain, it would still be consistent with a healthy economy.

Rapid hiring typically leads businesses to offer higher pay to attract or keep workers, and their higher labor costs are often passed on to their customers through higher prices. It's a cycle that tends to keep inflation elevated.

"We have two or three more very important data releases to analyze before" the Fed's next meeting,

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Powell told the Senate Banking Committee on Tuesday. "Those are going to be very important."

Besides Friday's jobs report, those data releases include Tuesday's report on consumer inflation in February. Last month's report on January inflation had raised alarms by showing that consumer prices reaccelerated on a month-to-month basis.

January's vigorous hiring data was the first in a series of reports to point to an accelerating economy at the start of the year. Employers added 517,000 jobs, the most in nearly a year, and the unemployment rate reached 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969. Sales at retail stores and restaurants also jumped, and inflation, according to the Fed's preferred measure, rose from December to January at the fastest pace in seven months.

The stronger data reversed a cautiously optimistic narrative that the economy was cooling modestly — just enough, perhaps, to tame inflation without triggering a deep recession. Now, the economic outlook is hazier.

High borrowing rates have cratered the housing market, with home sales having dropped for 12 straight months, a consequence of the average mortgage rate nearly doubling over that time. Manufacturing is also showing signs of weakness. Higher rates have made it harder for businesses and consumers to borrow to buy major factory goods, from machinery to cars to appliances.

By contrast, spending for services — things like traveling, dining out and attending entertainment events — remains strong. Many Americans continue to engage in activities that were restricted during the COVID lockdowns.

One reason why hiring likely slowed in February, analysts say, is that some of the outsize hiring in January had reflected one-time factors. The weather, for example, was unusually warm, which likely caused more people to go out and spend and allowed more construction projects to continue. The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco has estimated that the weather added about 120,000 jobs to January's total.

And a strike by workers at the University of California system ended, adding 36,000 jobs to January's total. Subtracting those two factors would have lowered job growth in January to about 360,000, matching the average gain for the past six months.

Hiring even at that rate is about triple the level the Fed would prefer. Job gains of about 100,000 a month would be just enough to keep up with population growth and prevent unemployment from rising. A figure that low would also mean that employers weren't so desperate for workers and wouldn't have to keep raising wages.

Higher pay is great for employees, of course. But Fed officials say it is contributing to higher inflation, particularly in labor-intensive service industries like restaurants, health care and hotels.

"Strong wage growth is good for workers but only if it is not eroded by inflation," Powell said in testimony to Congress on Wednesday.

## **Anti-Russia guerrillas in Belarus take on 'two-headed enemy'**

By The Associated Press undefined

After Russia invaded Ukraine, guerrillas from Belarus began carrying out acts of sabotage on their country's railways, including blowing up track equipment to paralyze the rails that Russian forces used to get troops and weapons into Ukraine.

In the most recent sabotage to make international headlines, they attacked a Russian warplane parked just outside the Belarusian capital.

"Belarusians will not allow the Russians to freely use our territory for the war with Ukraine, and we want to force them to leave," Anton, a retired Belarusian serviceman who joined a group of saboteurs, told The Associated Press in a phone interview.

"The Russians must understand on whose side the Belarusians are actually fighting," he said, speaking on the condition that his last name be withheld for security reasons.

More than a year after Russia used the territory of its neighbor and ally to invade Ukraine, Belarus con-

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tinues to host Russian troops, as well as warplanes, missiles and other weapons. The Belarusian opposition condemns the cooperation, and a guerrilla movement sprang up to disrupt the Kremlin's operations, both on the ground and online. Meanwhile, Belarus' authoritarian government is trying to crack down on saboteurs with threats of the death penalty and long prison terms.

Activists say the rail attacks have forced the Russian military to abandon the use of trains to send troops and materiel to Ukraine.

The retired serviceman is a member of the Association of Security Forces of Belarus, or BYPOL, a guerrilla group founded amid mass political protests in Belarus in 2020. Its core is composed of former military members.

During the first year of the war, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko realized that getting involved in the conflict "will cost him a lot and will ignite dangerous processes inside Belarus," said Anton Matolka, coordinator of the Belarusian military monitoring group Belaruski Hajun.

Last month, BYPOL claimed responsibility for a drone attack on a Russian warplane stationed near the Belarusian capital. The group said it used two armed drones to damage the Beriev A-50 parked at the Machulishchy Air Base near Minsk. Belarusian authorities have said they requested the early warning aircraft to monitor their border.

Lukashenko acknowledged the attack a week later, saying that the damage to the plane was insignificant, but admitting it had to be sent to Russia for repairs.

The iron-fisted leader also said the perpetrator of the attack was arrested along with more than 20 accomplices and that he has ties to Ukrainian security services.

Both BYPOL and Ukrainian authorities rejected allegations that Kyiv was involved. BYPOL leader Aliaksandr Azarau said the people who carried out the assault were able to leave Belarus safely.

"We are not familiar with the person Lukashenko talked about," he said.

The attack on the plane, which Azarau said was used to help Russia locate Ukrainian air defense systems, was "an attempt to blind Russian military aviation in Belarus."

He said the group is preparing other operations to free Belarus "from the Russian occupation" and to free Belarus from Lukashenko's regime.

"We have a two-headed enemy these days," said Azarau, who remains outside Belarus.

Former military officers in the BYPOL group work closely with the team of Belarus' exiled opposition leader, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who ran against Lukashenko in the 2020 presidential election that was widely seen as rigged.

The disputed vote results handed him his sixth term in office and triggered the largest protests in the country's history. In response, Lukashenko unleashed a brutal crackdown on demonstrators, accusing the opposition of plotting to overthrow the government. Tsikhanouskaya fled to Lithuania under pressure.

With the protests still simmering a year after the election, BYPOL created an underground network of anti-government activists dubbed Peramoha, or Victory. According to Azarau, the network has some 200,000 participants, two-thirds of them in Belarus.

"Lukashenko has something to be afraid of," Azarau said.

Belarusian guerrillas say they have already carried out 17 major acts of sabotage on railways. The first took place just two days after Russian troops rolled into Ukraine.

A month later, then-Ukrainian railways head Oleksandr Kamyshin said there "was no longer any railway traffic between Ukraine and Belarus," and thanked Belarusian guerrillas for it.

Another group of guerrillas operates in cyberspace. Their coordinator, Yuliana Shametavets, said some 70 Belarusian IT specialists are hacking into Russian government databases and attacking websites of Russian and Belarusian state institutions.

"The future of Belarus depends directly on the military success of Ukraine," Shametavets said. "We're trying to contribute to Ukraine's victory as best we can."

Last month, the cyberguerrillas reported hacking a subsidiary of Russia's state media watchdog, Roskomnadzor. They said they were able to penetrate the subsidiary's inner network, download more than two terabytes of documents and emails, and share data showing how Russian authorities censor information



about the war in Ukraine.

They also hacked into Belarus' state database containing information about border crossings and are now preparing a report on Ukrainian citizens who were recruited by Russia and went to meet with their handlers in Belarus.

In addition, the cyberguerrillas help vet Belarusians who volunteer to join the Kastus Kalinouski regiment that fights alongside Kyiv's forces. Shametovets said they were able to identify four security operatives among the applicants.

Belarusian authorities have unleashed a crackdown on guerrillas.

Last May, Lukashenko signed off on introducing the death penalty for attempted terrorist acts. Last month, the Belarusian parliament also adopted the death penalty as punishment for high treason. Lukashenko signed the measure Thursday.

"Belarusian authorities are seriously scared by the scale of the guerrilla movement inside the country and don't know what to do with it, so they chose harsh repressions, intimidation and fear as the main tool," said Pavel Sapelka of the Viasna human rights group.

Dozens have been arrested, while many others have fled the country.

Siarhei Vaitsekhovich runs a Telegram blog where he regularly posts about Russian drills in Belarus and the deployment of Russian military equipment and troops to the country. He had to leave Belarus after authorities began investigating him on charges of treason and forming an extremist group.

Vaitsekhovich said his 15-year-old brother was recently detained in an effort to pressure him to take the blog down and cooperate with the security services.

The Russian Federal Security Service "is very unhappy with the fact that information about movements of Russian military equipment spills out into public domain," Vaitsekhovich said.

According to Viasna, over the past 12 months at least 1,575 Belarusians have been detained for their anti-war stance, and 56 have been convicted on various charges and sentenced to prison terms ranging from a year to 23 years.

Anton says he understands the risks. On one of the railway attacks he worked with three associates who were each sentenced in November to more than 20 years in prison.

"It is hard to say who is in a more difficult position — a Ukrainian in a trench or a Belarusian on a stake-out," he said.

## **Feds: Proud Boys deployed foot soldiers in sedition plot**

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal prosecutors are employing an unusual strategy to prove leaders of the far-right Proud Boys extremist group orchestrated a violent plot to keep President Joe Biden out of the White House, even though some of the defendants didn't carry out the violence themselves.

As they wrap up their seditious conspiracy case, prosecutors are arguing that Proud Boys chief Enrique Tarrío and other leaders of the group handpicked and mobilized a loyal group of foot soldiers — or "tools" — to supply the force necessary to carry out their plot to stop the transfer of power from Donald Trump to President Joe Biden after the 2020 election.

These "tools" helped Proud Boys leaders overwhelm police, breach barricades, force the evacuation of the House and Senate chambers and disrupt the certification of Biden's victory, prosecutors allege.

Defense attorneys have dismissed the "tools" theory as a novel, flawed concept with no legal foundation. They argue that the Justice Department is trying to unfairly hold their clients responsible for the violent actions of others in the crowd of Trump supporters. Tarrío, for example, wasn't even in Washington on Jan. 6.

The seditious conspiracy trial, which started nearly two months ago, is one of the most serious cases to emerge from the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol and comes as some conservatives continue to try to downplay the riot and push false narratives about what happened that day. Tarrío, who led the neofascist group as it became a force in mainstream Republican circles, is among the highest-profile defendants to stand trial yet and could face up to 20 years in prison if convicted of seditious conspiracy.

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Seditious conspiracy — a rarely used charge from the Civil War-era — can be difficult to prove, especially when the plot was unsuccessful. And the group leaders on trial aren't accused of engaging in violence themselves. Tarrio was arrested on separate charges two days before the riot.

Tarrio is on trial with Ethan Nordean of Auburn, Washington, who was a Proud Boys chapter president; Joseph Biggs of Ormond Beach, Florida, a self-described Proud Boys organizer; Zachary Rehl, who president of the Proud Boys chapter in Philadelphia; and Dominic Pezzola, a Proud Boy member from Rochester, New York.

Their trial could stretch into April. Prosecutors are expected to rest their case as soon as next week. Defense lawyers plan to present at least two weeks of testimony before jurors get the case.

The prosecution's case hit a snag this week with the revelation that the government accidentally provided defense attorneys with sensitive messages from FBI agents. Testimony was suspended until next week as authorities searched the files for possible classified information.

The Justice Department presented a more conventional theory at the trial last year for Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes, who was convicted of seditious conspiracy along with another leader of the antigovernment group. Oath Keepers members stockpiled guns at a Virginia hotel so they could shuttle them across the Potomac River into Washington if they were needed to support their plot to stop the transfer of power, prosecutors said. The weapons were never deployed.

In this case, prosecutors are trying to show that the Proud Boys used people as their weapons.

"The Oath Keepers had their rifles. The Proud Boys had their 'real men,'" prosecutor Conor Mulroe has said.

Mulroe was referring to text messages that Proud Boys organizer Joseph Biggs sent to Tarrio weeks before the Jan. 6, 2021, attack at the Capitol. In a Dec. 19 text, Biggs told Tarrio that the Proud Boys have been recruiting "losers who wanna drink."

"Let's get radical and get real men," Biggs added.

Randall Eliason, an adjunct professor at George Washington University Law School and former federal prosecutor, described prosecutors' tools theory as "unusual but not remarkable."

"It's not something that comes up a lot, but there's nothing controversial about the idea," he said. "And the word 'tools' is kind of the perfect way to describe it. In other words, whether you use a battering ram to break down the door of the Capitol or whether you enlist a bunch of other people to help you break down the door to the Capitol, they're all tools, right?"

Prosecutors this week publicly identified nearly two dozen Proud Boys members and associates they say served as "tools." All but one of the 23 people named as "tools" have been publicly and separately charged with Capitol riot-related crimes.

An FBI agent narrated videos for jurors that show Proud Boys' "tools" marching from the Washington Monument to the Capitol and clashing with police officers who were trying to hold off the mob of Trump supporters.

"Let's go! This is what we came for!" Proud Boys member William Pepe shouted before taking down a police barricade.

Prosecutors argue the "tools" didn't have to know the ultimate goal of the Proud Boys' conspiracy to be part of it. Mulroe compared the concept to human "mules" unwittingly transporting drugs or money.

"The case is about the concerted efforts of a group of people, this group that the defendants called real men. And our position is that they weaponized these people," the prosecutor said.

Before the trial started in January, U.S. District Judge Timothy Kelly ruled that prosecutors could present evidence to support their "tools" theory. The judge acknowledged it's an "unusual" theory but said the actions of rioters who followed Proud Boys leaders to the Capitol can be relevant under certain circumstances.

Norman Pattis, an attorney for Biggs, said comparing Oath Keepers' guns to Proud Boys followers is a "clumsy analogy." Pattis also said he doesn't know of any case in which prosecutors have been allowed to argue that "acts of third parties are the legal responsibility of criminal defendants absent some nexus other than mere proximity and shared political views."

"There is nothing but rank and dangerous speculation supporting this theory," he wrote in court papers, urging the judge to "reject such evidence as little more than an effort to make hindsight do the work of proof."

## **Iraq's crackdown on booze, social media posts raises alarm**

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Only a few months into its term, Iraq's government is suddenly enforcing a long-dormant law banning alcohol imports and arresting people over social media content deemed morally offensive. The crackdown has raised alarm among religious minorities and rights activists.

Some see the measures as an attempt by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani to head off potential political challenges from religious conservatives and to distract from economic woes, such as rising prices and wild currency fluctuations.

The ban on the import, sale and production of alcohol was adopted in 2016, but was only published in the official gazette last month, making it enforceable. On Saturday, Iraq's customs authority ordered all border crossings to impose the prohibition.

Although many liquor stores across Iraq continued business as usual — presumably using up their stocks — border crossings went dry overnight, with the exception of the northern, semi-autonomous Kurdish region which hasn't enforced the ban. The price of alcohol, meanwhile, spiked due to tightened supply.

Ghazwan Issa manufactures arak, a popular anise-flavored spirit, at his factory in Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. He sells it, along with imported, foreign-made alcohol, at 15 stores in Baghdad.

"There are imported goods at the borders that are not allowed to enter, with a value of tens of millions of dollars," he said.

Issa said he is also stuck with \$3 million worth of goods in warehouses — liquor produced in his factory. It's not clear yet if and when the ban on the sale of alcohol will be enforced as well, but Issa said he won't send his trucks from his Mosul factory to Baghdad for fear they'll get stopped.

For Issa, the ban is a blow to Iraq's multi-confessional social fabric. He believes it will prompt more non-Muslims to emigrate.

