

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Sunday, Dec. 8

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

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

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

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.

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



Fellowship of Christian Students (FCS), 3:16 p.m., GHS Conference Room

United Methodist: Conde worship at 8:30 a.m.; Groton worship at 10:30 a.m.; Sunday School Christmas Practice with snack, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

## Monday, Dec. 9

Senior Menu: Beef noodle stroganoff, mixed vegetables, fruit cocktail, cookie, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Stuffed bagels.

School Lunch: Corndogs, baked beans.

Groton Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center, 1 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Bible Study, 6:30 a.m.

JH Boys Wrestling at Sisseton, 5 p.m.

JH GBB hosts Northwestern, one combined 6-quarter game, 6:30 p.m.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Pantry, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Groton Community Center



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## **GDILIVE.COM**

**Hamlin Boys C**  
**Hamlin Boys JV**  
~~**Hamlin Girls JV**~~  
**Sisseton Boys C**  
**Sisseton Girls C**  
**Sisseton Boys JV**  
**Sisseton Girls JV**  
**West Central Boys C**  
**West Central Girls C**  
**West Central Boys JV**  
**West Central Girls JV**  
**Webster Boys C**  
**Webster Boys JV**

**\$25 per  
game**

**Some games may not  
have commentary but  
will have the score**

**Text Paul at  
605-397-7460**

## X SERIES | Cub Cadet

### PUT WINTER IN ITS PLACE.



**2X** TWO-STAGE POWER  
**INTELLIPOWER** **TRAC** **MAX** **EFI**

When the winters get tough, the Cub Cadet® 2X gets tougher. This two-stage snow blower is engineered for clearing between 12-18 inches of powder and slush. If you measure snow in feet instead of inches, step up to the commercial-grade 2X MAX™ trim package to help tackle the deep stuff. Featuring trigger-controlled power steering, push-button electric start, dual LED headlights, 16-inch X-Trac™ tires and a 3-year limited warranty.\*\*

**ENGINEERED FOR**

SNOWFALL	DRIVEWAY	SURFACES
Up to 18-23" (18"-23" for EFI and MAX™ units)	Up to 8-15+ cars	Smooth & gravel



#### 2X 24" WITH INTELLIPOWER®

Clear paths with the 2X 24" snow blower featuring a 243cc Cub Cadet® engine with IntelliPOWER®.

- IntelliPOWER® engine technology delivers consistent power in heavy and wet snow conditions
- Trigger-control power steering
- Single-hand remote chute and pitch control
- 3-year limited residential / 1-year commercial limited warranty\*\*

**\$1,199\*** Additional models available with 26", 28" clearing width



#### 2X 26" TRAC WITH INTELLIPOWER®

Designed to provide steady traction in extreme weather conditions—try the 2X 26" TRAC with IntelliPOWER®.

- TRAC drive designed for traction on slopes, inclines and gravel
- Heavy-duty 14-gauge steel side plates and auger housing
- 23" intake height
- Heated hand grips
- High-arc steel chute
- Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty\*\*

**\$1,999\***



#### 2X 30" MAX INTELLIPOWER®

Take on winter with the 357cc Cub Cadet® engine with IntelliPOWER®.

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

**\$2,399\***

\* Indicates step-up feature



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† Restrictions apply. See dealer or cubcadet.com/en\_US/financing for details.

\* Actual retail prices are set by dealer and may vary. Taxes are additional and vary by location. Freight and PDI charges may be additional and vary by dealer. Models subject to limited availability. Images may not reflect dealer inventory and/or unit specifications.

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

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EXCEPTIONAL FINANCING OFFERS AVAILABLE!



# FOR RENT!

**1, 2, AND 3 BEDROOM  
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GROTON & WEBSTER!**

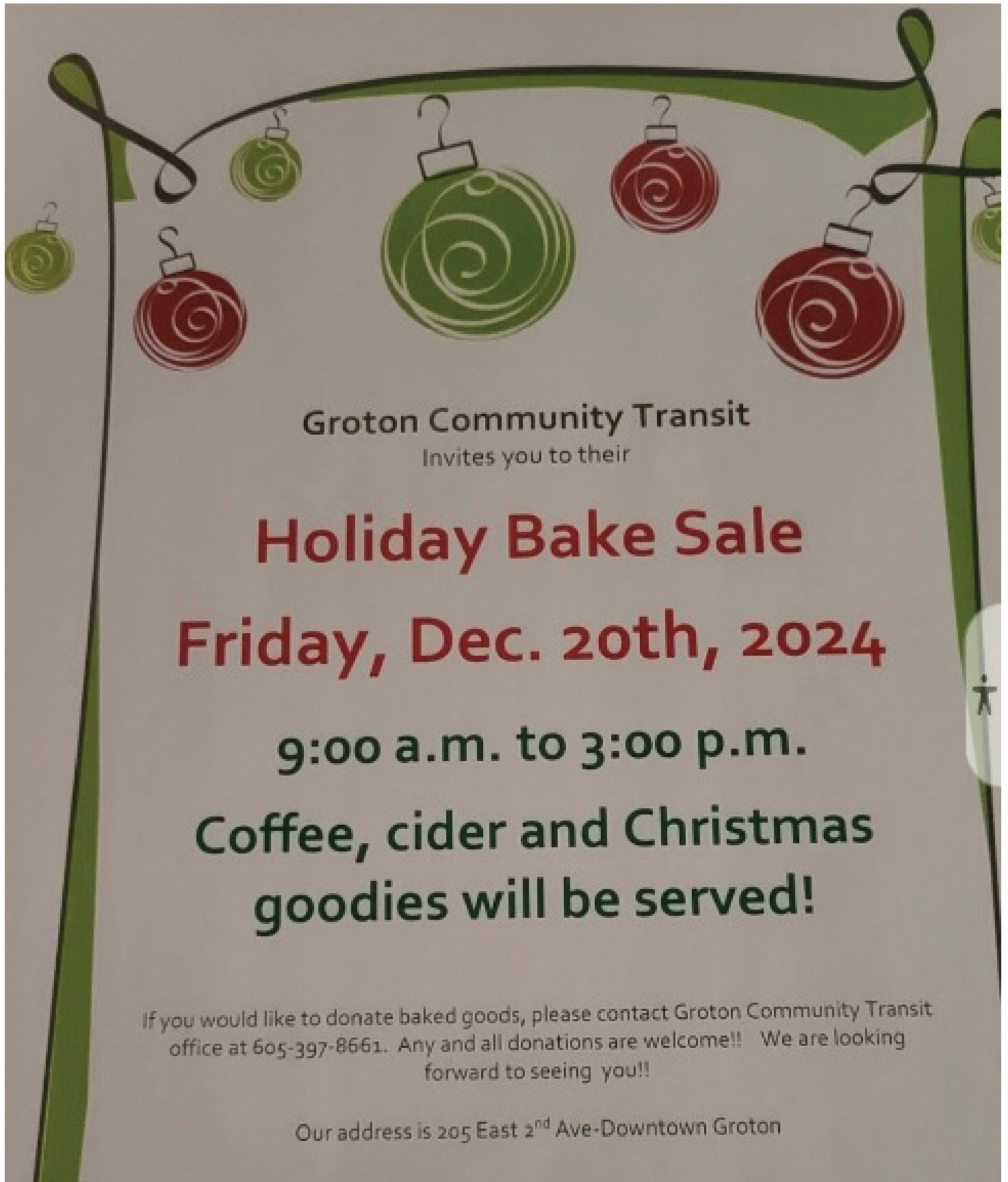
Call today for a showing!

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5-STAR MANAGEMENT, LLC



Groton Community Transit  
Invites you to their

## Holiday Bake Sale

### Friday, Dec. 20th, 2024

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Coffee, cider and Christmas  
goodies will be served!

If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact Groton Community Transit  
office at 605-397-8661. Any and all donations are welcome!! We are looking  
forward to seeing you!!

Our address is 205 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave-Downtown Groton

## HOLIDAY BAKE SALE

12/20/2024-Friday

Happy Holidays! We hope this finds all of you staying well and healthy! Hoping you can enjoy what this wonderful season brings!

We are looking for donations of baked goods for our upcoming bake sale on Friday, December 20<sup>th</sup> 2024. If you would like to donate items please contact the dispatch office at 605-397-8661. Baked goods need to be delivered to the transit by 8:00 am the morning of the bake sale. Please feel free to package your items to your liking. We will price items as they are brought in. As always, we would like to thank you for supporting the GCT!! We look forward to hearing from you!

Please don't hesitate to call to arrange pickup of your donation...We would be happy to come and grab from you!!

Sincerely & Thank you Again!!

Groton Community Transit





## Medora Christmas Show "A Magical Christmas"

December 8, 2024 - 3:00 pm

Aberdeen Civic Theater  
225 2nd Ave, SE

General Admission Tickets:  
\$35/Adult, \$25 Child

Available

Interior Design Concepts  
21 N Main Street, Aberdeen, SD or  
[www.aberdeencommunityconcerts.org](http://www.aberdeencommunityconcerts.org)

Call 605-228-0946 or 216-2822

Presented by  
Aberdeen Community Concert Association



DACOTAH BANK

HOLIDAY  
OPEN HOUSE

Cookies & Calendars

DECEMBER 10 -13

9:00 - 4:00 PM

*Stop in for cookies,  
coffee and a calendar!*

7 E. US Hwy 12 | Groton

MEMBER FDIC



# Groton Daily Independent

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## Service Notice: Carol Osterman

Services for Carol Osterman, 79, of Groton will be Friday, December 13th at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery, Groton under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Thursday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m.

Carol passed away December 6, 2024 at Avera St. Lukes Hospital, Aberdeen.



## Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #5 Results

**Team Standings:** Jackelopes 12, Coyotes 11, Foxes 10, Shihtzus 9, Cheetahs 9, Chipmunks 9

**Men's High Games:** Tony Waage 202, Ron Belden 199, Brad Waage 192

**Women's High Games:** Vicki Walter 176, Nancy Radke 169, Alicia Bruns 165

**Men's High Series:** Roger Spanier 533, Tony Waage 521, Brad Waage 521, Lance Frohling 479

**Women's High Series:** Vicki Walter 462, Alicia Bruns 454, Sam Bahr 437

**Fun Game: Most Strikes** - Foxes with 33!

## Tuff Tiger Wrestling Results:

### Morris, Minnesota:

Roman Bahr - 2nd Place

Ryker Herron - 1st Place

Watson Herron - 2nd Place

Jace Morris - 1st Place

Hudson Morris - 1st Place

### Apple Valley, Minnesota:

Braxten Sombke - 1st Place

Brooks Sombke - 1st Place

## Krueger places first at Dell Rapids Tournament

Top of the Rock 2024 Girls Results for Groton  
**100-107 Liza Krueger (2-0) placed 1st and scored 22.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Liza Krueger (Groton) 2-0 received a bye ( ) (Bye)

Semifinal - Liza Krueger (Groton) 2-0 won by fall over Citabria Manzanares (Sioux Valley) 2-1 (Fall 0:50)

1st Place Match - Liza Krueger (Groton) 2-0 won by fall over JadeLynn McCall (Winner Area) 1-1 (Fall 0:53)

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## Eleven wrestlers place at Clark/Willow Lake Tournament

Eleven wrestlers placed at the Clark/Willow Lake Wrestling Tournament held Saturday and as a result, the Groton Area team placed third in a field of 10 teams.