Alcohol is generally prohibited in Islam — the religion of the vast majority of Iraqis — but is permitted and used in religious rituals by Christians, who make up 1% of Iraq's population of about 40 million.

"The law is a narrowing of freedoms," Issa said, adding the ban would encourage "bribes and blackmail, because alcohol will be sold the same way like illegal drugs."

Joseph Sliwa, a former Christian lawmaker, blamed the decision to start enforcing the law on extremists within Iraq's Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities. He said alcohol shop owners and producers would become vulnerable, with those in power or armed groups likely trying to squeeze them for bribes.

Like Issa, Sliwa also worried the alcohol ban could increase the use of illegal drugs.

A judge and former lawmaker, Mahmoud al-Hassan, defended the ban as constitutional and argued that it's in line with the beliefs of most Iraqis and therefore would not impact personal freedoms.

"Quite the opposite, the majority of the people of Iraq are Muslim and their freedoms should be respected," he said. "They make up 97% of the country."

He downplayed fears that outlawing alcohol would increase trafficking of other drugs. "Drugs already exist, with or without this law," he said. "Alcohol also causes addiction and social problems."

The alcohol ban comes on the heels of the contentious campaign to police social media content.

In January, the Interior Ministry formed a committee to investigate reports of what it called indecent posts and set up a website for public complaints. The site received tens of thousands of reports.

A month later, judicial authorities announced the courts had charged 14 people for posting content labeled indecent or immoral; six were sentenced to prison time.

Among those targeted were people who posted videos of music, comedy skits and sarcastic social commentary. Some showed dance moves deemed provocative, used obscene language or raised sensitive social issues such as gender relations in Iraq's predominantly conservative society.

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Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as local and regional rights groups, said the crackdown on expression violates fundamental rights.

"Iraqis should be free to express themselves ... whether it is to make jokes or engage in satire, criticize or hold authorities accountable, discuss politics or religious topics, share joyful dancing, or have public conversations on sensitive or controversial issues," the groups said in a joint statement.

Amer Hassan, a Baghdad court judge dealing with publishing and media issues, defended the arrests in an interview with the state Iraqi News Agency.

"There is a confusion between freedom of expression, which is protected by the constitution" and what he called offensive content.

Hamzeh Hadad, an adjunct fellow at the Center for a New American Security, a Washington-based think tank, said the measures could be part of an attempt to distract from Iraq's unstable currency and to pander to the base of the conservative Shiite cleric and political leader Muqtada al-Sadr, a rival of al-Sudani's bloc.

Hadad said the alcohol ban could disproportionately affect Christians and other non-Muslim religious minorities — a dwindling population in Iraq, particularly in the years since the formation of the extremist Islamic State group, which at one point controlled wide swaths of the country.

However, Hadad noted there were also "powerful actors with financial interests in alcohol" who might legally challenge or simply flout the ban.

Religious minorities are not the only ones pushing back against the measures.

"I personally am a Muslim and am not with the law," said Mohammed Jassim, a 27-year-old from Baghdad who says he drinks alcohol regularly. Now he and others like him "will be forced to purchase alcohol under the table from those who dare sell it illegally," he said.

Many Christians see the ban as an attempt to marginalize their community.

In the northern Christian town of Qaraqosh, a liquor shop owner who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear his business could be targeted, said the government's move stings, particularly in the wake of years of deadly attacks on Christians by IS militants.

"They are telling us to get out, we don't want you in this country anymore," he said.

## East coast African states ail from too much, too little rain

By WANJOHI KABUKURU Associated Press

MOMBASA, Kenya (AP) — Surrounded by miles of dried land and what remains of his famished livestock, Daniel Lepaine is a worried man. Dozens of his goats in Ngong, a town in southern Kenya, have died after three years of harrowing drought in the east and Horn of Africa. The rest are on the verge of starvation as rain continues to fail.

"If this drought persists, I will have no livelihood and nothing for my family," Lepaine mourned. "We are praying hard for the rains."

But a few thousand miles south, communities are facing the opposite problem.

Tropical Cyclone Freddy, which has already caused 21 deaths and displaced thousands of others in Madagascar and Mozambique, is set to make landfall in Mozambique once more on Friday. The nation is already suffering from Freddy's first battering last month and severe flooding before that.

Meteorologists told The Associated Press the uneven and devastating water distribution across Africa's east coast states is caused by natural weather systems and exacerbated by human-made climate change with cyclones sucking up water that would otherwise be destined for nations further north.

"The trend has always been two contrasting weather systems," said Evans Mukolwe, the former head of Kenya's meteorological department. "Intensified cyclones in the southern Africa region translates into drought on the eastern side including Horn of Africa."

The current drought in the region began in late 2020, when the region's short rains season failed. Meteorologists traced the lack of rain to the start of La Nina in late summer of the same year, the natural and cyclical weather event that cools sea surface temperatures in the Pacific, with knock-on effects for the African continent and the rest of the world.



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La Nina, together with El Nino and the neutral condition are called ENSO, which stands for El Nino Southern Oscillation. These events have the largest natural effects on climate and can dampen or juice up the effects of human-caused climate change.

"There is a connection between the El Nino Southern Oscillation, rainfall patterns and drought in east and southern Africa," said climate scientist Marjahn Finlayson. La Nina means east Africa "would be primed for drier conditions while southern Africa would be more primed to experience wetter and more humid conditions."

When it comes to tropical cyclones, ENSO is a large factor in where they form and end up, said Anne-Claire Fontaine, a scientific officer with the World Meteorological Organization's tropical cyclone program.

El Nino favors tropical cyclones forming over the central basin of the Indian Ocean that then move toward the south pole, Fontaine said. "Whereas La Nina favors tropical cyclone formation over the eastern to central part of the basin and zonal tracks running westward to south westward" where it slams into southern Africa.

The damaging La Nina was declared over on Thursday by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which meteorologists say might spell better news ahead for the continent.

"It means that we will be entering an ENSO-neutral period until about June or so," said Finlayson, when El Nino is then expected to take over — potentially zapping the drought.

"End of La Nina means El Nino rains. But this may not happen immediately. For Africa, El Nino rains are normally expected in the short rains seasons which run from October to December," said Mukolwe.

But there's still the effect of climate change, which is worsening cyclones and drought by making them longer, more intense and more severe, according to the United Nations' weather agency. Studies going back to mid-1980s suggest there is a clear link between warmer oceans and the intensity and number of cyclones.

Africa is particularly vulnerable to climate change and extreme weather events like floods, cyclones, droughts, wildfires and sandstorms because it has less capacity to prepare for natural disasters, according to a U.N. report. The continent only contributes about 4% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions but suffers disproportionately.

Southern Africa is still in the throes of its cyclone season, with heavy flooding killing dozens, destroying homes and uprooting communities. Since 2019, the region has borne the brunt of 20 cyclones. A scientific analysis of the cyclones in the region last year found that climate change made the tropical storms more damaging and intense.

Meanwhile in the east and Horn of Africa, now in its sixth straight dry season, communities are counting huge losses. Authorities say 11 million livestock and iconic wildlife species have died due to the drought, leaving pastoralist families in abject poverty. Over 6,000 wild animals were lost to drought in Kenya alone by mid-February, according to the Kenya Wildlife Service, including elephants, giraffes and wildebeests.

But Finlayson is cautiously optimistic for the east of the continent in the short to medium term.

"Predictions are that we should expect a strong El Nino that will last from June to August," she said, which would provide better conditions on Africa's east coast. "It may be likely that we see those effects in the boreal autumn, but we have to wait and see."

## Multiple dead in Jehovah's Witness hall shooting in Germany

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Shots were fired inside a building used by Jehovah's Witnesses in the northern German city of Hamburg on Thursday evening, with several people killed and wounded, police said.

"We only know that several people died here; several people are wounded, they were taken to hospitals," police spokesperson Holger Vehren said of the shooting in the Gross Borstel district of Germany's second-biggest city.

He said he had no information on the severity of the injuries suffered by the wounded. Police did not confirm German media reports, which named no sources, of six or seven dead.

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David Semonian, a U.S.-based spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses, told The Associated Press in an emailed statement early Friday that members "worldwide grieve for the victims of this traumatic event."

"The congregation elders in the local area are providing pastoral care for those affected by the event," he wrote. "We understand that the authorities are still investigating the details of this crime. We appreciate the courageous help provided by the police and emergency services."

In a Twitter update in the early hours Friday, Hamburg police said they believed there was only one shooter and they were gradually rolling back security forces from the area.

"The investigation into the motive behind the crime continues," police said.

Hamburg security officials said there would be a news conference Friday afternoon to discuss details.

The scene of the shooting was the Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom Hall, a modern and boxy three-story building next to an auto repair shop.

Vehren said police were alerted to the shooting about 9:15 p.m. and were on the scene quickly.

He said that after officers arrived and found people with apparent gunshot wounds on the ground floor, they heard a shot from an upper floor and found a fatally wounded person upstairs who may have been a shooter. He said police did not have to use their firearms.

Vehren said there was no indication that a shooter was on the run and that it appeared likely that the perpetrator was either in the building or among the dead.

Through the night, forensic investigators in protective white suits could be seen walking through the building continuing their work.

Student Laura Bauch, who lives nearby, said "there were about four periods of shooting," German news agency dpa reported. "There were always several shots in these periods, roughly at intervals of 20 seconds to a minute," she said.

She said she looked out her window and saw a person running from the ground floor to the second floor of the Jehovah's Witnesses hall.

Gregor Miesbach, who lives within sight of the building, was alerted by the sound of shots and filmed a figure entering the building through a window. Shots can then be heard from inside. The figure later apparently emerges from the hall, is seen in the courtyard and then fires more shots inside.

Miesbach told German television news agency NonstopNews that he heard at least 25 shots. After police arrived, one last shot followed about five minutes later, he said.

His video, posted online by Bild newspaper, showed a person firing multiple shots into the building through a first floor window before the lights inside the room went out.

Early Friday morning, investigators could be seen working outside the building as a light snow fell, placing yellow cones on the ground and windowsills to mark evidence.

Police had no information on the event that was underway in the building when the shooting took place. They also had no immediate information on a possible motive. Vehren said that "the background is still completely unclear."

Hamburg Mayor Peter Tschentscher tweeted that the news was "shocking" and offered his sympathy to the victims' relatives.

Jehovah's Witnesses are part of an international church, founded in the United States in the 19th century and headquartered in Warwick, New York. It claims a worldwide membership of about 8.7 million, with about 170,000 in Germany.

Members are known for their evangelistic efforts that include knocking on doors and distributing literature in public squares. The denomination's distinctive practices include a refusal to bear arms, receive blood transfusions, salute a national flag or participate in secular government.

## **Biden budget vs. House GOP: Values on display in debt fight**

By LISA MASCARO and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For President Joe Biden, his federal budget is a statement of values — the dollars and cents of a governing philosophy that believes the wealthy and large corporations should pay more

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taxes to help stem deficits and lift Americans toward middle class stability

In the view of his chief congressional critics led by House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, the budget is also the arena where they intend to challenge the president with values of their own — slashing the social safety net, trimming support for Ukraine and ending the so-called “woke” policies rejected by Republicans.

It’s the blueprint for a summer showdown as Biden confronts Republicans over the raising the debt ceiling to pay off the nation’s accrued balances, a familiar battle that will define the president and the political parties ahead of the 2024 election.

“I’m ready to meet with the speaker any time — tomorrow, if he has his budget,” Biden said while rolling out his own \$6.8 trillion spending proposal Thursday in Philadelphia.

“Lay it down. Tell me what you want to do. I’ll show you what I want to do. See what we can agree on,” said Biden, the Democratic president egging on the Republican leader.

But McCarthy, in his first term as House speaker, is nowhere near being ready to present a GOP proposal at the negotiating table to start talks in earnest with the White House.

While Republicans newly empowered in the House have bold ideas about rolling back government spending to fiscal 2022 levels and putting the federal budget on a path to balance within the next decade, they have no easy ideas for how to meet those goals.

McCarthy declined this week to say when House Republicans intend to produce their own proposal, blaming their delays on Biden’s own tardiness in rolling out his plan.

“We want to analyze his budget based upon the question as to where can we find common ground,” McCarthy said. “So we’ll analyze his budget and then we’ll get to work.”

Squaring off, it’s a fresh take on the budget battles of a decade ago when Biden, as vice president, confronted an earlier generation of “tea party” House Republicans eager to cut the debt load and balance budgets.

What’s changed in the decade since the last big budget showdown in Washington is the solidifying of the GOP’s MAGA wing, inspired by the Trump-era Make American Great Again slogan, to turn the fiscal battles into cultural wars. The nation’s total debt load has almost doubled during that time to \$31 trillion.

Beyond the dollars and cents, the new era of House Republicans see the coming debt ceiling fight as a battle for their very existence — a test of their mandate in the new House majority to push back against liberals in Washington.

“There’s going to be a whole bunch of noise, and then everybody will push up to the brink and then someone’s gonna blink — I don’t intend to,” said Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, an influential member of the hard-right Freedom Caucus.

As pressure mounts on McCarthy, the president is trying to steal some thunder as he rolled out a proposal this week that spotlights deficit reductions that are a centerpiece of GOP goals.

Biden’s approach is a turn-around from the start of the year when he refused to negotiate with Republicans, demanding Congress send him a straightforward bill to raise the debt limit. At the time, the president wouldn’t entertain a conversation about spending changes McCarthy committed to as part of his campaign to become speaker.

The White House’s budget plan would cut the deficit by \$2.9 trillion over 10 years, a rebuttal to GOP criticism that Biden’s deficit spending to address the pandemic has fueled inflation and hurt the economy.

Speaking to union members in Philadelphia, Biden said McCarthy needed to follow his lead and publicly release his own numbers so that they can negotiate “line by line.”

With his budget, Biden showed the math of how he would lower the trajectory of the national debt. Yet his approach to fiscal responsibility is unacceptable to Republicans, since it would require \$4.7 trillion in higher taxes on corporations and people making more than \$400,000.

The president also wants an additional \$2.5 trillion in spending on programs such as an expanded child tax credit that would improve family finances.

“When the middle class does well, the poor have a way up and the wealthy still do very well,” the president said as he framed the showdown as a difference of principles.

By refusing to raise taxes, the Republicans in the House are relying almost exclusively on reductions

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to bring budgets into balance. It's a painful, potentially devastating endeavor, inflicting cuts on programs Americans depend on in their communities. Republicans cannot say when their budget will be ready.

"We're getting close," said Rep. Jody Arrington, R-Texas, the new chairman of the House Budget Committee.

Because McCarthy has yet to release his budget, Biden has toured the country and talked to audiences about past Republican plans to cut Social Security and Medicare.

McCarthy insists reductions to the Medicare and Social Security entitlement programs that millions of America's seniors and others depend on are off the table — and Republicans howled in protest during Biden's State of the Union address to Congress last month when the president claimed otherwise.

But by shielding those programs from cuts and opposing any tax increases, GOP lawmakers would need crippling slashes to the rest of government spending that could offend voters going into the 2024 elections.

The chamber's Freedom Caucus is eyeing reductions to supplemental disability insurance, food stamps and fresh work requirements on some people receiving government aid.