Placing first were Christian Ehresmann at 157 pounds, Korbin Kucker at 175 pounds and Gavin Englund at 285 pounds. Kyson Kucker at 120 pounds placed second. In third place were Keegen Kucker at 113 pounds, Donovan Block at 132 pounds, Walker Zoellner at 150 pounds and Karter Moody at 285 pounds. Placing fourth were Lincoln Krause at 120 pounds, Chris Schwab at 144 pounds and Charlie Frost at 285 pounds.

**Team Scores:** Clark/Willow Lake 160.5, Kingsbury County 153, Groton Area 143.5, Webster Area 100, Britton-Hecla 87.5, Faulkton Area 83.5, Pierre JV 69, Warner/Northwestern 20, Ortonville 11, Tiospa Zina 0.

### **157 Christian Ehresmann (2-0) placed 1st and scored 22.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 2-0 received a bye ( ) (Bye)

Semifinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 2-0 won by fall over Donovan Sandven (Kingsbury County) 1-2 (Fall 0:45)

1st Place Match - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 2-0 won by fall over Blake Jennings (Kingsbury County) 1-1 (Fall 1:54)

### **175 Korbin Kucker (3-0) placed 1st and scored 24.0 team points.**

Champ. Round 1 - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-0 received a bye ( ) (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-0 won by fall over Jaun Gutierrez (Kingsbury County) 2-2 (Fall 4:36)

Semifinal - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-0 won by decision over Will Eilers (Pierre JV) 3-1 (Dec 7-3)

1st Place Match - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-0 won by fall over Ben Suther (Britton/Hecla) 2-1 (Fall 5:49)

### **285 Gavin Englund (2-0) placed 1st and scored 21.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 2-0 received a bye ( ) (Bye)

Semifinal - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 2-0 won by fall over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 1:55)

1st Place Match - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 2-0 won by major decision over Preston Cavalier (Warner/Northwestern ) 1-1 (MD 10-1)

### **120 Kyson Kucker (3-1) placed 2nd and scored 21.0 team points.**

Champ. Round 1 - Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by major decision over Kooper Wookey (Clark/Willow Lake) 0-2 (MD 10-0)

Quarterfinal - Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Karstyn Schlechter (Webster Area) 1-2 (Fall 1:01)

Semifinal - Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 2-2 (Fall 2:44)

1st Place Match - Cash Edgar (Faulkton Area) 3-0 won by tech fall over Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 (TF-1.5 5:54 (16-0))

### **113 Keegen Kucker (3-1) placed 3rd.**

Quarterfinal - Tayten Kurkowski (Webster Area) 2-1 won by decision over Keegen Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 (Dec 10-4)

Cons. Round 1 - Keegen Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by major decision over Jyles Auble (Pierre JV) 0-2 (MD 12-1)

Cons. Semi - Keegen Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by decision over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 1-2 (Dec 3-1)

3rd Place Match - Keegen Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by decision over Chase Henriksen (Kingsbury County) 2-2 (Dec 11-9)

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## **132 Donavon Block (3-1) placed 3rd and scored 15.5 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Donavon Block (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Braeden Karels (Ortonville) 0-2 (Fall 1:42)  
Semifinal - Lane Albrecht (Kingsbury County) 1-1 won by major decision over Donavon Block (Groton Area) 3-1 (MD 9-0)  
Cons. Semi - Donavon Block (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Greyson Flores (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 1:27)  
3rd Place Match - Donavon Block (Groton Area) 3-1 won by tech fall over Mason Severson (Clark/Willow Lake) 2-2 (TF-1.5 2:45 (16-0))

## **150 Walker Zoellner (3-1) placed 3rd and scored 16.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Landon Cronin (Pierre JV) 0-2 (Fall 3:06)  
Semifinal - Greyson Nielson (Kingsbury County) 2-1 won by fall over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 3-1 (Fall 2:56)  
Cons. Semi - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Gavon Larson (Webster Area) 1-2 (Fall 3:43)  
3rd Place Match - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Rylan Meuer (Webster Area) 2-2 (Fall 4:23)

## **285 Karter Mood[y (2-1) placed 3rd.**

Quarterfinal - Karter Mood[y (Groton Area) 2-1 received a bye () (Bye)  
Semifinal - Preston Cavalier (Warner/Northwestern ) 1-1 won by fall over Karter Mood[y (Groton Area) 2-1 (Fall 4:59)  
Cons. Semi - Karter Mood[y (Groton Area) 2-1 won by fall over Mathew Eustice (Ortonville) 0-2 (Fall 0:30)  
3rd Place Match - Karter Mood[y (Groton Area) 2-1 won by fall over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 0:19)

## **120 Lincoln Krause (2-2) placed 4th.**

Champ. Round 1 - Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 2-2 received a bye () (Bye)  
Quarterfinal - Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 2-2 won by fall over Abram Heck (Ortonville) 0-2 (Fall 0:31)  
Semifinal - Kyson Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 2-2 (Fall 2:44)  
Cons. Semi - Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 2-2 won by decision over Truett Havranek (Pierre JV) 2-2 (Dec 11-7)  
3rd Place Match - Kaden Wookey (Clark/Willow Lake) 3-1 won by fall over Lincoln Krause (Groton Area) 2-2 (Fall 1:00)

## **144 Chris Schwab (2-2) placed 4th and scored 10.0 team points.**

Champ. Round 1 - Chris Schwab (Groton Area) 2-2 received a bye () (Bye)  
Quarterfinal - Chris Schwab (Groton Area) 2-2 won by decision over Tallen Lightfield (Pierre JV) 3-2 (Dec 6-1)  
Semifinal - Haeden Jorgenson (Webster Area) 3-0 won by fall over Chris Schwab (Groton Area) 2-2 (Fall 0:53)  
Cons. Semi - Chris Schwab (Groton Area) 2-2 won by major decision over Caden Singrey (Kingsbury County) 2-2 (MD 10-1)  
3rd Place Match - Sean Roseland (Faulkton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Chris Schwab (Groton Area) 2-2 (Fall 1:58)

## **285 Charlie Frost (1-2) placed 4th.**

Quarterfinal - Charlie Frost (Groton Area) 1-2 won by fall over Mathew Eustice (Ortonville) 0-2 (Fall 0:16)  
Semifinal - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 2-0 won by fall over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 1:55)  
Cons. Semi - Charlie Frost (Groton Area) 1-2 received a bye () (Bye)  
3rd Place Match - Karter Mood[y (Groton Area) 2-1 won by fall over Charlie Frost (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 0:19)

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## **113 Wyatt Hagen (1-2) scored 3.5 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 1-2 won by tech fall over Cain Hogg (Faulkton Area) 1-2 (TF-1.5 4:00 (18-0))

Semifinal - Cade Gaikowski (Clark/Willow Lake) 3-0 won by major decision over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 1-2 (MD 11-2)

Cons. Semi - Keegen Kucker (Groton Area) 3-1 won by decision over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 1-2 (Dec 3-1)

## **126 Noah Scepaniak (1-2) scored 3.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Noah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 1-2 won by major decision over Noah Vig (Kingsbury County) 1-2 (MD 18-10)

Semifinal - Cooper Pommer (Clark/Willow Lake) 3-0 won by fall over Noah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 1:44)

Cons. Semi - Karsten Lerwick (Kingsbury County) 2-2 won by decision over Noah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 1-2 (Dec 9-3)

## **132 Greyson Flores (0-2).**

Quarterfinal - Mason Severson (Clark/Willow Lake) 2-2 won by fall over Flores (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 4:46)

Cons. Round 1 - Greyson Flores (Groton Area) 0-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Donavon Block (Groton Area) 3-1 won by fall over Greyson Flores (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 1:27)

## **138 Tristin McGannon (0-2).**

Quarterfinal - Cutler Davis (Kingsbury County) 3-1 won by tech fall over Tristin McGannon (Groton Area) 0-2 (TF-1.5 3:40 (17-2))

Cons. Round 1 - Marken Cazeau (Faulkton Area) 2-2 won by fall over Tristin McGannon (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 0:29)

## **144 Kason Oswald (0-2).**

Champ. Round 1 - Austin Vetter (Warner/Northwestern ) 1-2 won by fall over Kason Oswald (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 1:02)

Cons. Round 1 - Kason Oswald (Groton Area) 0-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 2 - Logan Foster (Clark/Willow Lake) 2-2 won by fall over Kason Oswald (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 1:14)

## **165 Ben Hoeft (1-2) scored 3.5 team points.**

Champ. Round 1 - Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 1-2 won by tech fall over Dylan Honetschlager (Ortonville) 0-2 (TF-1.5 4:10 (16-1))

Quarterfinal - Elliot Bratland (Clark/Willow Lake) 3-0 won by tech fall over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 1-2 (TF-1.5 4:00 (16-0))

Cons. Round 2 - Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 1-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 3 - Kahne Hanson (Kingsbury County) 1-2 won by decision over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 1-2 (Dec 4-3)

## **190 Isaiah Scepaniak (0-2).**

Quarterfinal - Logan Omundson (Ortonville) 2-2 won by fall over Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 2:00)

Cons. Round 1 - Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Isaac Nelson (Webster Area) 2-1 won by fall over Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 1:32)

## **215 Layne Johnson (1-2) scored 4.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Johnson (Groton Area) 1-2 won by fall over Sam Crowe (Kingsbury County) 0-2 (Fall 1:19)

Semifinal - Tucker Hardy (Britton/Hecla) 2-0 won by fall over Johnson (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 0:48)

Cons. Semi - Riley Popp (Clark/Willow Lake) 1-2 won by fall over Johnson (Groton Area) 1-2 (Fall 0:45)

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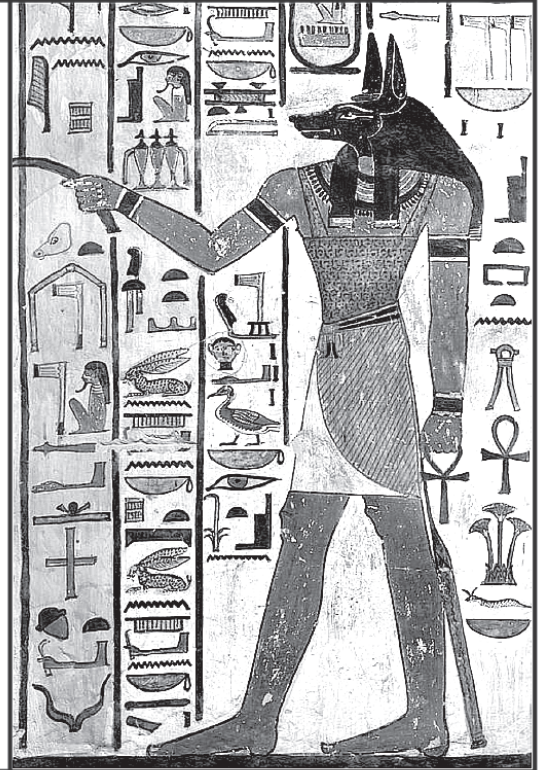
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## THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE

*Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.*

❧ ROMANS 1: 22,23 ❧



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## BIBLE

## TRIVIA

by Wilson Casey

1. Is the book of Bethlehem (KJV) in the Old or New Testament or neither?

2. Where did the angel Gabriel appear to Mary saying, "Blessed art thou among women"? *Nazareth, Tyre, Ninevah, Gazi*

3. With perhaps two different biblical answers, who was the father of Joseph? *Jacob/Heli, Gideon/Ishmael, Solomon/Nahum, Samuel/Pilate*

4. Which Old Testament prophet predicted Jesus would be born in Bethlehem? *Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum*

5. For the journey to Bethlehem, how did Mary and Joseph travel? *Bible not specific, Cart, Rode donkey, Small raft*

6. Which of these wasn't a gift from the wise men (Magi)? *Silver, Myrrh, Gold, Frankincense*

ANSWERS: 1) Neither, 2) Nazareth, 3) Jacob/Heli (Matthew 1:16, Luke 3:23), 4) Micah, 5) Bible not specific, 6) Silver

*Comments? More Trivia? Gift ideas? Visit [www.TriviaGuy.com](http://www.TriviaGuy.com).*

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THIS IS THE HISTORY OF THE LIONS AND THE SHARKS.

## FLASH GORDON

IT'S SAID WE'VE MADE WAR EVER SINCE THE SHARK MEN FIRST SWAM TO OUR LANDS, KNIVES CLUTCHED IN THEIR TEETH.

BUT THAT'S ANCIENT HISTORY -- AND HISTORY FLATTERS ITS TELLER.

DECADES AGO... WE LION MEN MADE A PACT WITH THE SHARK MEN TO STAND AGAINST MING.



PUTTING ASIDE ALL OUR CENTURIES OF BITTER CONFLICT IN THE FACE OF A GREATER ENEMY.

BUT THE SHARKS BETRAYED US.



AND MING THE MERCILESS... EARNED HIS NAME.

OUR CITY WAS DUST. OUR KING AND QUEEN WERE DEAD. WE WERE HOMELESS AND LOST.



I, JUGRID-- A MERE PALACE GUARD, BARELY NINETEEN-- SET MYSELF THE TASK OF KEEPING US TOGETHER.

YEARS PASSED. WE GREW STRONG IN SECRET. IN TIME, MONGO ROSE AGAINST MING AS ONE.



AGAIN, THE SHARKS CHOSE THE TYRANT'S SIDE.

THE LOSING SIDE.

NOW KALA, YOUNG CHIEF OF THE DEFEATED SHARK MEN, CALLS FOR A PEACE SUMMIT.



IT'S A TRAP, OF COURSE...

...BUT TOO LONG HAVE SHARK AND LION MADE WAR.

BY PEN OR BY SWORD... WE END THIS HERE.



NEXT: NEUTRAL TERRITORY

## Play Better Golf with JACK NICKLAUS

RECOGNIZE THAT IN PITCHING OR CHIPPING YOU'RE PLAYING A RECOVERY SHOT. THAT MEANS YOU'VE MADE A MISTAKE OR GOTTEN AN UNLUCKY BREAK.

BECAUSE EITHER WAY, THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT THAT. PUT IT OUT OF MIND -- DON'T LET ANGER MAKE YOU COMPOUND THE ERROR.

APPLY YOURSELF EXCLUSIVELY TO THE UPCOMING SHOT -- TO RECOVERING AS WELL AS YOU POSSIBLY CAN.

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## Liver Specialist Recommends Removing Cyst Growing in Size

DEAR DR. ROACH: I was diagnosed with several liver cysts over 15 years ago. My primary doctor and I followed the growth of the cysts by ultrasound, and one is increasing in size. We did an MRI with and without contrast to take a look at the cyst. The radiologist stated that the cyst looked "complex" and, for a lack of a better word, unusual.

A liver specialist's consult revealed that we could remove it if I wanted to. The doctor stated that he just had a patient who had a cyst, and it was cancerous. He felt that it may be best to remove it, but it's not urgent to do so.

I would appreciate your take on this situation. -- L.S.

ANSWER: Simple liver cysts are common, and even when they are large, they do not need to be removed unless they cause symptoms. However, any other cyst than a simple one needs to be carefully evaluated. There are many possible causes, including various types of cancer, especially a mucinous cystic neoplasm, which can be associated with invasive cancer.

I looked at both the ultrasound and MRI reports you sent, and although it seemed to me that the radiologists thought this was likely a simple cyst with some bleeding, they could not be sure. Furthermore, the growth in the size of the cyst is concerning.

In some cases, it's reasonable to wait and redo the scans in 6-12 months when the risk of a cancerous cyst is low. However, since the liver specialist (who has much more experience than I do) is concerned enough to recommend surgery, I don't understand why you would want to wait. I suspect the surgery will prove that it was a benign cyst, but you'll probably sleep better at night once you know for certain.

The surgery is normally done laparoscopically, and although it's usually a very safe and effective surgery, there is always a small risk for complications. You should speak with a surgeon.

\*\*\*

DEAR DR. ROACH: Do you have any comments on the use of metformin for weight loss and prediabetes? I am a 57-year-old woman. -- B.S.

ANSWER: That's one question I can answer based on very good data. The National Diabetes Prevention Program looked at this very issue. Subjects in the study (who averaged 51 years of age and were overweight with prediabetes) were treated with metformin, an intensive lifestyle-behavioral-change program that aimed for a low-fat diet and 150 minutes of exercise per week, or a placebo.

The diet and exercise group had the best response, decreasing the rate of new diabetes by 58% compared to the placebo group. However, the metformin group also had a benefit, with a 31% decrease in the rate of new diabetes diagnoses.

Personally, I recommend both. Metformin does help a bit with weight loss, but taking it along with some diet changes and exercise would likely have a much better response than metformin alone. We don't recommend a low-fat diet anymore, instead emphasizing whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, and very few processed foods. A registered dietician would be a valuable partner in helping with the diet of your regimen. You don't need to exercise for the whole 150 minutes, but it's a goal you can work toward.

New studies show that drugs like semaglutide are even more effective at preventing diabetes, but they are very expensive and often not covered by insurance.

Dr. Roach regrets that he is unable to answer individual questions, but will incorporate them in the column whenever possible. Readers may email questions to [ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu](mailto:ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu).

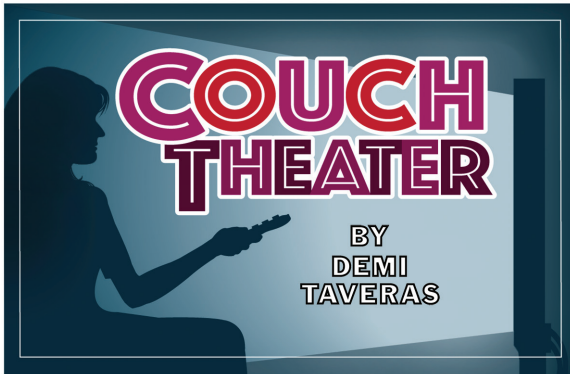
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# Groton Daily Independent

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"Fly Me to the Moon" (PG-13) -- This film deemed as a "rom-com drama" tells an intriguing story about marketing specialist Kelly Jones' (Scarlett Johansson) efforts to improve NASA's public image during the Space Race. Kelly moves from New York to Cocoa Beach, Florida, to start work at the



**Scarlett Johansson, left, and Channing Tatum star in "Fly Me to the Moon."** (Courtesy of AppleTV+ )

Kennedy Space Center, where she meets launch director Cole Davis (Channing Tatum), who disagrees with her marketing strategies. However, their opposing energies cause a romantic spark to develop between them, even though Kelly is hiding the fact that she's also been secretly tasked with creating a fake moon landing just in case the Apollo 11 mission doesn't succeed. Ray Romano and Woody Harrelson co-star in the film, which is out now to stream. (Apple TV+)

"Our Little Secret" (TV-14) -- Lindsay Lohan ("Irish Wish") and Ian Harding ("Pretty Little Liars") star opposite each other in this Christmas rom-com out now; although for a Christmas movie, the holiday spirit is lukewarm at best. Focusing more on the amusement of its incredulous story rather than the elements needed to tell the story properly, "Our Little Secret" follows exes Avery (Lohan) and Logan (Harding) who receive the surprise of a century when they bump into each other at their new significant others' family Christmas celebration. Realizing their new partners, Cam and Cassie, are siblings, Avery and Logan agree to keep their romantic past a secret so that they can make it through the holiday without any hiccups. The highlights of the film were the quips made by the supporting cast, specifically Kristin Chenoweth, Dan Bucatinsky and Judy Reyes. (Netflix)

"The Wonderful World of Disney: Holiday Spectacular" (TV-PG) -- Alfonso Ribeiro and Julianne Hough trade the "Dancing with the Stars" ballroom for Disney to host this holiday special out now! In this 1-hour-and-20-minute spectacular, viewers can enjoy performances of their favorite holiday songs and a few new songs from Disney films like "Moana 2" and "Mufasa: The Lion King." Look out for musicians such as Elton John, John Legend and Pentatonix, as well as familiar faces like Auli'i Cravalho, Seth MacFarlane and Leslie Odom Jr. The performances were filmed in Disney resorts located in Florida, California and Hawaii. (Disney+)

"Super/Man: The Christopher Reeve Story" (PG-13) -- This documentary, out now, recounts the life of actor Christopher Reeve, who is known best for his role as Superman in the 1978-1987 "Superman" films. But Reeve's career spanned over 30 years, with many television, theater and directing credits to his name. Unfortunately, in 1995, Reeve suffered a spinal cord injury after falling from his horse, which paralyzed him from the neck down. Fortunately, though, it catapulted him into activism as a result, and he began advocating for disabled people and spinal cord injury research. In the doc, there is ample footage of Reeve and his wife, Dana, as well as his children, Alexandra, Matthew and Will. Actors Jeff Daniels, Susan Sarandon, Glenn Close and Whoopi Goldberg were also interviewed for the film. (Max)

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1. Name the original title of the Beatles film "Help!"
2. What was a deuce coupe in the Beach Boys' song?
3. "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" was a big hit for which group?
4. What was Jesse Belvin's biggest hit?
5. Name the song that contains this lyric: "All we need is a drummer, for people who only need a beat."

Answers

1. "Eight Arms to Hold You." In the 1965 musical comedy, a sinister cult (complete with mad scientists) is after Ringo, who has a special ring they want.
2. The deuce coupe was a 1932 Ford Model 18. The same model car also appeared in "American Graffiti" in 1973.
3. The Rolling Stones, in 1965. The song topped the charts in the U.S., but in the U.K. it was played on pirate radio stations at first because it was considered to be too suggestive.
4. "Goodnight My Love" in 1956. Belvin died at the age of 27 in a suspicious car accident after playing a concert in 1960.
5. "Dance to the Music," by Sly and the Family Stone, in 1967. It was their first song to get into the Top 10. Thirty years later the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

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## GRIN and BEAR IT <sup>by Wagner</sup>



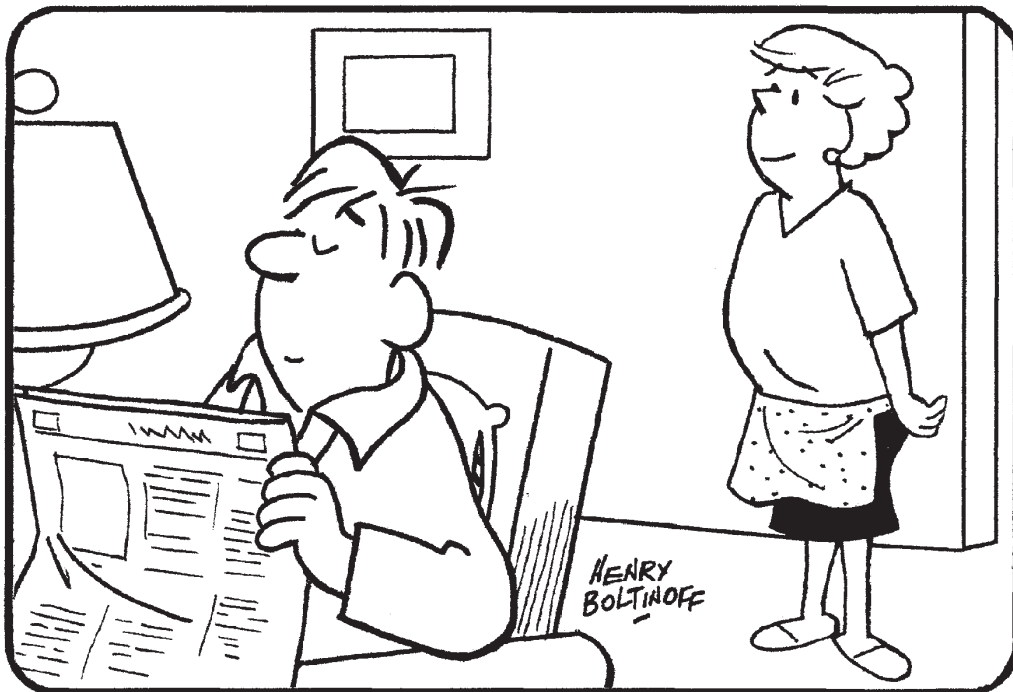
"Good news, Senator! Most Americans believe you didn't know anything and still don't know anything."