Roy, the Freedom Caucus member, outlined some \$700 billion in reductions that could be banked by reversing Biden's student loan forgiveness program, clawing back almost \$100 billion in unspent COVID-19 relief and rolling back spending to fiscal 2022 levels.

But the conservative caucus with its few dozen members is just one constituency McCarthy must balance as he tries to cobble together his ranks. The much larger Republican Study Committee is expected to roll out its ideas in April and other GOP caucuses have their own priorities.

McCarthy believes he has won a first round in the budget battles by pushing Biden to negotiate over the debt ceiling. But now the speaker faces the daunting challenge of bringing his own GOP plan to the table.

"The House Republican budget plan is in the witness protection program," said Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, the chamber's Democratic leader. "It's in hiding."

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Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

## Malaysia ex-PM Muhyiddin charged with corruption, laundering

By EILEEN NG Associated Press

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia (AP) — Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin was charged Friday with corruption and money laundering, making him Malaysia's second ex-leader to be indicted after leaving office.

Muhyiddin, 75, pleaded innocent to four charges of abusing his power to obtain 232.5 million ringgit (\$51.4 million) bribes for his party and two charges of money laundering involving 195 million ringgit (\$43 million). His party said he is expected to face an additional charge on Monday.

Muhyiddin vowed to clear his name, slamming the charges as an "evil slander" to embarrass him and crush his Islamic-dominated opposition ahead of state elections. He denied abusing his power to award contracts to selected ethnic Malay contractors in return for bribes, and to approve an appeal by a business tycoon on the cancellation of his tax exemption.

"It is an organized political persecution," Muhyiddin told a news conference after he was released on bail. "I accept this charge against me with patience. ... I choose to stand upright on the principles that I hold. This is the price that I have to pay."

Muhyiddin was first arrested Thursday and released later in the day by the anti-graft agency, which questioned him a second time over government stimulus projects for Malay contractors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Outside the court building Friday, some supporters chanted and carried banners that read "malicious intent."

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim rejected accusations that the charges were politically motivated and noted the investigations were carried out independently by the anti-graft agency. After taking power in November, Anwar ordered a review of government projects approved by past administrations including Muhyiddin, who led Malaysia from March 2020 until August 2021. Anwar has said many of the projects awarded were overpriced and given without tender.



Two senior members from Muhyiddin's Bersatu party were recently charged with graft. The anti-graft agency has also frozen Bersatu's party accounts.

Anwar and Muhyiddin had fought for the premiership after the November general elections produced a hung parliament. Muhyiddin's alliance includes a conservative Islamist party that won stronger-than-expected support from Malays, who account for about two-thirds of Malaysia's 33 million people. The king later appointed Anwar as premier after he formed a unity government with several smaller parties, but his strength will be tested in six state elections due in the next few months.

Muhyiddin was the second former leader to be charged after ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak, who was hit with multiple charges after he lost in 2018 general elections. Najib began a 12-year prison term in August after losing his final appeal in the first of several graft trials related to the looting of the 1MDB state development fund.

If Muhyiddin is found guilty, he faces up to 20 years in prison for each of the corruption charges, 15 years each for money laundering and fines.

## What's happening at Fukushima plant 12 years after meltdown?

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

OKUMA, Japan (AP) — Twelve years after the triple reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, Japan is preparing to release a massive amount of treated radioactive wastewater into the sea. Japanese officials say the release is unavoidable and should start soon.

Dealing with the wastewater is less of a challenge than the daunting task of decommissioning the plant. That process has barely progressed, and the removal of melted nuclear fuel hasn't even started.

The Associated Press recently visited the plant. Here's an update on what's happening.

### HOW ARE WATER DISCHARGE PREPARATIONS PROCEEDING?

During their visit, AP journalists saw 30 giant tanks for sampling and analyzing the water for safety checks. A concrete facility for diluting the water after it is treated and tested is in the final stages of construction. From there, the water will be released via an undersea tunnel.

The plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Company Holdings, aims to have the facilities ready by spring. TEPCO needs a safety approval from the Nuclear Regulation Authority. The International Atomic Energy Agency, collaborating with Japan to ensure the project meets international standards, will send a mission to Japan and issue a report before the discharge begins.

### WHAT IS TREATED WATER?

A magnitude 9.0 quake on March 11, 2011, triggered a massive tsunami that destroyed the plant's power supply and cooling systems, causing reactors No. 1, 2 and 3 to melt and spew large amounts of radiation. Water used to cool the reactors' cores leaked into the basements of the reactor buildings and mixed with rainwater and groundwater.

The 130 tons of contaminated water created daily is collected, treated and then stored in tanks, which now number about 1,000 and cover much of the plant's grounds. About 70% of the "ALPS-treated water," named after the machines used to filter it, still contains Cesium and other radionuclides that exceed releasable limits.

TEPCO says the radioactivity can be reduced to safe levels and it will ensure that insufficiently filtered water is treated until it meets the legal limit.

Tritium cannot be removed from the water but is unharmed in small amounts and is routinely released by any nuclear plant, officials say. It will be also diluted, along with other radioactive isotopes, they say. The water release will be gradual and tritium concentrations will not exceed the plant's pre-accident levels, TEPCO says.

### WHY RELEASE THE WATER?

Fukushima Daiichi has struggled to handle the contaminated water since the 2011 disaster. The government and TEPCO say the tanks must make way for facilities to decommission the plant, such as storage

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space for melted fuel debris and other highly contaminated waste. The tanks are 96% full and expected to reach their capacity of 1.37 million tons in the fall.

They also want to release the water in a controlled, treated way to avoid the risk that contaminated water would leak in case of another major quake or tsunami. It will be sent through a pipe from the sampling tanks to a coastal pool to be diluted with seawater and released through an undersea tunnel to a point 1 kilometer (0.6 mile) offshore.

## \_\_\_ WHAT ARE THE SAFETY CONCERNS?

Local fishing communities say their businesses and livelihoods will suffer still more damage. Neighboring countries such as China and South Korea and Pacific Island nations have raised safety concerns.

"It would be best if the water isn't released, but it seems unavoidable," said Katsumasa Okawa, owner of a seafood store in Iwaki, south of the plant, whose business is still recovering. Okawa said he hopes any further setbacks will be short-lived and that the releases might reassure people about eating fish from Fukushima.

"I find those massive tanks more disturbing," Okawa said. "The next time the water leaks out by accident, Fukushima's fishing will be finished."

The government has earmarked 80 billion yen (\$580 million) to support Fukushima fisheries and to address "reputation damage" from the release.

TEPCO has sought to reassure people by keeping hundreds of flounder and abalone in two groups — one in regular seawater and another in the diluted treated water. The experiment is "for people to visually confirm the treated water we deem safe to release won't adversely affect creatures in reality," said Tomohiko Mayuzumi, TEPCO's risk communicator.

Radioactivity levels in the flounder and abalone rose while they were in the treated water but fell to normal levels within days after they were returned to regular seawater. That supports data showing a minimal effect on marine life from tritium, said Noboru Ishizawa, a TEPCO official overseeing the experiment.

Officials say the impact of the water on humans, the environment and marine life will be minimal and will be monitored before, during and after the releases which will continue through the 30-40 year decommissioning process. Simulations show no increase in radioactivity beyond 3 kilometers (1.8 mile) from the coast.

Scientists say health impacts from consuming tritium and other radioisotopes through the food chain may be worse than from drinking it in water and further studies are needed.

Cross-checks are another concern: TEPCO says water samples are shared with IAEA and the government-funded Japan Atomic Energy Agency, but experts would like to see independent cross-checks.

University of Tokyo radiologist Katsumi Shozugawa said his analysis of groundwater in multiple locations in no-go zones near the plant has shown that tritium and other radioactive elements have been leaking into groundwater.

If highly radioactive water escapes and is dispersed into the sea it becomes impossible to trace, a concern not only for Japan but also for countries in the Pacific, he said. "There should be a continuous, science-based effort to show other countries that it's thoroughly handled, which I think is lacking the most."

Environmental groups including Friends of the Earth oppose the release. They have proposed long-term storage of the water by solidification, as used at the Savannah River waste repository in the U.S.

\_\_\_ ANY PROGRESS WITH THE MELTED REACTORS? Massive amounts of fatally radioactive melted nuclear fuel remain inside the reactors. Robotic probes have provided some information but the status of the melted debris is largely unknown.

Akira Ono, who heads the cleanup as president of TEPCO's decommissioning unit, says the work is "unconceivably difficult."

Earlier this year, a remote-controlled underwater vehicle successfully collected a tiny sample from inside Unit 1's reactor — only a spoonful of about 880 tons of melted fuel debris in the three reactors. That's 10 times the amount of damaged fuel removed at the Three Mile Island cleanup following its 1979 partial core melt.

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Trial removal of melted debris will begin in Unit 2 later this year after a nearly two-year delay. Spent fuel removal from Unit 1 reactor's cooling pool is to start in 2027 after a 10-year delay. Once all the spent fuel is removed the focus will turn in 2031 to taking melted debris out of the reactors.

\_\_\_ IS A 2051 COMPLETION TARGET REALISTIC?

Ono says the goal is a good "guidepost" but too little is known. The government has stuck to its initial 30-40 year target for completing the decommissioning, without defining what that means.

An overly ambitious schedule could result in unnecessary radiation exposures for plant workers and excess environmental damage, said Ryo Omatsu, an expert on legal aspects of nuclear plant decommissioning. Some experts say it would be impossible to remove all the melted fuel debris by 2051.

## Robert Blake, actor acquitted in wife's killing, dies at 89

By LINDA DEUTSCH AP Special Correspondent

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Robert Blake, the Emmy award-winning performer who went from acclaim for his acting to notoriety when he was tried and acquitted in the killing of his wife, died Thursday at age 89.

A statement released on behalf of his niece, Noreen Austin, said Blake died from heart disease, surrounded by family at home in Los Angeles.

Blake, star of the 1970s TV show, "Baretta," had once hoped for a comeback, but he never recovered from the long ordeal which began with the shooting death of his wife, Bonny Lee Bakley, outside a Studio City restaurant on May 4, 2001. The story of their strange marriage, the child it produced and its violent end was a Hollywood tragedy played out in court.

Once hailed as among the finest actors of his generation, Blake became better known as the center of a real-life murder trial, a story more bizarre than any in which he acted. Many remembered him not as the rugged, dark-haired star of "Baretta," but as a spectral, white-haired murder defendant.

In a 2002 interview with The Associated Press while he was jailed awaiting trial, he bemoaned the change in his status with his fans nationwide: "It hurt because America is the only family I had."

He was adamant that he had not killed his wife and a jury ultimately acquitted him. But a civil jury would find him liable for her death and order him to pay Bakley's family \$30 million, a judgment which sent him into bankruptcy. The daughter he and Bakley had together, Rose Lenore, was raised by other relatives and went for years without seeing Blake, until they spoke in 2019. She would tell People magazine that she called him "Robert," not "Dad."

It was an ignominious finale for a life lived in the spotlight from childhood. As a youngster, he starred in the "Our Gang" comedies and acted in a movie classic, "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre." As an adult, he was praised for his portrayal of real-life murderer Perry Smith in the movie of Truman Capote's true crime best seller "In Cold Blood."

His career peaked with the 1975-78 TV cop series, "Baretta." He starred as a detective who carried a pet cockatoo on his shoulder and was fond of disguises. It was typical of his specialty, portraying tough guys with soft hearts, and its signature line: "Don't do the crime if you can't do the time," was often quoted.

Blake won a 1975 Emmy for his portrayal of Tony Baretta, although behind the scenes the show was wracked by disputes involving the temperamental star. He gained a reputation as one of Hollywood's finest actors, but one of the most difficult to work with. He later admitted to struggles with alcohol and drug addiction in his early life.

In 1993, Blake won another Emmy as the title character in, "Judgment Day: the John List Story," portraying a soft-spoken, churchgoing man who murdered his wife and three children.

Blake's career had slowed down well before the trial. He made only a handful of screen appearances after the mid-1980s; his last project was in David Lynch's "Lost Highway," released in 1997. According to his niece, Blake had spent his recent years "enjoying jazz music, playing his guitar, reading poetry, and watching many Hollywood Classic films."

He was born Michael James Gubitosi on Sept. 18, 1933, in Nutley, New Jersey. His father, an Italian immigrant and his mother, an Italian American, wanted their three children to succeed in show business. At

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age 2, Blake was performing with a brother and sister in a family vaudeville act called, "The Three Little Hillbillies."

When his parents moved the family to Los Angeles, his mother found work for the kids as movie extras and little Mickey Gubitosi was plucked from the crowd by producers who cast him in the "Our Gang" comedies. He appeared in the series for five years and changed his name to Bobby Blake.

He went on to work with Hollywood legends, playing the young John Garfield in "Humoresque" in 1946 and the little boy who sells Humphrey Bogart a crucial lottery ticket in the Oscar-winning "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

In adulthood, he landed serious movie roles. The biggest breakthrough was in 1967 with "In Cold Blood." Later there were films including, "Tell Them Willie Boy is Here" and "Electra Glide in Blue."

In 1961, Blake and actress Sondra Kerr married and had two children, Noah and Delinah. They divorced in 1983.

His fateful meeting with Bakley came in 1999 at a jazz club where he went to escape loneliness.

"Here I was, 67 or 68 years old. My life was on hold. My career was stalled out," he said in the AP interview. "I'd been alone for a long time."

He said he had no reason to dislike Bakley: "She took me out of the stands and put me back in the arena. I had something to live for."

When Bakley gave birth to a baby girl, she named Christian Brando — son of Marlon — as the father. But DNA tests pointed to Blake.

Blake first saw the little girl, named Rosie, when she was two months old and she became the focus of his life. He married Bakley because of the child.

"Rosie is my blood. Rosie is calling to me," he said. "I have no doubt that Rosie and I are going to walk off into the sunset together."

Prosecutors would claim that he planned to kill Bakley to get sole custody of the baby and tried to hire hitmen for the job. But evidence was muddled and a jury rejected that theory.

On her last night alive, Blake and his 44-year-old wife dined at a neighborhood restaurant, Vitello's. He claimed she was shot when he left her in the car and returned to the restaurant to retrieve a handgun he had inadvertently left behind. Police were initially baffled and Blake was not arrested until a year after the crime occurred.

Once a wealthy man, he spent millions on his defense and wound up living on social security and a Screen Actor's Guild pension.

In a 2006 interview with the AP a year after his acquittal, Blake said he hoped to restart his career.

"I'd like to give my best performance," he said. "I'd like to leave a legacy for Rosie about who I am. I'm not ready for a dog and fishing pole yet. I'd like to go to bed each night desperate to wake up each morning and create some magic."

## Letter claims cartel handed over men who killed Americans

By ALFREDO PEÑA, MARK STEVENSON and JAMES POLLARD Associated Press

CIUDAD VICTORIA, Mexico (AP) — A letter claiming to be from the Mexican drug cartel blamed for abducting four Americans and killing two of them condemned the violence and said the gang turned over to authorities its own members who were responsible.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press through a Tamaulipas state law enforcement official, the Scorpions faction of the Gulf cartel apologized to the residents of Matamoros where the Americans were kidnapped, the Mexican woman who died in the cartel shootout, and the four Americans and their families.