## Just Like Cats & Dogs <sup>by Dave T. Phipps</sup>

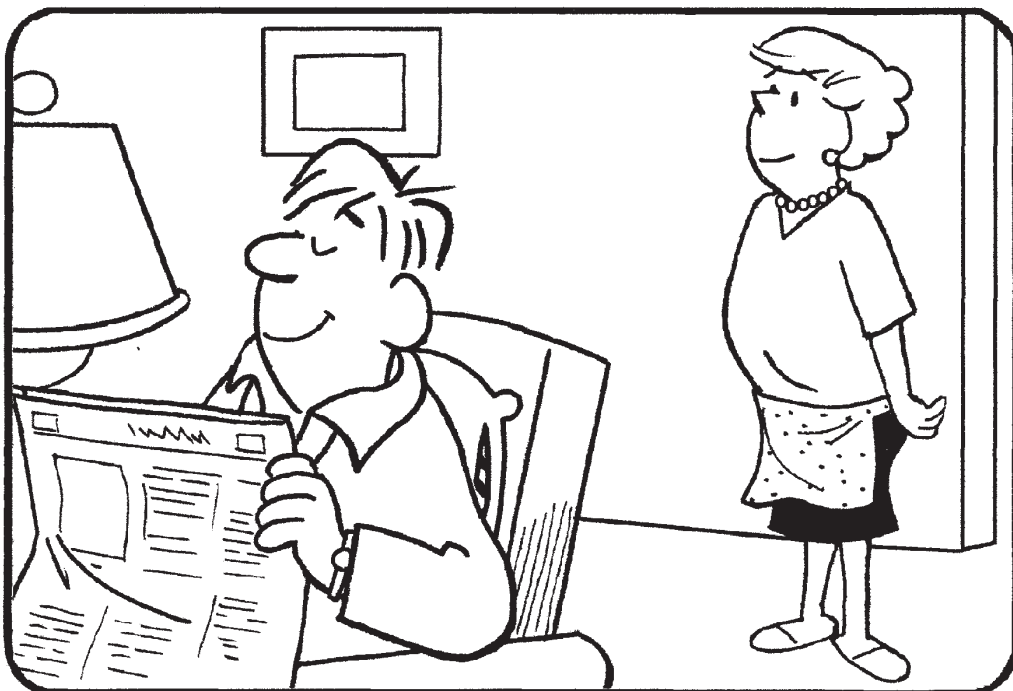


## HOCUS-FOCUS

BY  
HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



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Differences: 1. Pillow is larger. 2. Picture on wall is moved.  
3. Mouth is different. 4. Necklace is added. 5. Apron is different.  
6. Wristwatch is added.

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\* To stretch your laundry budget, cut fabric softener sheets in half. They work just as well. Also, save them after they come out of the dryer. They make excellent dusters in the home.

\* Love Sudoku? M.K. of Montana suggests that you might love it even more if you color code your grid. Each number 1-9 is assigned a color, and you solve the puzzle as normal, except you color in the box to denote your answer. When it's all finished, she says, "It looks like a colorful quilt."

\* If the vegetables you are cooking give off an unpleasant smell, grab a small saucepan and simmer a bit of plain vinegar while cooking. It will negate the smell, and leave your house smelling pleasantly like mealtime afterward.

\* "Cornstarch is great for itchy, rashy skin. This is true for babies' bottoms and for doggy bellies, which is what I use it for. My pup is allergic to grass but loves to romp. Sometimes his belly gets red, and I clean it with a mild soap and water, then give him a cornstarch rub. It sure helps." -- T.W. in Ohio

\* Want to keep your cut flowers fresh longer? Add a teaspoon of chlorine bleach to the water and change it out every few days.

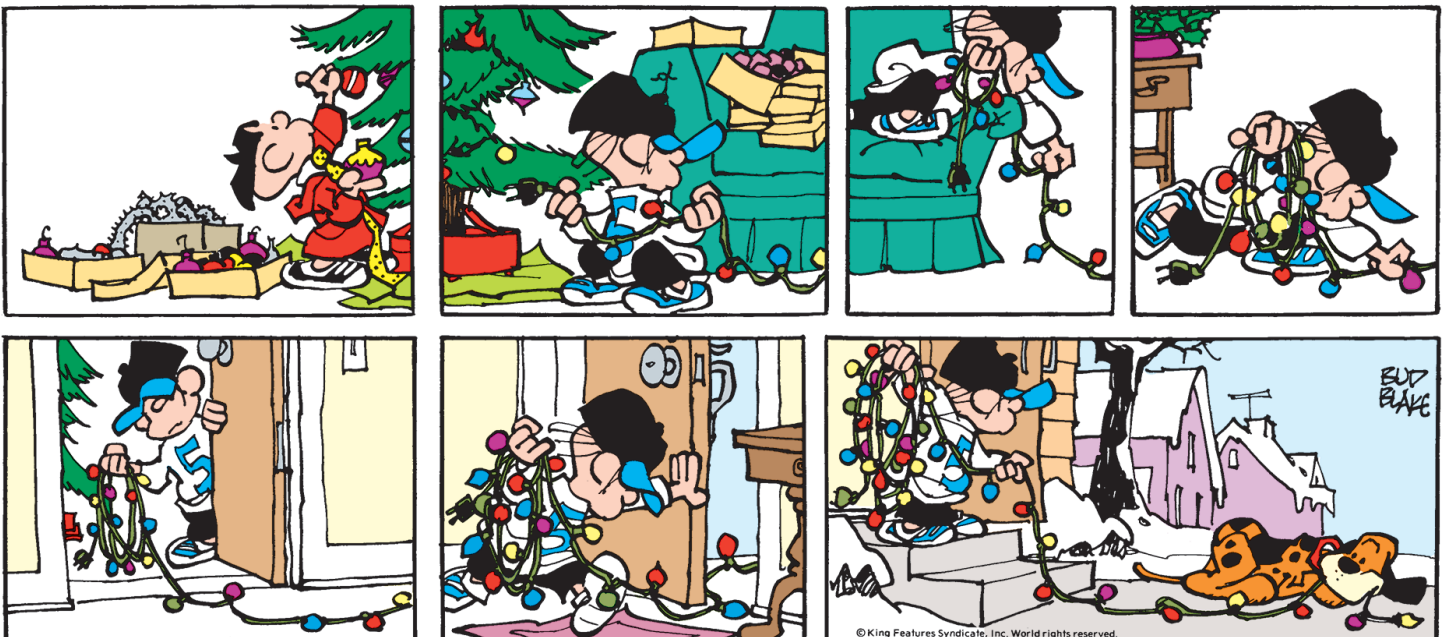
\* Spruce up indoor greenery with a little mineral oil. To get your green plants' leaves shining and healthy, wipe them down with a clean cloth dipped in mineral oil. Rub off any excess.

Send your tips to Now Here's a Tip, 628 Virginia Drive, Orlando, FL 32803.

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## TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



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## King Crossword

### ACROSS

- 1 "Waterloo" group
- 5 Financial pro
- 8 Sci-fi vehicles
- 12 Starring role
- 13 — Royal Highness
- 14 Worn-down pencils
- 15 Nose and mouth covering
- 17 Move like a butterfly
- 18 Short sock
- 19 Curved fasteners
- 21 Shoe width
- 22 Tropical tree
- 23 Santa's helper

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12					13				14			
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		41			42		43		44			
45	46						47			48	49	50
51					52	53						
54					55				56			
57					58				59			

- 26 Highland hat
- 28 Prettify
- 31 Painter Joan
- 33 Coffee vessel
- 35 A few
- 36 Glasses, slangily
- 38 Bro's kin
- 40 Compass dir.
- 41 And others (Lat.)
- 43 Goal
- 45 Filmed anew
- 47 Lubricate
- 51 Mountain ht.
- 52 Gathering organized via social media
- 54 Jai —
- 55 Sailor
- 56 Skater Lipinski
- 57 Chorus syllables
- 58 Govt. lender
- 59 ABA member
- 9 Spectacular lunar phase
- 10 Last write-up
- 11 Bygone fliers
- 16 Bump into
- 20 Sheepish remark
- 23 German river
- 24 Sass
- 25 Comp for a foodie
- 27 "— Miniver"
- 29 LBJ's successor
- 30 Formerly known as
- 32 Spencer of "Hidden Figures"
- 34 — Falls
- 37 Blue
- 39 Round Table titles
- 42 Certain jobs
- 44 Maestro Zubin —
- 45 Genuine
- 46 Big name in scat
- 48 Latin 101 word
- 49 Type
- 50 Online auction site
- 53 Science room

### DOWN

- 1 — Romeo
- 2 Legume
- 3 Support
- 4 "Skyfall" singer
- 5 French vineyard estate
- 6 Math ratios
- 7 Invite to one's loft
- 8 Develops

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## — King Crossword —

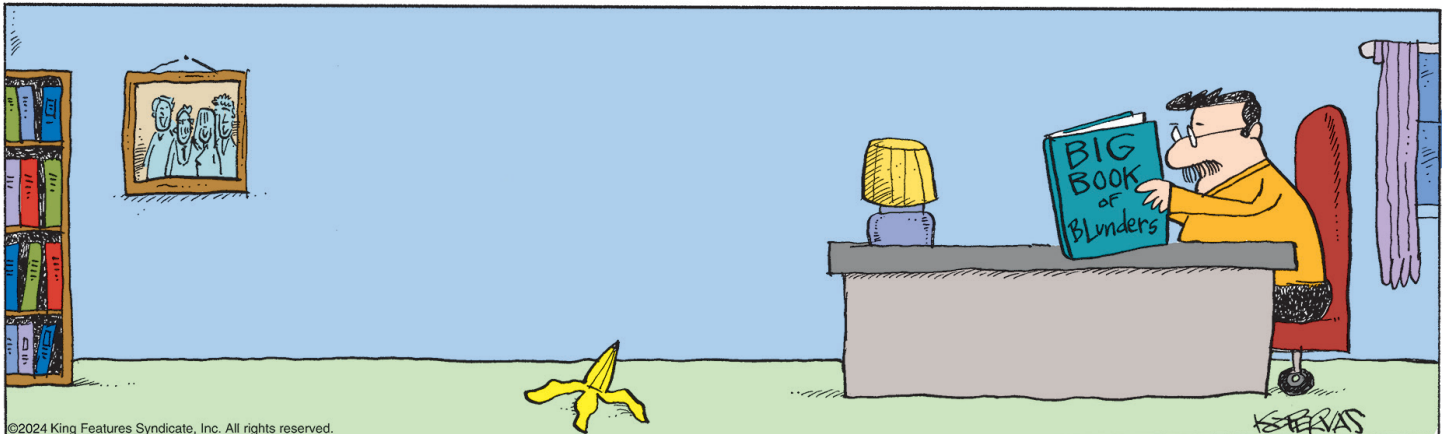
Answers

Solution time: 24 mins.

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M	I	R	O		U	R	N		S	O	M	E	
S	P	E	C	S		S	I	S		N	N	E	
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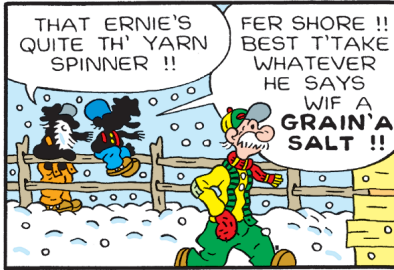
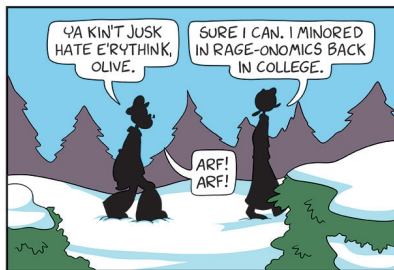
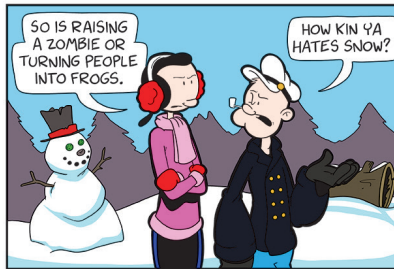
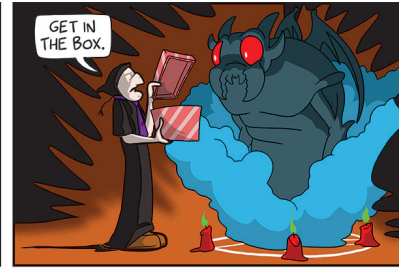
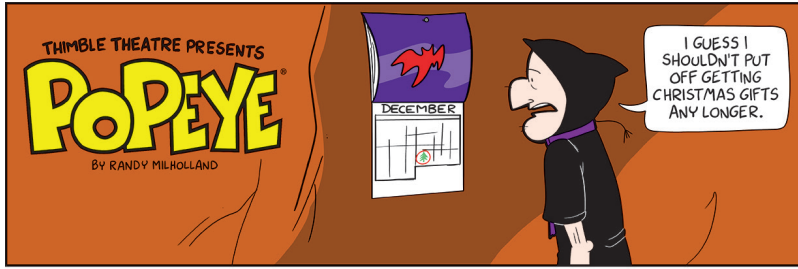
Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



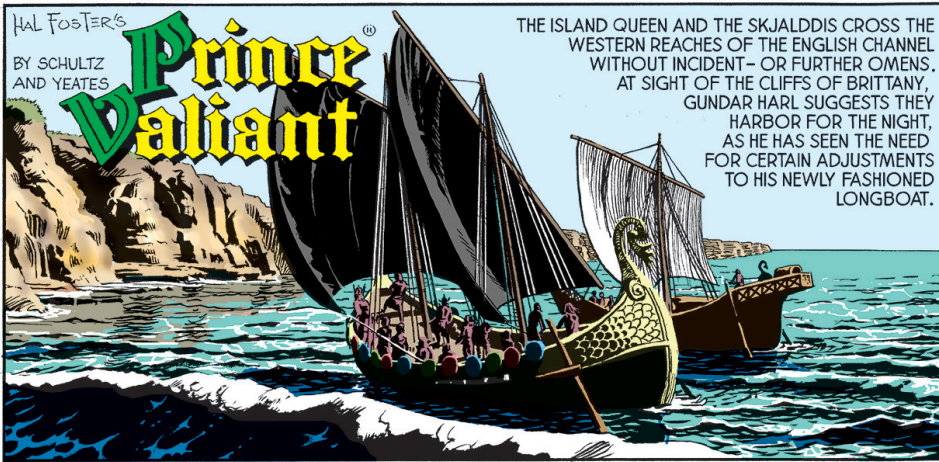
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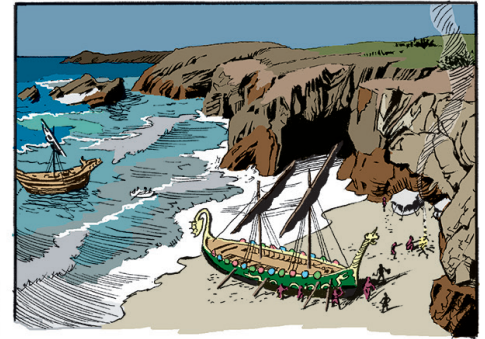
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HAL FOSTER'S  
BY SCHULTZ  
AND YEATES

## Prince Valiant

THE ISLAND QUEEN AND THE SKJALDDIS CROSS THE WESTERN REACHES OF THE ENGLISH CHANNEL WITHOUT INCIDENT - OR FURTHER OMENS. AT SIGHT OF THE CLIFFS OF BRITANNY, GUNDAR HARL SUGGESTS THEY HARBOR FOR THE NIGHT, AS HE HAS SEEN THE NEED FOR CERTAIN ADJUSTMENTS TO HIS NEWLY FASHIONED LONGBOAT.



SO, THEY FIND AN ISOLATED, PROTECTED COVE AND THE SKJALDDIS IS BEACHED. WHILE GUNDAR SEES TO THE CAULKING OF LOOSE SEAMS, VAL SEEKS FRESH MEAT AND WATER.

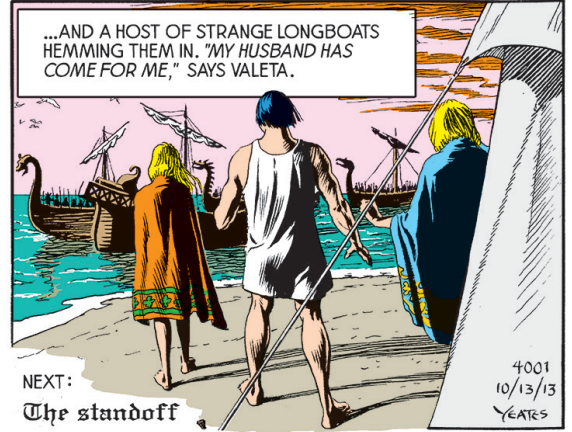
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THEY WORK, CLEANING THE SHIPS AND LAYING IN ADDITIONAL PROVISIONS, UNTIL NIGHT FALLS, AND ALL ARE GLAD FOR AN ADDITIONAL NIGHT ASHORE.



BUT WHEN VAL AWAKES, IT IS WITH A SENSE OF MISGIVING. HE FINDS HIS DAUGHTER VALETA ALREADY RISEN, STARING OUT TO SEA ...



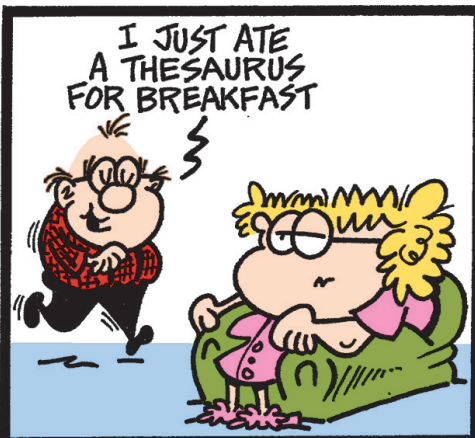
...AND A HOST OF STRANGE LONGBOATS HEMMING THEM IN. "MY HUSBAND HAS COME FOR ME," SAYS VALETA.

NEXT:  
The standoff

4001  
10/13/13  
YEATES

## The Spats

by Jeff Pickering

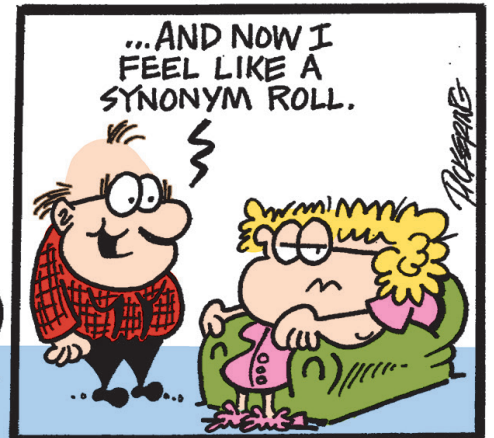


I JUST ATE A THESAURUS FOR BREAKFAST

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\*BURP\*



...AND NOW I FEEL LIKE A SYNONYM ROLL.

PICKERING



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## SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

### Our challenge for 2025

"Your mission, should you choose to accept it ..." Remember that quote, from the "Mission: Impossible" TV show? The show (1966-1973) tasked members of the team with stopping enemy forces, a job that seemed to be impossible but really wasn't. That's our challenge for the New Year, to stop the "enemy forces" who are the scammers that want to steal our money, our identification and our peace of mind.

Some ideas for staying safe:

Ask your senior center to host a seminar about scams aimed at seniors.

Don't click on links in email or text messages.

Don't answer the phone if you don't know who it is. If a caller says they're from your bank, hang up and call the bank to see if they really did call you.

Don't give out any information over the phone, no matter who it is. The IRS, Medicare or Social Security aren't going to call you to ask for your account numbers or threaten to have you arrested.

If a caller asks, "Can you hear me?" never say "yes." That one word will be recorded and give them permission to authorize charges on your credit card, or to make a payment. Just hang up.

If a company claims you're having a virus problem with your computer and wants access to fix it, just hang up.

Never announce on social media that you're going away on vacation. It alerts thieves that your house will be empty.

Go online and search for scams against seniors. Become familiar with all the tricks thieves use to get you to let down your guard. Learn about the red flags for the grandparent scam, the lottery scam, the counterfeit check scam, the undelivered package scam ... there are just so many of them, and they rob seniors of billions of dollars each year.

Make your goal for 2025 to not fall for any scams. It's not impossible.

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1. What businessman is the founder, chairman and CEO of Monumental Sports & Entertainment, which owns the NBA's Washington Wizards, the NHL's Washington Capitals and the WNBA's Washington Mystics?

2. The Cyclone Taylor Trophy is awarded annually to the MVP of which NHL hockey team?

3. Name the Las Vegas Aces player who tied Liz Cambage's single-game WNBA scoring record with a 53-point performance in August 2023.

4. Pro softball pitcher, LPGA Tour golfer and U.S. Women's National Basketball Team player Joan Joyce coached softball (1995-2022) and women's golf (1996-2014) for what college team?

5. Name the Los Angeles Dodgers first baseman who hit the first walk-off grand slam home run in World Series history.

6. Ed Anzalone, better known as "Fireman Ed," is a superfan famous for leading cheers at what NFL team's home games?

7. During a 2015 Indianapolis 500 practice session, what driver was critically injured in a crash when a piece of his car's suspension impaled his left thigh?