"We have decided to turn over those who were directly involved and responsible in the events, who at all times acted under their own decision-making and lack of discipline," the letter reads, adding that those individuals had gone against the cartel's rules, which include "respecting the life and well-being of the innocent."

Drug cartels have been known to issue communiques to intimidate rivals and authorities, but also at



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times like these as public relations work to try to smooth over situations that could affect their business. And last Friday's violence in Matamoros was bad for cartel business.

The Americans' killings brought National Guard troops and an Army special forces outfit running patrols that "heat up the plaza" in narco terminology, Mexican security analyst David Saucedo said.

"It is very difficult right now for them to continue working in terms of street-level drug sales and transferring drugs to the United States; they are the first ones interested in closing this chapter as soon as possible," Saucedo said.

A photograph of five bound men face-down on the pavement accompanied the letter, which was shared with The Associated Press by the official on condition that they remain anonymous because they were not authorized to share the document.

State officials did not immediately publicly confirm having new suspects in custody.

A separate state security official said that five men had been found tied up inside one of the vehicles that authorities had been searching for, along with the letter. That official also spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak about the case.

The cousin of one of the victims said his family feels "great" knowing that Eric Williams, who was shot in the left leg, is alive but does not accept any apologies from the cartel blamed for kidnapping the Americans.

"It ain't gonna change nothing about the suffering that we went through," Jerry Wallace told the AP on Thursday. Wallace, 62, called for the American and Mexican governments to better address cartel violence.

Last Friday, the four Americans crossed into Matamoros from Texas so that one of them could have cosmetic surgery. Around midday, they were fired on in downtown Matamoros and then loaded into a pickup truck. A Mexican woman, Areli Pablo Servando, 33, was also killed, apparently by a stray bullet.

Another friend, who remained in Brownsville, called police after being unable to reach the group that crossed the border Friday morning.

Brownsville Police Department spokesman Martin Sandoval said Thursday that officers followed protocol by checking local hospitals and jails after receiving the report of the missing people. A detective was assigned to the case within the hour and then alerted the FBI after realizing the people had crossed into Mexico. Shortly after, the FBI took over the case as social media videos began to show a shootout with the victims matching the description of the missing people.

Authorities located them Tuesday morning on the outskirts of the city, guarded by a man who was arrested. Zindell Brown and Shaeed Woodard died in the attack; Williams and Latavia McGee survived.

On Thursday, two hearses carrying the bodies of Woodard and Brown crossed the international bridge to Brownsville, where the remains were handed over to U.S. authorities.

Woodard's cousin, McGee, had surprised him with the fatal road trip as a birthday getaway, according to his father, James Woodard. He said he was speechless upon hearing that the cartel had apologized for the violent abduction that killed his son and was captured in footage that quickly spread online.

"Just being helpless — not to be able to do anything, not to be able to go there and just rescue them — it's real painful," James Woodard said.

Thursday's letter was not an unheard of cartel tactic.

Cartels' community relations efforts are well-known within Mexico. In contested territory, one cartel might hang banners around a city blaming a rival for recent violence and distinguishing themselves as the gang that does not mess with civilians.

Last November, such banners appeared around Guanajuato state, purportedly written by the Jalisco New Generation cartel, that blamed a rival for a spate of killings in bars and other businesses.

In other situations, the message is more blunt: Bodies are left inside a vehicle with a note or hung from a highway overpass on a heavily transited road. The motivation is terror.

More subtly, cartels use their power to plant stories in the local press or keep stories from appearing. Their members are active on social media.

Their underlying interest is facilitating their business whether that be smuggling drugs and migrants or extortion.

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Sometimes a cartel will shoot up its rival's territory hoping to trigger a law enforcement response to make business difficult for their opponents. That's what appeared to happen two years ago in Reynosa, just up the border from Matamoros. Gunmen drove into town shooting and killed 14 innocent bystanders.

Handing over alleged cartel suspects to police is also not without precedent. Saucedo cautioned that a cartel leader may have authorized the attack then regretted it and decided to offer sacrificial lambs to police.

In 2008, drug traffickers in Michoacan lobbed hand grenades into a crowd celebrating Mexico's independence, killing eight. Days later, authorities arrested three suspects, but it turns out they had been kidnapped by a cartel, beaten into confessions implicating a rival group and turned over to police.

Meanwhile, the Tamaulipas state prosecutor's office said Thursday it had seized an ambulance and a medical clinic in Matamoros that were allegedly used to provide treatment to the Americans after the shooting.

The Americans told investigators they were taken to the clinic in an ambulance to receive first aid, the statement said. By reviewing police surveillance video around the city, authorities were able to identify the ambulance and find the clinic. No arrests were made at the clinic, according to the statement.

## Trump invited to testify before NY grand jury, lawyer says

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump has been invited to testify before a New York grand jury that has been investigating hush money payments made on his behalf during his 2016 presidential campaign, according to one of his lawyers.

Trump attorney Joseph Tacopina confirmed Thursday that the Manhattan district attorney's office has invited the former president to testify next week as prosecutors near a decision on whether to proceed with what could be the first criminal case ever brought against a former U.S. president.

"To me, it's much ado about nothing," Tacopina told the Associated Press, adding he didn't think prosecutors had committed "one way or another" on a decision on whether to charge Trump. He said there was no legal basis for a case.

"It's just another example of them weaponizing the justice system against him. And it's sort of unfair," he said.

The office of Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, a Democrat, declined to comment. Such an invitation to testify before a grand jury often indicates a decision on indictments is near.

The invitation to testify was first reported by The New York Times.

Any indictment would come as Trump is ramping up a run to regain the White House in 2024 while simultaneously battling legal problems on multiple fronts.

Trump, in a lengthy statement posted on his social media network, blasted the investigation as a "political Witch-Hunt trying to take down the leading candidate, by far, in the Republican Party" and what he called a "corrupt, depraved, and weaponized justice system."

"I did absolutely nothing wrong," he said.

Meanwhile, the district attorney in Atlanta, Georgia, has said decisions are "imminent" in a two-year investigation into possible illegal meddling in the 2020 election by Trump and his allies. A U.S. Justice Department special counsel is also investigating efforts by Trump and his allies to undo the election as well as the handling of classified documents at his Florida estate.

The New York grand jury has been probing Trump's involvement in a \$130,000 payment made in 2016 to the porn star Stormy Daniels to keep her from going public about a sexual encounter she said she had with the Republican years earlier.

The money was paid out of the personal funds of Trump's now-estranged lawyer, Michael Cohen, who then said he was reimbursed by the Trump Organization and also paid extra bonuses for a total that eventually rose to \$420,000.

Cohen pleaded guilty to federal charges in 2018 that the payment, and another he helped arrange to the model Karen McDougal through the parent company of the National Enquirer tabloid, amounted to an illegal campaign contribution.

Federal prosecutors at the time decided not to bring charges against Trump, who by then was president.

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The Manhattan district attorney's office then launched its own investigation, which lingered for several years but has been gathering momentum in recent weeks.

Several figures close to Trump have been spotted in recent days entering Bragg's office for meetings with prosecutors, including his former political adviser Kellyanne Conway and former spokesperson Hope Hicks.

Cohen has also met several times with prosecutors, saying after a recent visit that he thought the investigation was nearing a conclusion.

Under New York law, people who appear before a grand jury are given immunity from prosecution for things they say during their testimony, so potential targets of criminal investigations are generally invited to testify only if they waive that immunity. Lawyers generally advise clients not to do so if there is a potential for a criminal case.

It isn't clear what charges prosecutors might be exploring.

Legal experts have said one potential crime could be the way the payments to Cohen were structured and falsely classified internally as being for a legal retainer. New York has a law against falsifying business records, but it is a misdemeanor unless the records fudging is done in conjunction with a more serious felony crime.

Tacopina said there was no crime.

"There's no precedent for this. There's no established case law on this campaign finance stuff. It's ridiculous. And there's no underlying crime," he said.

Separately, the district attorney's office has also spent years investigating whether Trump and his company inflated the value of some of its assets in dealings with lenders and potential business partners. Those allegations are the subject of a civil lawsuit, filed by the state's attorney general.

## Heat takes toll as Iditarod mushers trek across Alaska

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Mushers and their dogs in the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race face plenty of variables in the Alaska wilderness. An unexpected one this year has been heat that is taking a toll in a sport better suited for temperatures well below zero.

Jason Mackey said a thermometer hanging from the back of his sled hit 80 degrees Fahrenheit (26.67 degree C) at one point this week as he camped alongside the trail while mushers neared the halfway mark of the race. Other racers threw their game plans for the 1,000-mile (1,609-kilometer) race across Alaska out the window to deal with the heat and messy trail conditions.

Although it's warm, it wasn't 80 degrees in interior Alaska, which would probably be a record high in July, said Brian Brettschneider, a climate scientist with the National Weather Service's Alaska Region. Instead, when you leave a thermometer in the sun, it absorbs the solar energy, which is the reason official measurement thermometers are kept in the shade.

But it's still warm and sunny, and it's having noticeable effects on people who are exposed to it, Brettschneider said.

Last weekend, the same area was much cooler than normal, with what appeared to be ideal mushing conditions. The warmer conditions are being driven by an area of high pressure, he said.

Many communities in the nation's largest state hit record highs this week, from Kodiak off Alaska's southern coast to Deadhorse, the supply town for oil companies operating on the state's North Slope, about 1,250 miles (2,012 kilometers) away.

Along the Iditarod race route, the community of McGrath didn't set records but had a high Wednesday of 36 degrees Fahrenheit (2.22 degree C), 14 degrees Fahrenheit (-10 degree C) above normal. More telling was a low temperature of 27 degrees Fahrenheit (-2.78 degrees C).

"Normally it should be below zero (-17.78 degrees C)," Brettschneider said.

That warmth was evident all along the Iditarod trail Wednesday. "There's almost no places that were below freezing along the route," he said.

That was not news to Mackey. "I wish the temperatures would cool down," the musher told a television crew from the Iditarod Insider.

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It's just not the heat that was bothersome. He said he looked down at his sled at one point and saw two mosquitoes.

"Yeah, it's spring," Mackey said.

The heat is taking its toll on Mackey's dogs, which he called "big boys" at 80 pounds (36.29 kilograms). He said other teams were moving in the heat of the day, but he wasn't willing to do that. "I mean, it zaps them," he said of the dog team.

Kelly Maixner, a pediatric dentist, said his dogs don't like the heat, and he'd rather it be minus -20 degrees Fahrenheit (-28.89 degrees C).

During the race, mushers must take one 24-hour layover at a checkpoint to rest. Part of where to take that layover plays into the strategy of most every musher.

Nic Petit took his mandatory rest early in the race, at the checkpoint in Nikolai, because the sun was out. "I like hot dogs, just not my dog as a hot dog," said Petit, who was born in France and raised in New Mexico.

The melting was causing issues and concerns for some mushers, especially as they made for the race's halfway point, the ghost village of Iditarod.

"It could be soft and punchy out there, and who knows how the hills are going into Iditarod," Richie Diehl told the TV crew. "It could be big tussocks just like a couple of years ago, and it could be a brutal run, you know, with the rolling hills and possibly barren tundra." Tussocks are clumps of grass.

Rookie musher Bailey Vitello of New Hampshire was near last place Thursday, running his dogs in the rain during the day and having to deal with ice at night.

He would rather not be behind and dealing with ripped-up trails. "The back-of-the-pack is the worst part of the trail," he told the TV crew.

Riley Dyche of Fairbanks took his 24-hour break before reaching Iditarod because he didn't want to run his dogs in the heat of the day. That likely cost him either \$3,000 in gold nuggets or a new smart phone, the prize given to the first musher at the halfway point.

"I don't think the little incentive prize — it would have been cool — but I don't think it would have been a benefit to these guys for getting to the finish line," he said, speaking of his dogs.

Instead, that prize went to race leader Wade Marrs, who is originally from Alaska but now living in Wisconsin. He arrived in Iditarod about 1 a.m. Thursday.

The good news for mushers is that as they continue west, temperatures will be more Alaska-like, highs around 10 degrees Fahrenheit (-12 degrees C) and lows below zero, Brettschneider said.

The race started Sunday in Willow, just north of Anchorage. Mushers will take their dog teams over two mountain ranges, the frozen Yukon River and the Bering Sea ice to the finish line in Nome. The winner is expected sometime early next week.

## World Baseball Classic players get artsy with custom cleats

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

When Joc Pederson takes the field for Israel in the World Baseball Classic, he'll be wearing bright silver cleats with blue Stars of David inside each Nike swoosh.

Edwin Díaz commissioned two different designs to wear for Puerto Rico: blue with a bronze trumpet across the Adidas stripes, and red with white and blue trumpets, a reference to the closer's intro music.

Flashy footwear is the work of Stadium Custom Cleats, a company owned by Alex Katz, a pitcher for Israel at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and at this year's WBC.

"You can express yourself more," Pederson said. "It's pretty boring when it's just plain Jane black-and-white shoes. I like to spice my shoes up a little bit, add some extra flair."

When Israel plays its Group D opener against Nicaragua at Miami on Sunday, Katz's cleats will feature the Mensch on a Bench mascot of Israel's team, the Western Wall, Haifa. The 28-year-old left-hander's shoes even have multicolor reflective soles.

Others with the spiffy shoes include Daniel Bard of the U.S., Didi Gregorius and Jurickson Profar of the



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Netherlands, and Robinson Canó of the Dominican Republic. In all, Katz's company supplied 42 pairs of cleats to 36 players.

A 27th-round pick by the Chicago White Sox in the 2015 amateur draft, Katz came up with the idea in 2016 when he was at Class A Kannapolis and was chastised by a minor league coordinator.

"The White Sox were kind of old school at the time," Katz said. "I had black Nike cleats. The only thing white on them was a little bit on the toe and the Nike swoosh. And he said, 'Hey Alex, like you have to Sharpie it out.' So they were very strict."

Peter Kurz, general manager of Israel's national team, had reached out to Katz when the pitcher played for St. John's from 2013-15, and Katz was part of Israel's pitching staff during WBC qualifying in 2016. He used blue Nike spikes with some camouflage.

"They really didn't get dirty from the qualifiers, so I reused them for the main tournament, cleaned them up a little bit and just painted them. And the rest is history," Katz said. "It wasn't really big at the time. It was more of a popular in sneaker culture rather than cleat culture."

Through 2018, Major League Baseball's collectively bargained shoe standards were more akin to a military dress code. At least 51% of a cleat's exterior had to be the team's designated primary shoe color and the rule mandated "color must be evenly distributed." Teams determined the design and players were forced to wear shoes "compatible with their club's design and color scheme." The rule stated "excessive and distracting flaps and laces on shoes, particularly those on pitchers, are not permitted."

Starting in 2019, players were permitted to wear any combination of black, gray, white along with uniform hues or any additional team-designated shades. A player's initials were allowed for the first time, Color restrictions were lifted in 2020, and noncommercial writings, illustrations and messages were allowed as long as they didn't include offensive language. Teams retained a right of approval and the shoes had to be from an approved supplier.

Sometimes players have been, well, tripped up by the rules.

Pitcher Trevor Bauer, then with Cincinnati, was threatened with discipline by MLB when he planned in 2020 to wear cleats with "Free Joe Kelly" after the Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher was suspended for eight games. When Seattle's Dee Strange-Gordon had "In-N-Out Burger" on his cleats that same year, players were reminded commercial messages were prohibited.

Katz started a company called KD Custom Kicks in 2017. He split with his partner in 2017 and founded the new firm in 2019. He has 43 people working for the firm, including 30 artists, while trying to reach the big leagues as a pitcher. Katz was with the Chicago Cubs' Double-A Tennessee Smokies in 2021 and spent last season with Staten Island in the independent Atlantic League.

His company charges \$300 to \$600 per pair, and the biggest expenses are shipping and shoelaces. A player works with a designer, and the shoe model a player chooses is sent to one of the artists. They use Jacquard Airbrush Color, which is available in 57 colors and can be mixed to create even more.

Andrew Urrutia, a 22-year-old from Seattle who is a student at the University of Washington, reached out to the Mariners on Instagram offering design work when MLB held "Players Weekend" events from 2017-19 allowing unique getups. He works for Katz's company and averages 5-to-10 hours per pair — he needed 16 for the pair worn by Mariners outfielder Jarred Kelenic for his 2021 big league debut.

Urrutia's favorite was a pair he painted for Mets pitcher Jacob deGrom in September 2020 that included the No. 41 of Hall of Famer Tom Seaver, who had died the previous month. The cleats, designed by Ari Solomon, were later auctioned for \$8,010 by MLB.com and the money given to charity.

"A lot of our cleats are special event cleats," Urrutia said. "It might just be worn on Mother's Day or Jackie Robinson Day."

Katz said the company produced close to 3,000 pairs last year.

"To me the best ideas are things that just come naturally, that just randomly show up," he said.

## Lawyers: Former NBA star Shawn Kemp fired in self-defense

TACOMA, Wash. (AP) — Former NBA star Shawn Kemp acted in self-defense when he exchanged gunfire

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in a Washington parking lot while trying to retrieve a stolen cell phone and other items, his attorneys said Thursday.

Kemp, 53, was arrested by Tacoma police Wednesday for investigation of a drive-by shooting but was released from jail Thursday afternoon without charges having been filed. The Pierce County Prosecutor's Office said it would not file charges pending further investigation.

"We're grateful they didn't rush to judgment," said Seattle criminal defense lawyer Tim Leary, who is representing Kemp.

In a written statement, another Kemp attorney, W. Scott Boatman, said Kemp's vehicle was broken into Tuesday night and several items were taken — including an iPhone. Kemp tracked the phone's location to an occupied car at the Tacoma Mall, and when Kemp confronted the individuals inside, they shot at him, and he returned fire, Boatright said.

"There was not a drive by shooting as previously reported and Mr. Kemp's actions were reasonable and legally justified," Boatman said. "Mr. Kemp met with law enforcement at the scene in an attempt to assist in the matter."

Tacoma police said they recovered a gun at the scene.

Kemp, who has two licensed cannabis stores in Seattle, was a six-time NBA all-star and played for the Seattle SuperSonics from 1989 to 1997. He also played for Cleveland, Portland and Orlando.

Kemp debuted in the NBA during the 1989-90 season as a 20-year-old who had never played college basketball. He became known for his high-flying, athletic dunks.

## Judge uses a slavery law to rule frozen embryos are property

By MATTHEW BARAKAT Associated Press

FAIRFAX, Va. (AP) — Frozen human embryos can legally be considered property, or "chattel," a Virginia judge has ruled, basing his decision in part on a 19th century law governing the treatment of slaves.

The preliminary opinion by Fairfax County Circuit Court Judge Richard Gardiner — delivered in a long-running dispute between a divorced husband and wife — is being criticized by some for wrongly and unnecessarily delving into a time in Virginia history when it was legally permissible to own human beings.

"It's repulsive and it's morally repugnant," said Susan Crockin, a lawyer and scholar at Georgetown University's Kennedy Institute of Ethics and an expert in reproductive technology law.

Solomon Ashby, president of the Old Dominion Bar Association, a professional organization made up primarily of African American lawyers, called Gardiner's ruling troubling.

"I would like to think that the bench and the bar would be seeking more modern precedent," he said.

Gardiner did not return a call to his chambers Wednesday. His decision, issued last month, is not final: He has not yet ruled on other arguments in the case involving Honeyhline and Jason Heidemann, a divorced couple fighting over two frozen embryos that remain in storage.

Honeyhline Heidemann, 45, wants to use the embryos. Jason Heidemann objects.

Initially, Gardiner sided with Jason Heidemann. The law at the heart of the case governs how to divide "goods and chattels." The judge ruled that because embryos could not be bought or sold, they couldn't be considered as such and therefore Honeyhline Heidemann had no recourse under that law to claim custody of them.

But after the ex-wife's lawyer, Adam Kronfeld, asked the judge to reconsider, Gardiner conducted a deep dive into the history of the law. He found that before the Civil War, it also applied to slaves. The judge then researched old rulings that governed custody disputes involving slaves, and said he found parallels that forced him to reconsider whether the law should apply to embryos.

In a separate part of his opinion, Gardiner also said he erred when he initially concluded that human embryos cannot be sold.

"As there is no prohibition on the sale of human embryos, they may be valued and sold, and thus may be considered 'goods or chattels,'" he wrote.

Crockin said she's not aware of any other judge in the U.S. who has concluded that human embryos

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can be bought and sold. She said the trend, if anything, has been to recognize that embryos have to be treated in a more nuanced way than as mere property.

Ashby said he was baffled that Gardiner felt a need to delve into slavery to answer a question about embryos, even if Virginia case law is thin on how to handle embryo custody questions.

"Hopefully, the jurisprudence will advance in the commonwealth of Virginia such that ... we will no longer see slave codes" cited to justify legal rulings, he said.

Neither of the Heidemanns' lawyers ever raised the slavery issue. They did raise other arguments in support of their cases, however.

Jason Heidemann's lawyers said allowing his ex-wife to implant the embryos they created when they were married "would force Mr. Heidemann to procreate against his wishes and therefore violate his constitutional right to procreational autonomy."

Honeyhline Heidemann's lawyer, Kronfeld, argued that Honeyhline's right to the embryos outweighs her ex-husband's objections, partly because he would have no legal obligations to be their parent and partly because she has no other options to conceive biological children after undergoing cancer treatments that made her infertile.

Kronfeld also argued that the initial separation agreement the couple signed in 2018 already treated the embryos as property when they concurred — under a subheading titled "Division of Personal Property" — that the embryos would remain in cryogenic storage until a court ordered otherwise.

Gardiner has not yet ruled on the argument over Jason Heidemann's procreational autonomy.

## It's almost Oscars time. Here's everything you need to know

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Hollywood is gearing up for the 95th Academy Awards, where "Everything Everywhere All at Once" comes in the lead nominee and the film industry will hope to move past "the slap" of last year's ceremony. Here's everything you need to know about the 2023 Oscars, including when they are, where to watch the live show and this year's controversies.

### WHEN ARE THE OSCARS?

The Oscars will be held Sunday, March 12, at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles. The ceremony is set to begin at 8 p.m. EST and be broadcast live on ABC.

### CAN YOU STREAM THE OSCARS?

The broadcast can be streamed with a subscription to Hulu Live TV, YouTubeTV, AT&T TV and Fubo TV. Some of these services offer brief free trials. You can also stream the show on ABC.com and on the ABC app by authenticating your provider.

### WHO'S HOSTING?

Jimmy Kimmel will host for the third time and his first time since 2018. That was also the last Oscars to feature a solo host. The show went hostless for several years after Kimmel's last outing. Last year, Regina Hall, Amy Schumer and Wanda Sykes hosted as a trio. In an ad for this year's show styled after "Top Gun: Maverick," Kimmel made his humble case for being the right person for the job while noting that he can't get slapped because "I cry a lot."

### WHAT'S NOMINATED FOR BEST PICTURE AT THE 2023 OSCARS?

The 10 movies competing for best picture are: "All Quiet on the Western Front," "Avatar: The Way of Water," "The Banshees of Inisherin," "Elvis," "Everything Everywhere All at Once," "The Fabelmans," "Tár," "Top Gun: Maverick," "Triangle of Sadness," "Women Talking." Here's a guide to how you can watch them.

### WHO'S PRESENTING?

Presenters include: Halle Bailey, Antonio Banderas, Elizabeth Banks, Jessica Chastain, John Cho, Andrew Garfield, Hugh Grant, Danai Gurira, Salma Hayek Pinault, Nicole Kidman, Florence Pugh and Sigourney Weaver. They join a previously announced group including: Riz Ahmed, Emily Blunt, Glenn Close, Jennifer Connelly, Ariana DeBose, Samuel L. Jackson, Dwayne Johnson, Michael B. Jordan, Troy Kotsur, Jonathan

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Majors, Melissa McCarthy, Janelle Monáe, Deepika Padukone, Questlove, Zoe Saldaña and Donnie Yen. A third wave was announced Thursday: Halle Berry, Paul Dano, Cara Delevingne, Harrison Ford, Kate Hudson, Mindy Kaling, Eva Longoria, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Andie MacDowell, Elizabeth Olsen, Pedro Pascal and John Travolta.

## WHAT ELSE IS IN STORE FOR THE SHOW?

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences has said that winners to all categories will be announced live on the show. (Last year, some categories were taped in a pre-show, something that caused an uproar among academy members.) All signs point to a full slate of musical performances, with Rihanna performing "Lift Me Up" from "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" and Rahul Sipligunj and Kaala Bhairava singing Chandrabose and M.M. Keeravaani's "Naatu Naatu" from "RRR." Nominee Lady Gaga, on the other hand, will not sing "Hold My Hand," from "Top Gun: Maverick," during the show. On Monday, show producers announced that Lenny Kravitz will deliver the "In Memoriam" performance.

## WHO ARE THE FAVORITES?

Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's indie sci-fi hit "Everything Everywhere All at Once" comes in with a leading 11 nominations. Close on its heels, though, is the Irish friends-falling-out dark comedy "The Banshees of Inisherin," with nine nods, a total matched by Netflix's WWI film "All Quiet on the Western Front." Michelle Yeoh ("Everything Everywhere All at Once") may have a slight edge on Cate Blanchett ("Tár") for best actress. Best actor is harder to call, with Brendan Fraser ("The Whale") and Austin Butler ("Elvis") in the mix. In the supporting categories, Angela Bassett ("Black Panther: Wakanda Forever") and Ke Huy Quan ("Everything Everywhere All at Once") are the frontrunners, though Jamie Lee Curtis' Screen Actors Guild Awards win may have thrown a wrench into the supporting actress category. Steven Spielberg ("The Fabelmans") may win his third best director Oscar, though the Daniels may have emerged as the frontrunners. AP Film Writers Lindsey Bahr and Jake Coyle are predicting a big haul for "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

## WHAT'S BEEN CONTROVERSIAL THIS YEAR?

Aside from the usual snubs and surprises, this year's biggest to-do has been the debate surrounding Andrea Riseborough's unexpected nomination for best actress. Riseborough was nominated for the little-seen, Texas-set drama "To Leslie" after many A-list stars rallied around her performance. When two other best-actress contenders — Danielle Deadwyler ("Till") and Viola Davis ("Woman King") — were snubbed, some saw that as a reflection of racial bias in the film industry. The academy launched an inquiry into the star-studded, grassroots campaign for Riseborough but found no reason to rescind her nomination.

## WHAT ELSE SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR?

Just the reading of the title to one of this year's short film nominees should prompt a wave of giggles. John Williams ("The Fabelmans"), up for best score, is the oldest nominee ever, at 90 years old. After historic back-to-back best-director wins by Chloé Zhao ("Nomadland") and Jane Campion ("The Power of the Dog"), no women were nominated this year for best director. Also don't expect to see Will Smith at the Oscars anytime soon. After striking Chris Rock at last year's ceremony, Smith was banned by the film academy from attending for 10 years. In a live Netflix special on Saturday, Rock finally punched back at Smith with a blistering stand-up set about the incident.

## Here's what Biden's budget would mean — if it had a chance

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With Republicans in control of the House, there's no chance that President Joe Biden's new budget plan will become law as it stands. Instead, the financial blueprint that he announced Thursday in Philadelphia will serve as a political talking point for a president preparing to run for reelection.

"I just laid out the bulk of my budget," Biden said during a stop at a union training center. "Republicans in Congress should do the same thing. Then we can sit down and see where we disagree."

Many of the key proposals are designed to draw sharp contrasts with Republicans.

Some of the highlights of Biden's plan:



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## BIDEN EMPHASIZES FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

Biden's budget covers the next 10 years. Overall, he expects an additional \$4.7 trillion in tax revenues and \$800 billion in savings from making changes to government programs. Biden also wants \$2.6 trillion in new spending. That leaves him with an estimated \$2.9 trillion reduction in the deficit.

The president emphasized fiscal responsibility as he prepared his budget, portraying Republicans as not being serious about getting the country's finances in order. Republicans have said Biden's plan doesn't go far enough, but they haven't released proposals of their own.

## MINIMUM TAX ON BILLIONAIRES

Biden frequently talks about making companies and the wealthy "pay their fair share," and the budget is designed to further that goal.

The president wants a 25% tax on the richest 0.01% of Americans. The White House calls this a "minimum tax on billionaires." The idea is designed to extract more revenue from income that isn't derived from salaries, ending what the administration describes as "special treatment" and "giant loopholes."

Biden also wants to roll back tax breaks enacted under his predecessor, former President Donald Trump. For example, people making more than \$400,000 a year would once again face a top tax rate of 39.6%.

The budget proposal would also close the "carried interest" loophole that allows wealthy hedge fund managers and others to pay their taxes at a lower rate.

## MEDICARE FUNDING BOOSTED

A key trust fund that funds Medicare, which provides health care to older adults, is on track to become insolvent in about five years, meaning it would be unable to fully cover the cost of benefits. The White House says Biden's plan would push that date back to the 2050s.

Some of the money would come from expanding the federal government's ability to negotiate the cost of prescription drugs, something that began with the Inflation Reduction Act that Biden signed last year. He also wants to increase the Medicare tax rate from 3.8% to 5% on income exceeding \$400,000 per year, including salaries and capital gains.

Biden has frequently targeted Republicans over their proposals to reduce Medicare benefits or force Congress to reauthorize the program. (Social Security is similarly being threatened by Republicans, Biden often says.) So expect to hear more from the White House on how the president's plan would help older Americans.

## FULLY REFUNDABLE CHILD TAX CREDIT

Congress expanded the child tax credit during the pandemic to help families cope with the economic fallout, but the extra money expired last year.

Now Biden wants to restore the credit to its previous level. The change would provide families up to \$3,600 per child, up from \$2,000. The credit would be "fully refundable," which means households could receive all of the money even if they don't owe any taxes. That approach is designed to make sure the credit benefits low-income families.

## REDUCTION OF CANCER DEATH RATES

Biden made fighting cancer part of the "unity agenda" that he outlined near the beginning of his administration, and he wants \$2.8 billion to advance that goal.