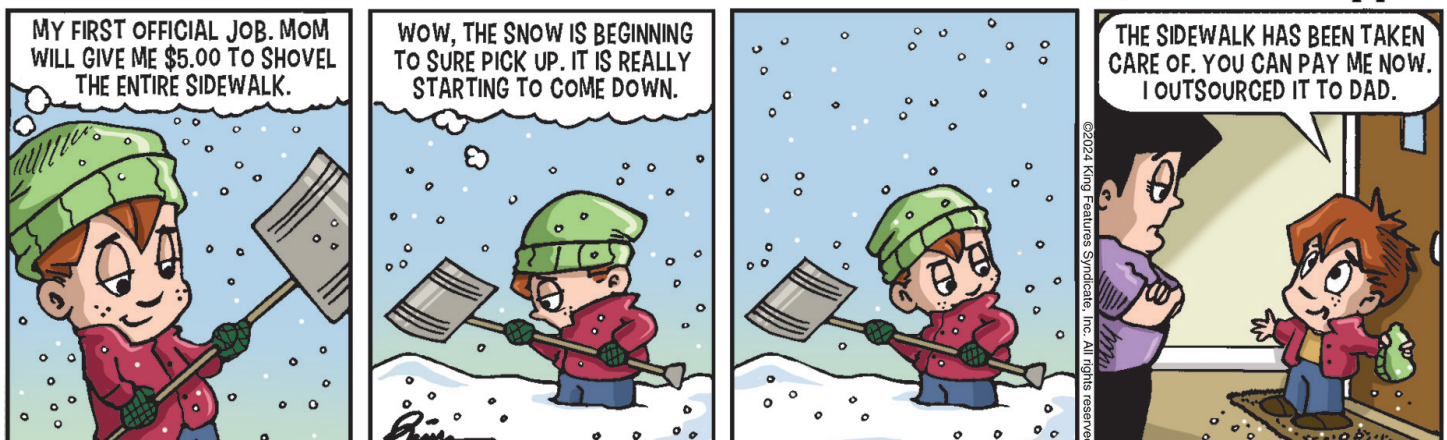


## Answers

1. Ted Leonsis.
  2. The Vancouver Canucks.
  3. A'ja Wilson.
  4. The Florida Atlantic Owls.
  5. Freddie Freeman, in 2024 World Series Game 1.
  6. The New York Jets.
  7. James Hinchcliffe.
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## Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps





## Introducing a new pet to your cat

DEAR PAW'S CORNER: I recently adopted a year-old puppy. "Max" is a friendly, well-socialized dog, and during the trial stay a month ago, my 10-year-old cat, "Nora," seemed to tolerate him. Well, on the second day that Max was home, he started barking excitedly. Nora sprang up and attacked him, cornering Max on the sofa. She batted him around the snout several times. Now, Max slinks out of the room anytime that Nora appears. How can I make peace between them? -- Gerry G., Manchester, New Hampshire

DEAR GERRY: I'm sorry to hear that! Introducing a new pet into an established household can be stressful for both pets and sometimes unpredictable. And any negative interactions that occur -- from hissing and barking to an all-out boxing match -- can make future harmony nearly impossible to achieve. One or both pets may begin to exhibit behavioral issues like aggression, soiling in the house, chewing and scratching, and more.

For the foreseeable future, you'll need to manage and monitor all interactions between Max and Nora. As soon as they begin to react negatively, they need to be separated.

Reintroduce the two gradually. I recommend taking Max for a nice, long walk before each meeting so that some of his puppy energy is worked off beforehand. Work intensively with Max on basic commands like sit, stay, lie down and come here. When Max is in the room with Nora, have him sit or lie down close to you -- they don't have to meet face to face. Limit interaction time to five minutes or less at first, then gradually increase the time.

How do you keep peace between pets in your house? Tell me about it at [ask@pawscorner.com](mailto:ask@pawscorner.com).

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## Strange BUT TRUE

\* Montana's Flathead Lake looks shallow due to its crystal-clear water, but is actually 370 feet deep.

\* The expiration date on bottled water is for the bottle, not the water.

\* In 2004, farmers in India used Pepsi and Coca-Cola instead of pesticides because they were cheaper and got the job done just as well. Not surprisingly, Pepsi and Coca-Cola strongly disagreed.

\* After eating a large meal, lions can sleep for up to 24

hours straight.

\* People used to use bread to erase pencil marks, until Edward Naine accidentally picked up a piece of rubber instead of breadcrumbs in 1770 and -- voila! -- decided to start selling rubber erasers.

\* Two Bosnians had been talking in online chatrooms for a while when they decided it was time to meet in person. They discovered they were a married couple who had been cheating on each other with each other. They ended up divorcing.

\* One French cafe, La Petite Syrah, charges 7 euros for a coffee to rude customers but only 1.40 euro to patrons who are polite to the waitstaff. The cafe is located, perhaps unsurprisingly, in Nice.

\* Penguin egg whites turn clear when they're boiled.

\* Michael Jackson was said to request that his wine be served in Diet Coke cans whenever he was on a flight. He didn't want his kids to see him drinking alcohol.

\* Saudi Arabia once held a Women's Rights Conference that didn't include a single woman attendee.

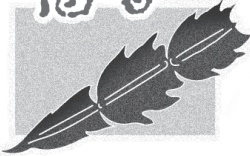
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Thought for the Day: "A good conscience is a continual Christmas." --Benjamin Franklin


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### The Garden Bug

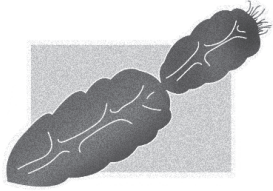
## Holiday cactuses



"Thanksgiving cactus" (*Schlumbergera truncata*) displays broad, pointy leaves and may bloom from late October through November.



"Christmas cactus" (*Schlumbergera bridgesii*) has scalloped, flat leaves and may bloom from late November to late January.



The "Easter cactus" (*Rhipsalidopsis gaertnerii*) displays rounded scalloped leaves, sometimes with "hairs," and may bloom from mid-March through April. - Brenda Weaver

Sources: planetdesert.com, Sunny Home Gardens



by Freddy Groves

## The OIG Always Comes Through

Things are going to be different in 2025. If there's one thing I hope, it's that the Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General isn't hit with any budget or staffing reductions. As time goes on we need them more than ever to dig out, investigate and expose all the problems in the VA.

The PACT Act of 2022, for example, required screenings for toxic exposures -- as well as training for the VA medical staff to do those screenings. Within a short time, screenings had been done on 4 million veterans out of the 9 million who were enrolled in VA health care. That's approximately 45% of the total. Training for staff, however, didn't come close. When additional training was required, only 21.4% of staff completed it, which means that a lot of veterans were screened by staff who hadn't done all of their training.

Then there is the matter of communication that the VA OIG exposed: A "package manager" computer program at the VA bundles up the documents for a veteran's claims and then sends them off to a printer. The VA OIG discovered that, because nobody was paying attention to the problem, over 2 million packages weren't printed ... because nobody hit the "send" button. The veterans, therefore, did not receive the communications from the VA, which might have been asking for more evidence for a claim to be processed or notification about a claim decision and information about options for responding to that decision.

Equally valuable are the frauds that the OIG nails. A recent scam involved a pharmaceutical company that offered a particular test kit, claiming that the kit could diagnose a certain condition. Then they were able to push the very expensive therapy drug they produced for that condition. Kickbacks were involved, of course. The company ended up paying \$47 million for their scam.

Keep your fingers crossed. In a perfect world, the VA OIG will maintain an adequate budget and staffing. Doubling it would be better.

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## Wishing Well®



6	2	5	4	7	6	2	7	8	7	2	7	5
H	C	A	P	A	A	R	C	B	T	E	I	P
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O	O	S	R	T	L	N	S	Y	T	D	O	H
6	7	5	3	6	7	6	3	7	3	8	7	8
I	I	U	R	E	F	S	I	I	V	T	E	I
4	3	6	8	7	6	4	6	8	4	6	4	6
H	E	A	V	D	H	E	E	E	A	A	D	D

HERE IS A PLEASANT LITTLE GAME that will give you a message every day. It's a numerical puzzle designed to spell out your fortune. Count the letters in your first name. If the number of letters is 6 or more, subtract 4. If the number is less than 6, add 3. The result is your key number. Start at the upper left-hand corner and check one of your key numbers, left to right. Then read the message the letters under the checked figures give you.

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- LITERATURE: Which Victor Hugo novel was made into an animated Disney movie?
- MUSIC: In the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas," what was the gift on the eighth day?
- GEOGRAPHY: Where is the Kalahari Desert located?
- HISTORY: Who was the first African-American justice on the U.S. Supreme Court?
- BIOLOGY: What is the process called in which a nonreproductive cell divides in two?
- MOVIES: In the movie "Elf," what is the name of Santa's sleigh?
- ANIMAL KINGDOM: What is the largest mammal on Earth?
- U.S. STATES: Where did the first organized celebration of Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) take place in the U.S.?
- ASTRONOMY: Which planet is the smallest in our solar system?
- TELEVISION: Which 1980s-1990s TV family sitcom had a holiday episode titled "A Very Tanner Christmas"?

### Answers

- "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."
- Eight maids a-milking.
- Southern Africa.
- Thurgood Marshall.
- Mitosis.
- The Kringle 3000.
- The blue whale.
- Mobile, Alabama.
- Mercury.
- "Full House."

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South Dakota Governor

**Kristi Noem**



**South Dakota:** *Under God, the People Rule*

## A Budget for the People

Our state motto is “Under God, the People Rule.” During my time as Governor, I have always kept my budget proposals focused on our people, not government programs. Every dollar that we invest – every policy that we support – should be focused on our people, on making them safer, stronger, and freer. Our budgets should always focus on our core priorities. That is what I have done in my first six years as governor, and that is what South Dakota will continue to do.

One of the things that makes me proudest is how strong we have made South Dakota’s economy. When I first ran for governor, I saw an economy that needed to grow. Our young people were leaving the state. Our businesses weren’t thriving. And major projects weren’t moving here. But I knew we had an opportunity to turn South Dakota around. My budget proposal will continue to invest in our schools, state employees, and our healthcare providers. I am recommending a 1.25% increase for these three – this should keep us ahead of the increase in inflation. We are not going back to the days when our kids, providers, and employees are left behind.

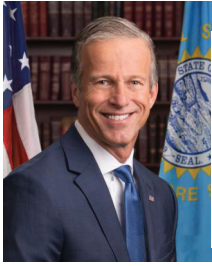
I have prioritized education over the last six years, and we will continue to do that with this year’s budget. I am proposing that we invest \$4 million to establish Education Savings Accounts for South Dakota students. This investment will pay for a portion of private school tuition or curriculum for alternative education – beginning with about \$3,000 per-student. We want those students to receive the education that’s best for them and to have the Freedom to do so. My budget also invests \$10 million in one-time funds over five years to create school safety grants that will support identified security upgrades and protect the next generation of South Dakotans.

In my time as Governor, I am proud of the work that we have done to support the public health of South Dakotans. Every citizen in our state should have the Freedom to live where they want and the opportunity to have good health outcomes – even if they choose a rural lifestyle. My budget accomplishes this by investing \$1.2 million in our regional mental health facilities so the South Dakotans can get appropriate help closer to home. And I recommend a \$1.5 million investment into Agency with Choice to provide greater care for South Dakotans utilizing our developmental disability services.

One of the core responsibilities of the government is to guarantee the safety and security of our people – to protect their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I am proud of all that we have done in the last six years to improve the safety of our people. My budget accomplishes this by meeting the remaining need of \$182 million to fully fund the new men’s prison. Doing this will save \$600 million in taxpayer dollars over the long-run.

This budget will reflect the 136th consecutive balanced budget for our state. My budget cuts spending in wise, targeted ways to achieve balance. And I am proposing further steps to strengthen our financial systems and make sure that we are transparent with taxpayer dollars.

Our state is an example of fiscal responsibility; of limited government; of what can be accomplished when we trust in our people and respect their Freedom. And the results prove our approach is correct. I am proud of the budget that we have put together this year for the people of South Dakota.



**JOHN THUNE**  
U.S. SENATOR FOR SOUTH DAKOTA

## Supporting Farmers and Ranchers

There's hardly a corner of South Dakota where you won't find a farm, ranch, or some other trace of our rich agricultural heritage – it's the lifeblood of our state. Representing the hardworking South Dakotans who grow food and fuel and raise livestock is a responsibility I take seriously. So I value the conversations I have with producers as I travel around the state.

Unfortunately, what I'm hearing from farmers and ranchers lately is not good. Higher input costs, higher interest rates, and lower commodity prices are a dangerous combination for farms and ranches. Add to that the natural disasters and droughts that have impacted agriculture around the country, including in South Dakota, and it's clear the situation is dire.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture projects net farm income will decrease 4 percent this year, after a 19 percent drop last year. Over the last two years row crop producers have lost \$50 billion, and projections for next year are not any better. Behind these numbers are the individual farms and ranches and the families who run them seeing red ink and wondering if their operation can weather the worst.

Farmers and ranchers need help. I share the frustration of many producers that these issues have not yet been addressed by an updated farm bill. I've been pushing hard for Congress to take up a farm bill, and I will continue doing everything I can to advance a bill that helps South Dakota's farmers and ranchers through these tough times, including strengthening the farm safety net and modernizing conservation programs to prioritize producer flexibility.

It's common sense, but I believe that the farm bill should be focused on farms and ranches. For too long, unfortunately, Democrats in the Senate have prioritized their climate agenda and out-of-control spending rather than focusing on agriculture policy. As a result, an updated farm bill is now more than a year overdue.

Agriculture is the lifeblood of South Dakota, and it's also the lifeblood of America. There's not much in our country that doesn't rely on farmers and ranchers in some way. For the last few years, they have faced challenge after challenge. I'm continuing to work with my colleagues to get the farm bill done and provide the support farmers and ranchers need to keep going for the next growing season and the next generation.



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## Leading the Way to Government Efficiency

### **BIG Update**

This week, I was elected to continue to serve as Chairman of the Republican Main Street Caucus, which I have led since 2022. The group has worked to pass conservative solutions to cut \$2 trillion in spending, reform welfare, and unlock domestic energy production.

I'm excited to lead this group during this special time in history. Main Street will work with President Trump and the Senate to secure the border, cut spending, and roll back unnecessary regulations.

There is a strong, conservative agenda to fulfill in the next few years, and I know our 80+ conservative members in the caucus are up to the task..

### **BIG Idea**

Many Americans believe the government is too large, too slow, and spends too much money.

I joined a meeting with Elon Musk, Vivek Ramaswamy, and other House Republicans to brainstorm ideas for the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

I've long been a champion of welfare reform, which is a key focus government efficiency improvement. There are loopholes and hurdles that make our welfare system costly. Making changes to decrease waste, fraud, and abuse will help reduce government spending and target welfare benefits to the people who need it the most.

DOGE is championing the return to the office for federal employees that have been working remotely since COVID-19. The government should not waste resources on buildings that sit empty and should instead make sure our federal agencies are working as efficiently and effectively as possible. Being good stewards of taxpayer dollars should be of the utmost importance.

I look forward to hearing and implementing more ideas to make our federal government run better..

### **BIG News**

The week started off with some pretty big, and incredibly disappointing news. President Biden issued a broad, sweeping pardon to his son, Hunter. Not only is it one of the broadest pardons given in history, but it furthers the belief among many Americans that there is a two-tiered justice system. This pardon is a terrible mistake.

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**December 2-6, 2024**

We're back to work out in Washington following Thanksgiving! I hope you all had a great holiday filled with family, friends and delicious food. We are truly blessed to live in the greatest state in the greatest country in the world, which is one thing we can all give thanks for. I spent time this week attending meetings with South Dakotans, hearings, votes and classified briefings. I also began meeting

with President-elect Trump's cabinet nominees this week. I had productive meetings with three nominees this week where we took time to discuss the issues our country is facing, as well as priorities for the next administration. More on these meetings and everything else in my Weekly Round[s] Up:

South Dakotans I met with: Amy Bruner with Minnehaha County Moms for Liberty; and the National Association of Farm Service Agency County Office Employees. Their current President, Joel Foster, is from Milbank.

Cabinet nominee meetings: As many of you may know, each of the individuals President-elect Trump nominates to serve in his cabinet must be confirmed by the Senate. As such, I will be meeting with his nominees as they move through the confirmation process.

I met with Elise Stefanik this week, nominee to serve as the United States' Ambassador to the United Nations. I am confident in her ability to be a strong advocate for policies that put America First and our adversaries last, particularly with regard to China.

I also met with former Representative Doug Collins, nominee for Secretary of the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Doug shares my vision for the VA – it's time to make the VA work for Veterans again. His nomination will come through the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Pete Hegseth, nominee for Secretary of Defense, also came to my office for a meeting this week. As someone with boots-on-the-ground experience, he would bring a refreshing perspective and a new approach to strengthening our military. I appreciated his perspective as a warrior for making the Department of Defense a more lethal force well into the future. Mr. Hegseth's nomination will come through the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Other meetings: Tiffany Justice, co-founder of Moms for Liberty; leaders from Talus Renewables; General C.Q. Brown, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; the American Business Immigration Coalition board members; Sedat Önal, Turkey's Ambassador to the United States; Dr. Harald Malmgren; Patrick Gruber, CEO of GEVO; and Jerome Powell, Chairman of the Federal Reserve. I also spoke at a conference hosted by Empower to speak about AI and financial services issues.

We had a half-day Senate Republican "retreat" on Tuesday where we took time to talk about priorities heading into the new Congress, including working as quickly as possible to get President-Elect Trump's cabinet confirmed so he can have his team in place. We also had a dinner honoring the Republican members of the United States Senate who are retiring this year.

Votes taken: 13 – similar to the past few weeks since the election, all of our votes were on nominations to judicial positions. The judges we voted on this week are located in California, Massachusetts, Washington DC, Pennsylvania, New York, New Mexico and Georgia. As we near the end of this administration and a Democrat-controlled Senate, the President and Leader Schumer are pushing through their most left-leaning, controversial nominees. As a result, I did not vote to confirm any of the seven judges that passed the Senate this week.

Hearings: I had one closed hearing in the Select Committee on Intelligence.

Classified briefings: I attended three classified briefings this week. I had one classified briefing related to my work on the Senate Armed Service Committee's Subcommittee on Air, Land and Sea. We also had an all-members classified briefing on the Salt Typhoon hack, a successful effort by China to listen in on cell phone communications and read text messages for an extended period of time. Finally, I hosted my biweekly Cyber Education seminar, a classified session for members of the Senate and their staff to receive an update on our cybersecurity operations in the defense sector.

My staff in South Dakota visited: Belle Fourche.

Steps taken this past week: 49,295 steps or 24.78 miles.

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Dr. James L. Snyder Ministries

PO Box 831313 - Ocala, FL 34483

1-352-216-3025

## Another Jingle Bell on the Tree

Working in my office the other morning, I heard some rattling noises on the other side of the house. Being as busy as I was, I didn't take the time to find out what that noise was all about. When I'm working on a project, I like to stay on the project.

It was around lunchtime, and I was still hearing that noise. I decided to go into the kitchen and see what we were having for lunch, and as I did so, I noticed The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage was in the living room setting up our Christmas tree.

She does this every year and is very good at it. Each year, she gets a new Jingle Bell and puts it near the top of the tree.

If Santa Claus was real (and I do not believe what my parents said about him), he would immediately recruit her to organize his Christmas. She could make his job so much easier.

I'm sure Santa Claus would be very grateful for all the work she could do for him. Of course, he would have to listen to her and do exactly what she says, or we would probably never see Santa Claus again.

I think he is so old that he would listen to her and do exactly what she says because he has done this work so long that he's just about worn out.

Sometimes, I think it would be really nice if there was a Santa Claus. Every year my parents would take me downtown where Santa Claus was, and I would sit on Santa's lap and tell him what I wanted for Christmas. I assured him I was a very good boy during the year.

The older I got the more suspicious I got of this man called Santa Claus. If he was real, he sure wasn't real to me.

Every year, as far as I can remember, I sat on his lap and told him that I wanted a pony for Christmas and nothing more. He always went through his "ho ho ho" act and I believed he was going to do it for me.

I remember getting up on Christmas day and running into the living room, where my parents had their Christmas tree surrounded by all the Christmas gifts. I looked around the tree then I got up and went to the back porch, looked out, and shouted to my parents, "Where is he? I can't see him."

Of course, my parents would say, "What you're talking about," and I always responded by saying, "Santa Claus promised me that he was going to bring me a pony. Now, where is that pony?"

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The older I got, the more sophisticated my parents' response to that question was. Usually, it was something like, "Santa might have run out of ponies this year, so you'll have to wait until next year, and I'm sure he'll bring one next year."

Christmas went by, and another Christmas went by, and another Christmas went by, and there was no sign of any pony with my name on it.

My parents were rather disappointed when I discovered that they had been lying to me all these years and there was no such thing as a Santa Claus. Santa Claus was just a character somebody made up.

I remember the last time I sat on Santa Claus's lap, I was 12 years old. By the time the next Christmas came around, I had turned 13, and I was now a teenager. As a teenager, I knew everything, and nobody could talk to me about anything.

I remember the conversation I had with my parents. I explained to them that there is no such thing as a Santa Claus, and then I asked them why they had lied to me all those years.

"I'm sorry, son," my mother said. "Everyone was saying that, so we joined the crowd. We just wanted you to have a wonderful Christmas."

So Santa Claus is not a real person. If he were, why do I have to spend so much money on Christmas presents?

I was thinking about this as I was eating lunch. There, the Christmas tree was in the process of being put together for Christmas. One of the routines at Christmas time was to buy a brand-new jingle Bell, usually at her favorite thrift store. As I was looking at the Christmas tree, I noticed there was a space near the top of the tree, but no jingle bell.

I looked at my wife and said, "My Dear, where is the new jingle Bell and why is there a big space on top of the Christmas tree?"

"I guess you never pay attention to what's going on around here, do you?" Then she laughed a good, merry laugh. "I cannot put the new jingle Bell on until the night before Christmas. That has been our tradition for many years, in case you haven't noticed. That space near the top of the tree is where the new jingle Bell goes this year."

I sure do love it when a plan comes together, even if it's not my plan.

A verse of scripture came to mind, 2 Thessalonians 2:15, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."

Traditions are important, especially those grounded on the Word of God.

## EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: Are mainstream dish soaps really that bad for the planet? And if so, what are some greener alternatives?

-- P. McGrath, Boulder, CO

Popular dish soaps often claim to easily tackle grease, leave dishes sparkling clean and uphold commitments to sustainability and safety. But these promises are often misleading. These products may deliver on cleaning power, but they often come at a high cost to human health, animal welfare and the environment. Many well-known dish soaps contain synthetic chemicals and additives that are harmful.

The main chemicals in dish soaps include Methylisothiazolinone, 4-dioxane, and fragrance and dye additives. Methylisothiazolinone is a synthetic preservative which inhibits the growth of bacteria and fungi, helping to give sponges a long useful life. The chemical is also a skin irritant for many and highly toxic in aquatic environments. 4-dioxane, though not intentionally added into dish soaps, is the byproduct of other chemical reactions. As a recognized groundwater pollutant, 4-dioxane is notoriously difficult to filter out during water treatment. The lemony-fresh scent many associate with cleanliness comes from synthetic fragrances, which act as air and aquatic pollutants. Dyes, which create visual appeal, are persistent pollutants that can linger in the environment for decades, contaminating waterways.