He's described the effort as a "cancer moonshot" that should become a "national purpose" for Americans. It's a personal issue for Biden. His eldest son, Beau, died from a brain tumor. In addition, the president and first lady Jill Biden both recently had lesions removed that contained basal cell carcinoma, a kind of skin cancer.

Biden wants to reduce cancer death rates in half over the next quarter-century.

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## PROMOTING CLEAN ENERGY TO TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE

Last year's Inflation Reduction Act provided hundreds of billions of dollars in financial incentives to promote clean energy. Now Biden's budget proposal would add more to the further the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The plan includes \$4.5 billion to further clean energy development and \$16.5 billion to develop new technologies and conduct scientific research. Biden also wants \$7 billion, an increase of about \$1 billion, to support economic revitalization and job creation in communities that relied on coal, oil and gas production.

The budget would spend \$35 million to begin planning for a new national lab at a historically Black college or university, a tribal college or university, or another minority-serving institution.

## EYES ON CHINA

Some of the budget is designed to help Biden's effort to steer U.S. foreign policy to confront China's rising influence.

The Pentagon would receive \$842 billion, which includes money to modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. There's also a proposed 5.2% proposed pay increase for troops, designed to help the military boost its lagging recruitment.

In addition, the budget would allocate \$7.1 billion to renew agreements with three Pacific Island nations that the Chinese have been wooing. The amount includes \$6.5 billion over 20 years to the Marshall Islands, Micronesia and Palau, plus an additional \$634 million to maintain U.S. Postal Service operations there.

Under "Compact of Free Association" agreements with the three, the U.S. provides the islands with an array of services that range from weather forecasting to disaster management, air traffic control and mail delivery.

## March Madness 2023: Tension climbing for bubble teams

By The Associated Press undefined

March Madness is coming up fast. Here is what to know along with some key games to watch and who's on the bubble ahead of Selection Sunday for the NCAA Tournament:

### KEY DATES

All eyes will be on the conference tournaments this week:

- The ACC Tournament is March 7-11 in Greensboro, North Carolina.
- The Big 12 Tournament is March 8-11 in Kansas City, Missouri.
- The Big Ten Tournament is March 8-12 in Chicago.
- The Big East Tournament is March 8-11 in New York.
- The Pac-12 Tournament is March 8-11 in Las Vegas.
- The SEC Tournament is March 8-12 in Nashville, Tennessee.

### MARCH MADNESS

Selection Sunday is March 12, when bracket matchups will be set for the First Four and first- and second-round games that stretch from Florida to California.

Sweet 16 weekend will see games in New York City (East Region), Las Vegas (West), Kansas City, Missouri (Midwest), and Louisville, Kentucky (South).

Where is the Final Four? In Houston, on April 1, with the championship game on April 3.

Basketball aficionados, take note: The women's NCAA Tournament will hold its Final Four in Dallas, a four-hour drive up the road from Houston.

### BETTING GUIDE

Who's going to win the national championship? With the regular season over, the betting favorites as of this week to reach the Final Four are Houston, Alabama, Kansas and Purdue, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. That matches the top teams in the NCAA's initial seed watch. UCLA is in the mix near the top in the AP Top 25, too.

### WHO'S IN

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These teams are already going dancing after landing their league's automatic bid: Kennesaw State (26-8, Atlantic Sun), UNC Asheville (27-7, Big South), Fairleigh Dickinson (19-14, Northeast), Drake (27-7, Missouri Valley), Furman (27-7, Southern), Louisiana-Lafayette (26-7, Sun Belt), Southeast Missouri State (19-16, Ohio Valley), Gonzaga (28-5, West Coast), College of Charleston (31-3, Colonial Athletic Association), Oral Roberts (30-4, Summit League), Texas A&M-Corpus Christi (23-10, Southland), Montana State (25-9, Big Sky), Northern Kentucky (22-12, Horizon League) and Colgate (26-8, Patriot League).

## BUBBLE WATCH

Rutgers (19-13). The Scarlet Knights advanced in the Big Ten Tournament with a 62-50 win over Michigan, another bubble team. Rutgers had dropped five of seven heading into the tournament.

Iowa State (19-12). If the Cyclones still needed a win to crack the NCAA Tournament field, they got a big one, 78-72 over No. 11 Baylor in the Big 12 quarterfinals. It was their third win over Baylor this season and second in five days.

Mississippi State (21-11). The Bulldogs got a much-needed, 69-68 overtime win over Florida to boost their candidacy. Mississippi State has wins over No. 25 Missouri, No. 22 TCU and No. 18 Texas A&M.

## GAME(S) TO WATCH

No. 1 Houston (29-2) vs. East Carolina (16-16), American Athletic quarterfinals, Friday, 1 p.m. Eastern (ESPN2). League player of the year Marcus Sasser is trying to lead the Cougars to their third straight AAC Tournament title. East Carolina advanced with a 73-58 victory over South Florida.

No. 4 Alabama (26-5) vs. Mississippi State, SEC Tournament quarterfinals, Friday 1 p.m. Eastern (ESPN). The regular-season champion Crimson Tide have endured slow starts lately but are led by league player of the year Brandon Miller.

No. 5 Purdue (26-5) vs. Rutgers, Big Ten quarterfinals, Friday, noon Eastern (Big Ten Network). Led by 7-foot-4 center Zach Edey, a favorite to win national player of the year, the Boilermakers are seeking their second Big Ten Tournament championship after winning in 2009.

## Former Trump lawyer censured for falsehoods about election

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Jenna Ellis, a former attorney for Donald Trump's reelection campaign and a prominent conservative media figure, has been censured by Colorado legal officials after admitting she made repeated false statements about the 2020 presidential election.

Ellis acknowledged making 10 "misrepresentations" on television and Twitter during Trump's fight to stay in power after losing the 2020 election to President Joe Biden, according to the censure from the office of attorney regulation counsel in Colorado, where Ellis is from. The statements include claiming on Jeanine Pirro's Fox News show on Dec. 5, 2020 that "we have over 500,000 votes (in Arizona) that were cast illegally" and telling the conservative network Newsmax on Dec. 15 that Trump was "the true and proper victor."

On November 20, 2020, Ellis appeared on the Newsmax show of former Trump spokesman Sean Spicer and said: "with all those states (Nevada, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Georgia) combined we know that the election was stolen from President Trump and we can prove that."

Ellis was one of several prominent conservative voices who, in the final weeks of 2020, echoed Trump's lies that the election was stolen from him. Those falsehoods helped fuel the attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

"Respondent, through her conduct, undermined the American public's confidence in the presidential election, violating her duty of candor to the public," wrote Bryon M. Large, the disciplinary judge in the case.

Ellis becomes the latest pro-Trump attorney penalized for their attempts to overturn the 2020 election. Nine lawyers in Michigan in 2021 were ordered to pay \$175,000 in sanctions for a sham suit seeking to overturn the election in that swing state. The District of Columbia's bar association disciplinary counsel in December called for the suspension of former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's law license for pursuing a baseless lawsuit challenging Biden's win in Pennsylvania.

Ellis is based in Washington, DC, but is from Colorado and has also practiced in the state. Through her

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attorney, Michael Melito, she stipulated to both the findings that she'd made misrepresentations and the censure.

On Twitter Wednesday, Ellis said: "This was politically motivated from the start from Democrats and Never Trumpers. They ultimately failed to destroy me and failed in their attempt to deprive me of my bar license. I'm glad to have this behind me and remain in good standing in the State of Colorado."

## Rutgers pulls away in 2nd half vs. frigid-shooting Michigan

CHICAGO (AP) — Cam Spencer and Derek Simpson scored 23 of their combined 31 points in the second half and Rutgers beat Michigan 62-50 on Thursday in the second round of the Big Ten Tournament.

Spencer scored 18 points and Simpson 13 for the ninth-seeded Scarlet Knights (19-13), who rebounded to shoot 52% in the second half after a 29% first half. They will play top-seed Purdue in Friday's quarterfinals.

Hunter Dickinson scored 24 points for eighth-seeded Michigan (17-15), which had just one second-half field goal until the final minute.

Trailing by three at halftime, Rutgers opened the second half on a 12-3 run and midway through scored 12 straight points to lead by 13 with just under six minutes remaining. The lead grew to 16 with two minutes to go.

The Wolverines, who shot 48% in the first half, had only four field goals in the second. The first two were 3-pointers by Dickinson — the second with 59 seconds left — that came 14 minutes apart. Michigan finished the second half 4 of 21 for 19%.

Dickinson scored 13 points in the first half when Michigan took a 28-25 lead. The Wolverines scored the first seven points while the Scarlet Knights were missing their first seven shots. Rutgers rallied to take a lead late in the half with an 8-0 run. Dickinson had a bucket and Joey Baker a 3-pointer to regain the lead.

Michigan beat Rutgers 58-45 in the regular season and leads the all-time series 16-2.

## Jaded with education, more Americans are skipping college

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

JACKSON, Tenn. (AP) — When he looked to the future, Grayson Hart always saw a college degree. He was a good student at a good high school. He wanted to be an actor, or maybe a teacher. Growing up, he believed college was the only route to a good job, stability and a happy life.

The pandemic changed his mind.

A year after high school, Hart is directing a youth theater program in Jackson, Tennessee. He got into every college he applied to but turned them all down. Cost was a big factor, but a year of remote learning also gave him the time and confidence to forge his own path.

"There were a lot of us with the pandemic, we kind of had a do-it-yourself kind of attitude of like, 'Oh — I can figure this out,'" he said. "Why do I want to put in all the money to get a piece of paper that really isn't going to help with what I'm doing right now?"

Hart is among hundreds of thousands of young people who came of age during the pandemic but didn't go to college. Many have turned to hourly jobs or careers that don't require a degree, while others have been deterred by high tuition and the prospect of student debt.

What first looked like a pandemic blip has turned into a crisis. Nationwide, undergraduate college enrollment dropped 8% from 2019 to 2022, with declines even after returning to in-person classes, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse. The slide in the college-going rate since 2018 is the steepest on record, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Economists say the impact could be dire.

At worst, it could signal a new generation with little faith in the value of a college degree. At minimum, it appears those who passed on college during the pandemic are opting out for good. Predictions that they would enroll after a year or two haven't borne out.

Fewer college graduates could worsen labor shortages in fields from health care to information technology. For those who forgo college, it usually means lower lifetime earnings — 75% less compared with



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those who get bachelor's degrees, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce. And when the economy sours, those without degrees are more likely to lose jobs.

"It's quite a dangerous proposition for the strength of our national economy," said Zack Mabel, a Georgetown researcher.

In dozens of interviews with The Associated Press, educators, researchers and students described a generation jaded by education institutions. Largely left on their own amid remote learning, many took part-time jobs. Some felt they weren't learning anything, and the idea of four more years of school, or even two, held little appeal.

At the same time, the nation's student debt has soared. The issue has loomed large in the minds of young Americans as President Joe Biden pushes to cancel huge swaths of debt, an effort the Supreme Court appears poised to block.

As a kid, Hart dreamed of going to Penn State to study musical theater. His family encouraged college, and he went to a private Christian high school where it's an expectation.

But when classes went online, he spent more time pursuing creative outlets. He felt a new sense of independence, and the stress of school faded.

"I was like, 'OK, what's this thing that's not on my back constantly?'" Hart said. "I can do things that I can enjoy. I can also do things that are important to me. And I kind of relaxed more in life and enjoyed life."

He started working at a smoothie shop and realized he could earn a steady paycheck without a degree. By the time he graduated, he had left college plans behind.

It happened at public as well as private schools. Some counselors and principals were shocked to see graduates flocking to jobs at Amazon warehouses or scratching together income in the gig economy.

The shift has been stark in Jackson, where just four in 10 of the county's public high school graduates immediately went to college in 2021, down from six in 10 in 2019. That drop is far steeper than the nation overall, which declined from 66% to 62%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Jackson's leaders say young people are taking restaurant and retail jobs that pay more than ever. Some are being recruited by manufacturing companies that have aggressively raised wages to fill shortages.

"Students can't seem to resist sign-on bonuses and wages that far exceed any that they've seen before," said Vicki Bunch, the head of workforce development for the area's chamber of commerce.

Across Tennessee, there's growing concern the slide will only accelerate with the opening of several new manufacturing plants. The biggest is a \$5.6 billion Ford plant near Jackson that will produce electric trucks and batteries. It promises to create 5,000 jobs, and its construction is already drawing young workers.

Daniel Moody, 19, was recruited to run plumbing for the plant after graduating from a Memphis high school in 2021. Now earning \$24 an hour, he's glad he passed on college.

"If I would have gone to college after school, I would be dead broke," he said. "The type of money we're making out here, you're not going to be making that while you're trying to go to college."

America's college-going rate was generally on the upswing until the pandemic reversed decades of progress. Rates fell even as the nation's population of high school graduates grew, and despite economic upheaval, which typically drives more people into higher education.

In Tennessee, education officials issued a "call to action" after finding just 53% of public high school graduates were enrolling in college in 2021, far below the national average. It was a shock for a state that in 2014 made community college free, leading to a surge in the college-going rate. Now it's at its lowest point since at least 2009.

Searching for answers, education officials crossed the state last year and heard that easy access to jobs, coupled with student debt worries, made college less attractive.

"This generation is different," said Jamia Stokes, a senior director at SCORE, an education nonprofit. "They're more pragmatic about the way they work, about the way they spend their time and their money."

Most states are still collecting data on recent college rates, but early figures are troubling.

In Arkansas, the number of new high school graduates going to college fell from 49% to 42% during the pandemic. Kentucky slid by a similar amount, to 54%. The latest data in Indiana showed a 12-point

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drop from 2015 to 2020, leading the higher education chief to warn the “future of our state is at risk.”

Even more alarming are the figures for Black, Hispanic and low-income students, who saw the largest slides in many states. In Tennessee’s class of 2021, just 35% of Hispanic graduates and 44% of Black graduates enrolled in college, compared with 58% of their white peers.

There’s some hope the worst has passed. The number of freshmen enrolling at U.S. colleges increased slightly from 2021 to 2022. But that figure, along with total college enrollment, remains far below pre-pandemic levels.

Amid the chaos of the pandemic, many students fell through the cracks, said Scott Campbell, executive director of Persist Nashville, a nonprofit that offers college coaching.

Some students fell behind academically and didn’t feel prepared for college. Others lost access to counselors and teachers who help navigate college applications and the complicated process of applying for federal student aid.

“Students feel like schools have let them down,” Campbell said.

In Jackson, Mia Woodard recalls sitting in her bedroom and trying to fill out a few online college applications. No one from her school had talked to her about the process, she said. As she scrolled through the forms, she was sure of her Social Security number and little else.

“None of them even mentioned anything college-wise to me,” said Woodard, who is biracial and transferred high schools to escape racist bullying. “It might be because they didn’t believe in me.”

She says she never heard back from the colleges. She wonders whether to blame her shaky Wi-Fi, or if she simply failed to provide the right information.

A spokesperson for the Jackson school system, Greg Hammond, said it provides several opportunities for students to gain exposure to higher education, including an annual college fair for seniors.

“Mia was an at-risk student,” Hammond said. “Our school counselors provide additional supports for high school students in this category. It is, however, difficult to provide post-secondary planning and assistance to students who don’t participate in these services.”

Woodard, who had hoped to be the first in her family to get a college degree, now works at a restaurant and lives with her dad. She’s looking for a second job so she can afford to live on her own. Then maybe she’ll pursue her dream of getting a culinary arts degree.

“It’s still kind of 50-50,” she said of her chances.

If there’s a bright spot, experts say, it’s that more young people are pursuing education programs other than a four-year degree. Some states are seeing growing demand for apprenticeships in the trades, which usually provide certificates and other credentials.

After a dip in 2020, the number of new apprentices in the U.S. has rebounded to near pre-pandemic levels, according to the Department of Labor.

Before the pandemic, Boone Williams was the type of student colleges compete for. He took advanced classes and got A’s. He grew up around agriculture and thought about going to college for animal science.

But when his school outside Nashville sent students home his junior year, he tuned out. Instead of logging on for virtual classes, he worked at local farms, breaking horses or helping with cattle.

“I stopped applying myself once COVID came around,” the 20-year-old said. “I was focusing on making money rather than going to school.”

When a family friend told him about union apprenticeships, he jumped at the chance to get paid for hands-on work while mastering a craft.

Today he works for a plumbing company and takes night classes at a Nashville union.

The pay is modest, Williams said, but eventually he expects to earn far more than friends who took quick jobs after high school. He even thinks he’s better off than some who went to college — he knows too many who dropped out or took on debt for degrees they never used.

“In the long run, I’m going to be way more set than any of them,” he said.

Back in Jackson, Hart says he’s doing what he loves and contributing to the city’s growing arts community. Still, he wonders what’s next. His job pays enough for stability but not a whole lot more. He sometimes finds himself thinking about Broadway, but he doesn’t have a clear plan for the next 10 years.

"I do worry about the future and what that may look like for me," he said. "But right now I'm trying to remind myself that I am good where I'm at, and we'll take it one step at a time."

## 3 geologists die as tunnel collapses in Spanish potash mine

By RENATA BRITO and JENNIFER O'MAHONY Associated Press

SURIA, Spain (AP) — Three Spanish geologists died in a tunnel collapse deep inside a potash mine in northeastern Spain on Thursday, officials said.

The accident occurred in the Cabanasses de Súrria mine around 8 a.m., at a depth of 900 meters (nearly 3,000 feet), when the three victims were inspecting "an interior area," the mine operator said. It took several hours for rescuers to recover the bodies from the mine around 80 kilometers (50 miles) northwest of Barcelona.

The mine is operated by ICL Iberia, the Spanish subsidiary of Tel Aviv-based ICL Group. The Spanish company confirmed that the three men were Spanish nationals, aged 28, 29, and 31, and experienced geologists.

ICL said some 240 workers were immediately evacuated after the incident.

"The company's board of directors sincerely laments the accident and sends its deepest regrets and offer of support to the victims' families, co-workers and friends," ICL said in a statement.

Two of the victims were also postgraduate students at the Polytechnic University of Catalonia's Manresa engineering school. A minute's silence was held at the university on Thursday afternoon.

Mine employee Carlos Arnaldo said the collapsed section was only built "a few days ago." Catalonia's regional head of business, Roger Torrent, stated that the mine had passed regular safety inspections. "The checks were regular. The last one was three weeks ago," Torrent said.

Two workers died in similar circumstances at the same mine a decade ago.

Catalan regional president Pere Aragonès offered his condolences to families affected by the "tragic accident." The regional government announced an investigation, and a judicial probe was also opened.

Around 20,000 people work in Spain's mining sector, according to Energy Ministry statistics, a figure that has halved in the past two decades.

Between 2016 and 2021, the last year for which statistics were available, an average of four mining workers died annually in the southern European country.

## Yeti recalls 1.9 million coolers and cases for magnet hazard

By The Associated Press undefined

U.S. product regulators said Thursday that Yeti has recalled 1.9 million coolers and gear cases because magnets can come detached from them, posing a risk of serious injury or death.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission said consumers should immediately stop using the four recalled products and contact Yeti for refund information.

The closures on the recalled products can fail, resulting in detached magnets, the CPSC said. If swallowed, two or more high-powered magnets can attract to each other or to another metal object and get stuck in the digestive system. The CPSC said if that happens, it can cause perforations, twisting and blockage of the intestines, potentially resulting in infection, blood poisoning and death.

The products being recalled are the Sidekick dry gear case, M20 soft backpack cooler and M30 soft cooler, version 1.0 and 2.0.

The coolers and gear bags were sold at Dick's Sporting Goods, Ace Hardware, Academy Sports and Outdoors, Yeti and other stores, including Amazon, from March 2018 to January 2023. The gear case sells for about \$50 and the coolers for between \$300 and \$350.

The firm has received 1,399 reports of the magnet-lined closures degrading or failing, including reports of missing or detached magnets. No magnet ingestions or injuries have been reported.

Consumers can contact Yeti toll-free at 833-444-3151 from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. CT Monday through Sunday. The Austin, Texas company can also be contact by email at [productrecall@yeti.com](mailto:productrecall@yeti.com) or online at <https://stg.yeti.com/M20-M30-sidekick-product-recall.html> or at [www.yeti.com](http://www.yeti.com). Consumers should click on "Product

Recall" at the bottom of the page for details.

More than 40,000 of the recalled products were sold in Canada.

Shares in Yeti were down about 1.5% in midday trading Thursday.

## Maine motorists appeal to keep naughty vanity license plates

By DAVID SHARP Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) — A Maine vegan whose custom license plate contains the word "tofu" is one of the motorists caught in a state crackdown on vulgar tags.

Car owners across the United States can pay an extra fee to customize license plates, sparking creativity and personality but causing headaches for state officials who have to decide what's acceptable.

Maine had for several years allowed people to put just about any combination of letters and numbers on their vehicle plates, including words and phrases that other states would ban. But the state decided to change course and this year recalled 274 plates it deemed inappropriate.

Some people are fighting back.

So far the state has rejected all of the appeals, including one brought by the vegan whose license plate referenced tofu.

The state concluded the license plate "LUVTOFU" could've been seen as a reference to sex instead of admiration for bean curd. The motorist insisted there was no mistaking his intent because the back of his car had several tofu-related stickers.

"It's my protest against eating meat and animal products," Peter Starostecki, the disappointed motorist, said after a zoom session with a hearing examiner for the Maine Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

Heather Libby and her best friend grudgingly gave up their matching license plates that contained a word for a female dog.

"People are so sensitive nowadays," said Libby, of Jonesport, after a hearing examiner rejected her appeal. "I just think it's foolish."

When the state effectively ended the review process for so-called vanity license plates in 2015, some residents filled their plates with all manner of profanities, including F-bombs, either spelled out or abbreviated.

Residents in a state known for being laconic and even-tempered soon were sporting uncensored plates pairing the F-word with "snow," "haters," and "ALS," — the incurable neurodegenerative disease.

After license plate freedoms spiraled out of control, the Maine Legislature directed the Bureau of Motor Vehicles to reestablish a system for vetting the state's roughly 120,000 vanity license plates.

The new rules ban derogatory references to age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, religion or disability. Also banned is language that incites violence, or is considered obscene.

Restored as censors, Maine's vehicular officials now walk a similar tightrope as their colleagues in other states.

In 2020, a federal judge ruled that California's ban on plates that are "offensive to good taste and decency" was overly broad, and violated constitutional rights to free speech. Earlier this year, Texas officials rejected a license plate similar to Starostecki's — "LVT0FU" — leading to rebukes from an animal rights group.

Maine's rules were narrowly crafted to pass legal muster, officials said.

Secretary of State Shenna Bellows said motorists have the freedom to express themselves, but she said that they should do it on a bumper sticker, not a state-issued license plate.

"We have a public interest in keeping phrases and words that are profane or may incite violence off the roadways," she said.

She said she's happy that most motorists have relinquished their objectionable license plates without a fight. So far, there have been only 13 appeals, but there could be more.

If a motorist loses an appeal to a hearing examiner, then they can sue in Superior Court. So far, no one has taken that step.

As for Starostecki, he was offered another license plate that had become available, V3GAN. But he decided he was done with vanity plates. He's awaiting a new license plate — a boring one randomly selected



by the state.

Libby, who lost her B-word plate, got a custom plate celebrating her dog Zeus, named for the mythical god of thunder. "That could be offensive to someone because it's a Greek god," she quipped. "But I hope not."

## La Nina, which worsens hurricanes and drought, is gone

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — After three nasty years, the La Nina weather phenomenon that increases Atlantic hurricane activity and worsens western drought is gone, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Thursday.

That's usually good news for the United States and other parts of the world, including drought-stricken northeast Africa, scientists said.

The globe is now in what's considered a "neutral" condition and probably trending to an El Nino in late summer or fall, said climate scientist Michelle L'Heureux, head of NOAA's El Nino/La Nina forecast office.

"It's over," said research scientist Azhar Ehsan, who heads Columbia University's El Nino/La Nina forecasting. "Mother Nature thought to get rid of this one because it's enough."

La Nina is a natural and temporary cooling of parts of the Pacific Ocean that changes weather worldwide. In the United States, because La Nina is connected to more Atlantic storms and deeper droughts and wildfires in the West, La Ninas often are more damaging and expensive than their more famous flip side, El Nino, experts said and studies show.

Generally, American agriculture is more damaged by La Nina than El Nino. If the globe jumps into El Nino it means more rain for the Midwestern corn belt and grains in general and could be beneficial, said Michael Ferrari, chief scientific officer of Climate Alpha, a firm that advises investors on financial decisions based on climate.

When there's a La Nina, there are more storms in the Atlantic during hurricane season because it removes conditions that suppress storm formation. Neutral or El Nino conditions make it harder for storms to get going, but not impossible, scientists said.

Over the last three years, the U.S. has been hit by 14 hurricanes and tropical storms that caused a billion dollars or more in damage, totalling \$252 billion in costs, according to NOAA economist and meteorologist Adam Smith said. La Nina and people building in harm's way were factors, he said.

Climate change is a major factor in worsening extreme weather, alongside La Nina, scientists said and numerous studies and reports show. Human-caused warming is like an escalator going up: It makes temperatures increase and extremes worse, while La Nina and El Nino are like jumping up and down on the escalator, according to Northern Illinois University atmospheric sciences professor Victor Gensini.

La Nina has also slightly dampened global average temperatures, keeping warming from breaking annual temperature records, while El Nino slightly turbocharges those temperatures often setting records, scientists said.

La Nina tends to make Western Africa wet, but Eastern Africa, around Somalia, dry. The opposite happens in El Nino with drought-struck Somalia likely to get steady "short rains," Ehsan said. La Nina has wetter conditions for Indonesia, parts of Australia and the Amazon, but those areas are drier in El Nino, according to NOAA.

El Nino means more heat waves for India and Pakistan and other parts of South Asia and weaker monsoons there, Ehsan said.

This particular La Nina, which started in September 2020 but is considered three years old because it affected three different winters, was unusual and one of the longest on record. It took a brief break in 2021 but came roaring back with record intensity.

"I'm sick of this La Nina," Ehsan said. L'Heureux agreed, saying she's ready to talk about something else.

The few other times that there's been a triple-dip La Nina have come after strong El Ninos and there's clear physics on why that happens. But that's not what happened with this La Nina, L'Heureux said. This

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one didn't have a strong El Nino before it.

Even though this La Nina has confounded scientists in the past, they say the signs of it leaving are clear: Water in the key part of the central Pacific warmed to a bit more than the threshold for a La Nina in February, the atmosphere showed some changes and along the eastern Pacific near Peru, there's already El Nino-like warming brewing on the coast, L'Heureux said.

Think of a La Nina or El Nino as something that pushes the weather system from the Pacific with ripple effects worldwide, L'Heureux said. When there are neutral conditions like now, there's less push from the Pacific. That means other climatic factors, including the long-term warming trend, have more influence in day-to-day weather, she said.

Without an El Nino or La Nina, forecasters have a harder time predicting seasonal weather trends for summer or fall because the Pacific Ocean has such a big footprint in weeks-long forecasts.

El Nino forecasts made in the spring are generally less reliable than ones made other times of year, so scientists are less sure about what will happen next, L'Heureux said. But NOAA's forecast said there's a 60% chance that El Nino will take charge come fall.

There's also a 5% chance that La Nina will return for an unprecedented fourth dip. L'Heureux said she really doesn't want that but the scientist in her would find that interesting. \_\_\_ Follow AP's climate and environment coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/climate-and-environment> \_\_\_ Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears \_\_\_ Associated Press climate and environmental coverage receives support from several private foundations. See more about AP's climate initiative here. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Fear, anxiety follow Nicaraguan faith leaders into exile

By MARÍA TERESA HERNÁNDEZ Associated Press

SAN JOSÉ, Costa Rica (AP) — For two hours each afternoon, the Catholic priest listens to confessions behind a glass wall where anyone nearby can spot him. Yet that visibility is deceptive; he yearns to keep his name and exact whereabouts a secret to the outside world.

He began hearing confessions within a few days after recently fleeing to Costa Rica from Nicaragua, where the government has imprisoned religious leaders, activists and numerous outspoken critics of President Daniel Ortega.

The priest agreed to an interview on condition his name and new home base be withheld. He fears for his loved ones, who still live in Nicaragua, and hopes they'll be safe as long as he remains discreet.

He is not alone. Many priests and nuns in exile worry about reprisal from Ortega and fear going public with their stories.

"There is persecution of the church because the church is the voice of the people," the priest said.

A human rights organization, Nicaragua Nunca Más, estimates that more than 50 religious leaders have fled since 2018, when a social security reform triggered massive protests. Last year, two congregations of nuns — including from the Missionaries of Charity order founded by Mother Teresa — were expelled.

Other church personnel -- including priests, seminarians and lay staff members, were among the 222 Nicaraguans released from detention and forcibly expelled to the United States on Feb. 9.

The priest interviewed in Costa Rica left his Nicaragua hometown so hastily that there was no time for goodbyes. In the sole company of a driver, he travelled by car, then by motorcycle. Once near the Costa Rican border, he walked.

"I miss my people, my nation," he said, his voice breaking.

Ortega initially asked the Catholic Church to play a role as a mediator as political tensions rose over the past five years, but the first round of dialogue didn't last long. After priests sheltered demonstrators inside their parishes and expressed concern about excessive use of force, Ortega targeted them as "terrorists" who backed opposition efforts to undermine or overthrow him.

Nicaragua Nunca Más and CSW, a British-based organization that advocates for religious freedom around the world, say Ortega's government has targeted evangelical pastors, as well as Catholic personnel. Yader

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Valdivia of Nicaragua Nunca Más said at least 50 evangelical churches have been shut down.

The two organizations have gathered testimonies from dozens of people – some in exile and some still in Nicaragua – who have described harassment, threats, physical violence and arbitrary detention targeted at a range of religious workers. There are multiple accounts of masked men breaking into churches, theft or destruction of religious objects, and the prohibition of religious processions.

CSW said parishioners are warned not to display holy symbols outside their homes, while detainees are denied visits from clergy and barred from keeping a Bible in prison.

Among the remaining prisoners, the highest-profile Catholic cleric is Bishop Rolando Álvarez of Matagalpa. Before his arrest last year, his image was seen around the world as he knelt in front of security forces after being barred from celebrating Mass inside his church and deciding to pray in the streets.

An outspoken critic of the government, Álvarez was sentenced to 26 years in prison and stripped of his Nicaraguan citizenship on Feb. 10, the day after Ortega released and sent to the U.S. the planeload of opposition figures.

In Nicaragua, Catholic leaders' response to the government's repression has been muted, apparently in an attempt to not inflame tensions. Commenting last month on Álvarez's imprisonment, Cardinal Leopoldo Brenes of Managua – Nicaragua's capital – said, "Pray that the Lord gives him strength."

Reynald Gaitán, a former seminarian who met Álvarez in Matagalpa and currently studies theology in Costa Rica, believes that the bishop's imprisonment could be problematic for Ortega.

"If Monsignor were to die, his cause would continue to live because we will always remember him as a martyr," Gaitán said.

Two priests who were released and exiled on Feb. 9 -- after spending several months in a Nicaraguan prison -- shared some of their experiences with Catholic faithful at a recent Mass in Miami.

They described how they had no inkling of their upcoming release until they were told suddenly to change from prison uniforms to their regular clothes and put on buses heading to the airport.

The priests recounted the emotional flight to the U.S., with former prisoners hugging one another and crying with both relief and the sorrow of leaving families behind who are still at risk should they speak publicly about their ordeals.

"When the church seemingly was trying to be a voice for the voiceless, ... the Ortega regime went after the church," said Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, who has met with some of the exiled clergy and seminarians.

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Americas after Haiti, according to the World Bank. Facing poverty, unemployment and repression, most Nicaraguans crave spiritual reassurance. Around 42% of the population is Catholic and 35% evangelical.

"The church in Nicaragua plays a very important role," said the priest interviewed by The Associated Press in Costa Rica. "It is the one who cares for the poor, who always tells the truth and remains close to its people."

He recalls his hometown as a humble place, where parishioners are deeply religious. Threats against him surfaced, he said, when he started referring during Mass to the difficult situation facing the church.

Policemen patrolled around the parishes and attended Masses dressed as civilians to monitor what was said during the homily, he recalled. Parishioners were frequently interrogated regarding the speeches of their priests.

"There is a lot of fear, even among the lay people who speak out," he said. "We cannot say anything and, if we do, we know there's a price to pay."

Elsewhere in Costa Rica, the AP spoke with one of the Nicaraguan nuns who was expelled last year. Like the priest, she requested anonymity because her family stayed behind.

She remains baffled by the expulsion order, saying her work was devoted to children and the elderly.

"Wherever people saw us, they greeted us. They welcomed us in their homes," she said.

Her faith remains strong.

"I pray for my country," she said. "I think that everyone does, not just me. We pray so that we can live

calmly, in peace.”

## Applications for US jobless aid rise by most in 5 months

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits last week jumped by the most in five months, but layoffs remain historically low as the labor market continues to be largely unaffected by the Federal Reserve’s interest rate hikes.

Applications for jobless claims in the U.S. for the week ending March 4 rose by 21,000 to 211,000 from 190,000 the previous week, the Labor Department said Thursday. It’s the first time in eight weeks that claims came in above 200,000.

The four-week moving average of claims, which flattens out some of the weekly ups and downs, rose by 4,000 to 197,000, remaining below the 200,000 threshold for the seventh straight week.

Applications for unemployment benefits are considered a proxy for layoffs.

Last month the Fed raised its main lending rate by 25 basis points, the eighth straight rate hike in its year-long battle against stubborn inflation. The central bank’s benchmark rate is now in a range of 4.5% to 4.75%, its highest level in 15 years and some analysts are forecasting three or more increases that would push the lower end of that rate to 5.5%.

The Fed’s rate increases are meant to cool the economy, labor market and wages, thereby suppressing prices. But so far, none of those things have happened, at least not to the degree that the central bank had hoped.

Inflation remains more than double the Fed’s 2% target, and the economy is growing and adding jobs at a healthy clip.

Last month, the government reported that employers added a better-than-expected 517,000 jobs in January and that the unemployment rate dipped to 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969. Analysts expect Friday’s jobs report to show the U.S. economy added another 208,000 jobs in February.

Fed policymakers have forecast that the unemployment rate would rise to 4.6% by the end of this year, a sizable increase historically associated with recessions.

Though the U.S. labor market remains strong, layoffs have been mounting in the technology sector, where many companies overhired after a pandemic boom. IBM, Microsoft, Amazon, Salesforce, Facebook parent Meta, Twitter and DoorDash have all announced layoffs in recent months.

The real estate sector has also been battered by the Fed’s interest rate hikes. Higher mortgage rates — currently above 6% — have slowed home sales for 12 straight months. That’s almost in lockstep with the Fed’s rate hikes that began last March.

About 1.72 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended Feb. 25, an increase of 69,000 from the week before.

## Shohei Ohtani and Japan: It’s much more than just baseball

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — He’d paid about \$80 for his ticket. He wore a Japan cap above a blue Los Angeles Angels jersey. And as he enthused about the sensation that is Shohei Ohtani, baseball fan Hotaru Shiromizu was talking about far more than sports.

Shiromizu, 23, was part of the quilt of thousands of colorfully dressed fans outside the Tokyo Dome on Thursday afternoon. They paced, they camped out, and they discussed their hopes of seeing Ohtani pitch — and hit — against China in Japan’s opening game in the World Baseball Classic.

“He’s a legendary player, but he’s more than just a good player,” Shiromizu said, using his translator app to help clarify a few thoughts in English. “His aspirations — his achievements — have had a positive influence on all Japanese people.”

He added: “All the kids want to be like Ohtani.”

These days, Japanese culture and politics feel more tenuous than a few decades ago. The economy



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is stagnant. The birthrate is among the world's lowest. A former prime minister was assassinated a few months ago on the street. And despite the "Cool Japan" image abroad, the nation faces uncertainty on many fronts, a corruption scandal surrounding the pandemic-delayed 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and a giant Asian rival in neighboring China.

For many, Ohtani is the antidote.

## PART OF AN EVOLUTION

He does things modern players don't do. He's a throwback who pitches, bats and can play in the field. Many call him the finest player in the major leagues. If that's the case, then he's better than Americans — Latin Americans, too — at what they consider their own game.

He's the culmination — so far, at least — of an evolution in Japanese baseball that began when the game was introduced to the country in 1872 by an American professor. And his fame has now surpassed that of players like Ichiro Suzuki and Hideo Nomo, who came before him.

One of them could hit really well. One could pitch the same way. But Ohtani? He does both, and with more power — on the pitcher's mound and at bat — than either Ichiro or Nomo.

"I suppose the idolization of Ohtani in Japan reflects its own inferiority complex vis a vis the fatherland of baseball that is the U.S.," said Koichi Nakano, who teaches politics and culture in Tokyo at Sophia University.

"Baseball is so major here, but it has long been said that Japanese baseball, called *yakyu*, is different from 'real' baseball in America. Books have been written and published on the topic," Nakano said. "So each time where there is a Japanese 'export' that was hugely successful in MLB, the Japanese are enthralled."

The wait to see Ohtani play again in Japan is also driving the buzz around him — and the sellouts at the Tokyo Dome.

It had been almost 2,000 days since Ohtani played his last inning in Japan on Oct. 9, 2017, for the Nippon Ham-Fighters before leaving for California. That appearance drought ended in a practice game on Monday when Ohtani hit a pair of three-run homers off the Hanshin Tigers.

Keiichiro Shiotsuka, a businessman waiting outside the stadium, called Ohtani "a treasure of Japan."

"I don't know if such a player like him will ever exist in the future, so I'm happy he's now playing in Japan," he said.

## TALENT AND CHARACTER

Atop all the talent, Ohtani has a sterling reputation. No scandals. No tabloid stories about his social life. He's overflowing with \$20 million in endorsements, more than any other major leaguer. And he could sign the largest contract in baseball history — the number \$500 million has been kicked around — when he becomes a free agent after this season.

"He is very authentic," said Masako Yamamoto, standing in a ticket line outside the Tokyo Dome with her 12-year-old son Shutaro and other family members. Facing her was a pulsating billboard with Ohtani's image flashing.

"As a human, he's polite and very charming and good to people," she said. "He's special. His personality is so even. He seems to make the atmosphere."

Ohtani came out of Japan's regimented baseball system at Hanamaki Higashi High School in largely rural Iwate prefecture in northeastern Japan. Blue Jays pitcher Yusei Kikuchi attended the same high school a few years earlier. The military-like system has its critics, but Ohtani is making it look good.

"Ohtani was raised in this Japanese, martial arts-inspired training system where you join a baseball team and you play year-round," Robert Whiting, who has written several books on Japanese baseball and lived here off and on for 60 years, said in an interview last year with The Associated Press.

"Ichiro, in his first year in high school was probably the best player on the team, but he couldn't play. He had to do the laundry and cook the meals. He'd get up in the middle of night and practice his swing," Whiting said. "The same thing with Ohtani. He was cleaning toilets in high school during his first year."

Ohtani is the polar opposite of Ichiro, who had an edge. The Japanese phrase "*deru kugi wa utareru*" captures Ichiro: "The nail that sticks up gets hammered down."

In explaining how baseball took root in Japan, Whiting and others have pointed to the importance of a game in 1896 in Yokohama between Japanese and Americans. Japan won 29-4, and many of the players

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were from Samurai families.

The result was front-page news in Japan. The victory is thought to have given Japan confidence as it was modernizing, coming out of centuries of isolation, and showed it could compete against the industrially advanced West.

On Thursday night, so many years later, Japan got itself more front-page baseball news. Ohtani allowed one hit in the four innings he pitched and struck out five, ending up as the winning pitcher in an 8-1 Japan victory. He also doubled off the left field wall in the fourth to score two. So fans like Shiromizu got what they came for -- Ohtani pitching, hitting and not disappointing the 41,616 who showed up.

"Ohtani is the latest of these idols, but he might be even bigger than any before him," said Nakano, the political scientist. He noted that only Ohtani hits and pitches both — just like the old-timers used to, which gives him a unique profile. "He is 'Made in Japan,' but more real now than America players."

## Today in History: MARCH 10, First words spoken over phone

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 10, the 69th day of 2023. There are 296 days left in the year.

Today's highlight in history:

On March 10, 1969, James Earl Ray pleaded guilty in Memphis, Tennessee, to assassinating civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (Ray later repudiated that plea, maintaining his innocence until his death.)

On this date:

In 1496, Christopher Columbus concluded his second visit to the Western Hemisphere as he left Hispaniola for Spain.

In 1785, Thomas Jefferson was appointed America's minister to France, succeeding Benjamin Franklin.

In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln assigned Ulysses S. Grant, who had just received his commission as lieutenant-general, to the command of the Armies of the United States.

In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell's assistant, Thomas Watson, heard Bell say over his experimental telephone: "Mr. Watson — come here — I want to see you" from the next room of Bell's Boston laboratory.

In 1906, about 1,100 miners in northern France were killed by a coal-dust explosion.

In 1913, former slave, abolitionist and Underground Railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman died in Auburn, New York; she was in her 90s.

In 1965, Neil Simon's play "The Odd Couple," starring Walter Matthau and Art Carney, opened on Broadway.

In 1985, Konstantin U. Chernenko, who was the Soviet Union's leader for 13 months, died at age 73; he was succeeded by Mikhail Gorbachev.

In 1988, pop singer Andy Gibb died in Oxford, England, at age 30 of heart inflammation.

In 2015, breaking her silence in the face of a growing controversy over her use of a private email address and server, Hillary Rodham Clinton conceded that she should have used government email as secretary of state but insisted she had not violated any federal laws or Obama administration rules.

In 2019, a Boeing 737 Max 8 operated by Ethiopian Airlines crashed shortly after taking off from the capital, Addis Ababa, killing all 157 people on board; the crash was similar to one in October 2018 in which a 737 Max 8 flown by Indonesia's Lion Air plunged into the Java Sea minutes after takeoff, killing all 189 people on the plane. (The aircraft would be grounded worldwide after the two disasters, bringing fierce criticism to Boeing over the design and rollout of the jetliner.)

Ten years ago: The president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai (HAH'-mihd KAHR'-ze-ye), accused the Taliban and the U.S. of working in concert to convince Afghans that violence would worsen if most foreign troops left — an allegation the top American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Joseph Dunford, rejected as "categorically false."

Five years ago: Syrian government forces made their deepest push yet into the eastern suburbs of the capital Damascus in a major blow to opposition fighters. Campaigning in western Pennsylvania for a Re-

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publican House candidate, President Donald Trump told a rally that his new tariffs were saving the steel industry.

One year ago: Civilians trapped inside Mariupol desperately scrounged for food and fuel as Russian forces kept up their bombardment of the Ukrainian port city amid international condemnation over an airstrike a day earlier that killed three people at a maternity hospital. "Black Panther" director Ryan Coogler was handcuffed by Atlanta police after he was mistaken for a robber when he passed a teller a note while trying to withdraw a large amount of cash from his account.

Today's birthdays: Bluegrass/country singer-musician Norman Blake is 85. Actor Chuck Norris is 83. Playwright David Rabe is 83. Singer Dean Torrence (Jan and Dean) is 83. Actor Katharine Houghton (Film: "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?") is 81. Actor Richard Gant is 79. Rock musician Tom Scholz (Boston) is 76. Former Canadian Prime Minister Kim Campbell is 76. TV personality/businesswoman Barbara Corcoran (TV: "Shark Tank") is 74. Actor Aloma Wright is 73. Blues musician Ronnie Earl (Ronnie Earl and the Broadcasters) is 70. Producer-director-writer Paul Haggis is 70. Alt-country/rock musician Gary Louris is 68. Actor Shannon Tweed is 66. Pop/jazz singer Jeanie Bryson is 65. Actor Sharon Stone is 65. Rock musician Gail Greenwood is 63. Magician Lance Burton is 63. Actor Jasmine Guy is 61. Rock musician Jeff Ament (Pearl Jam) is 60. Music producer Rick Rubin is 60. Britain's Prince Edward is 59. Rock singer Edie Brickell is 57. Actor Stephen Mailer is 57. Actor Philip Anthony-Rodriguez is 55. Actor Paget Brewster is 54. Actor Jon Hamm is 52. Rapper-producer Timbaland is 51. Actor Cristián (kris-tee-AHN') de la Fuente is 49. Rock musician Jerry Horton (Papa Roach) is 48. Actor Jeff Branson is 46. Singer Robin Thicke is 46. Actor Bree Turner is 46. Olympic gold medal gymnast Shannon Miller is 46. Contemporary Christian singer Michael Barnes (Red) is 44. Actor Edi Gathegi is 44. Actor Thomas Middleditch is 41. Country singer Carrie Underwood is 40. Actor Olivia Wilde is 39. R&B singer Emeli Sandé (EH'-mihl-ee SAN'-day) is 36. Country singer Rachel Reinert is 34. Country musician Jared Hampton (LANCO) is 32. Actor Emily Osment is 31.