The environmental harm of dish soap extends beyond usage to its production. The industry ranks as the fourth-largest contributor to toxic pollution, with weighty impacts on communities near production facilities. The factories emit high levels of harmful chemicals, worsening climate change and exposing local populations to increased cancer risks. The toxic footprint also extends along transportation routes, especially from South Carolina through Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

Luckily, there are several options that are better for the environment and individual health. Cleancult Liquid Dish Soap is made from plant bases and does not use animal testing. It cleans efficiently, is easy on sensitive skin, does not contain harmful chemical, and received an "A" environmental rating. Dr. Bronner's Pure Castile Liquid Soap, generally known as a camping dish soap, is another grade "A" certified soap with strong Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles guiding production. It uses basic ingredients, designed to be safe in waterways. Koala EcoNatural Dish Soap is made without synthetic fragrances, using essential oils instead, and holds two toxic chemical-free certifications. These alternatives are available at a slightly higher price point, but are much worth the investment.



**Many well-known dish soaps contain synthetic chemicals and additives that are harmful.** Credit:

Pexels.com.

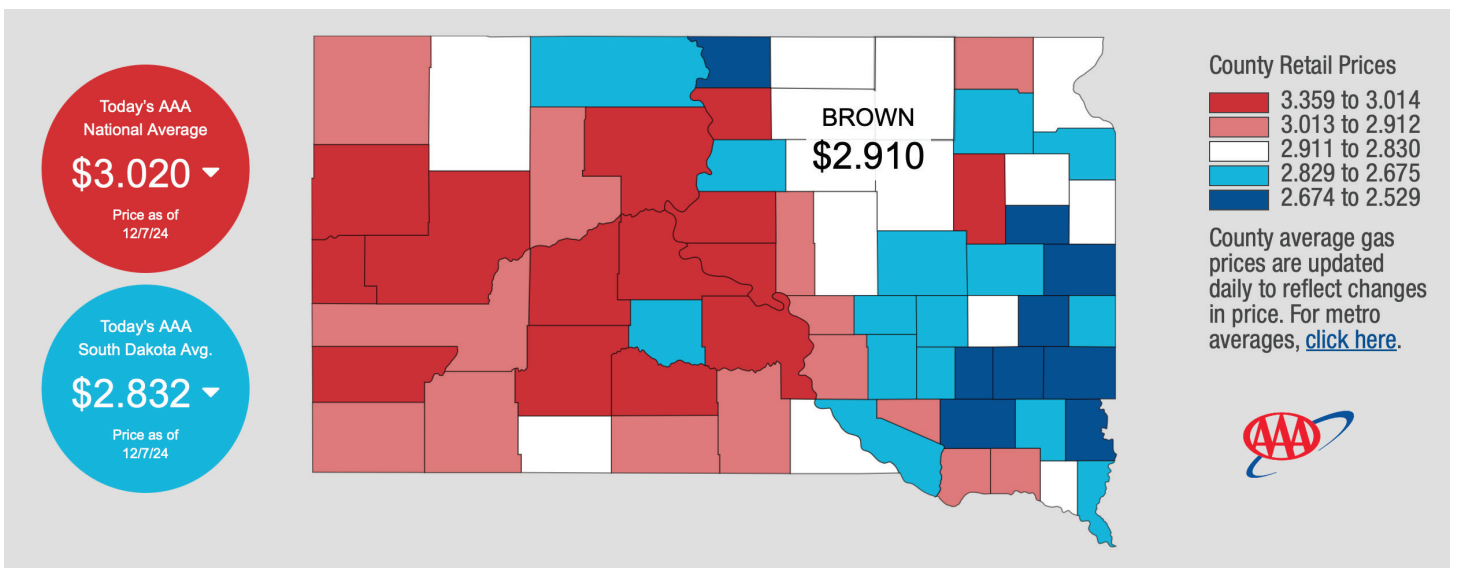
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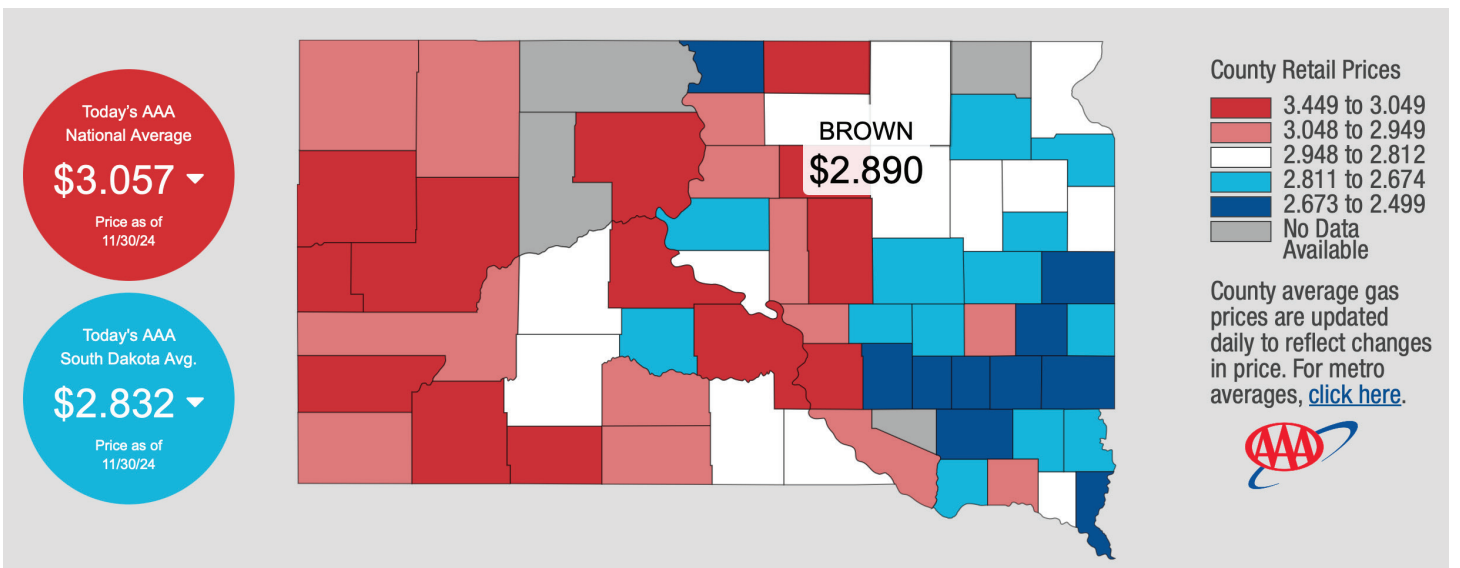
## South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.832	\$3.033	\$3.442	\$3.251
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.845	\$3.037	\$3.460	\$3.268
Week Ago Avg.	\$2.832	\$3.070	\$3.518	\$3.270
Month Ago Avg.	\$2.957	\$3.148	\$3.573	\$3.234
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.101	\$3.292	\$3.774	\$3.952

### This Week



### Last Week



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## Drought Classification

None

D0 (Abnormally Dry)

D1 (Moderate Drought)

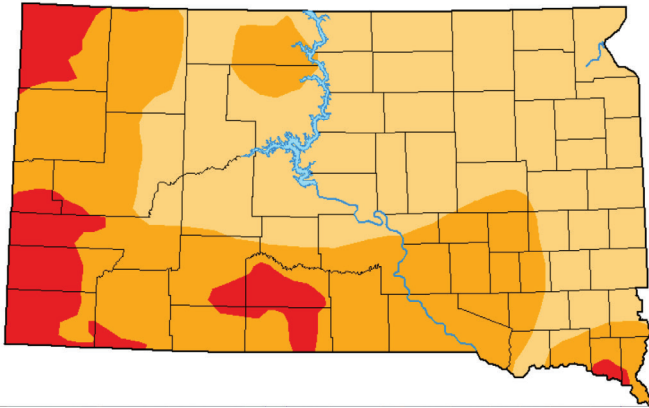
D2 (Severe Drought)

D3 (Extreme Drought)

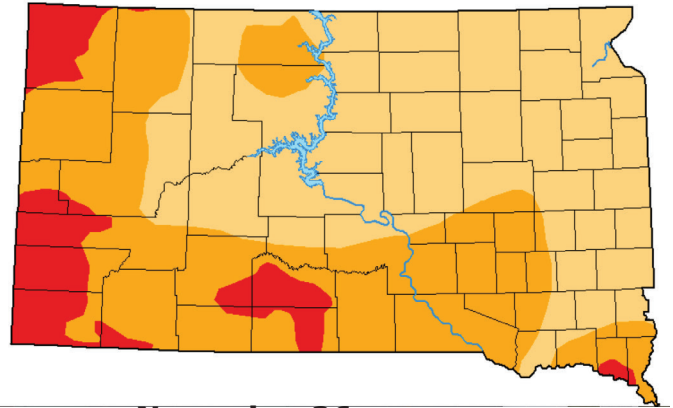
D4 (Exceptional Drought)

No Data

## Drought Monitor



December 3



November 26

On this week's map, only minor changes were made in the region, including in areas of North Dakota in response to recent snowfall events and above-normal precipitation during the past 30-day period. Some minor improvements were made also in west-central Kansas, where precipitation has been above normal during the past 30–60-day period. For the week, the region was generally dry except for some light snowfall across portions of the Dakotas. In terms of average temperatures for the week, cooler-than-normal temperatures (2 to 25 deg F below normal) prevailed, with frigid temperatures observed across North Dakota.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Massive data centers consuming large amounts of energy have eyes on South Dakota

**'Utilities are getting calls every week,' state regulator says**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - DECEMBER 7, 2024 7:00 AM**

Massive data centers used for cloud computing and artificial intelligence are consuming enormous amounts of energy, and developers are eyeing South Dakota as a potential location, regulators say.

These "hyperscale data centers," or "hyperscalers," are designed to handle immense computing demands and are often operated by tech giants. The centers are characterized by their large size — often tens of thousands of square feet — and thousands of computer servers that require significant energy to operate.

Nick Phillips with Applied Digital in Texas, a developer of the centers, highlighted South Dakota's appeal: a cold climate that cuts down on cooling a room full of hot servers, and abundant wind energy that's considered one of the most cost-effective renewable energy sources, which can help keep operating costs down.

State regulators are not aware of any hyperscale data centers currently operating in South Dakota.

"There isn't a requirement to report hyperscale data centers to the commission, so we don't have a formal method to track that information," said Leah Anderson with the Public Utilities Commission.

Commissioner Kristie Fiegen noted that the state's largest existing data center is a 50-megawatt facility in Leola.

"We don't know what's coming," she said. "But the utilities are getting calls every week from people trying to see if they have the megawatts available."

The commission recently hosted a meeting in Pierre with representatives from regional utilities, regional power grid associations and data centers. The goal was to understand the emerging demands and facilitate an information exchange.

Bob Sahr, a former public utilities commissioner and current CEO of East River Electric Cooperative in Madison, emphasized the scale of energy needed.

"We're talking loads that eclipse some of the largest cities in South Dakota," he said.

A single data center campus can require anywhere from 300 to 500 megawatts of electricity to operate. One megawatt can power hundreds of homes. By one estimate, there are over 1,000 hyperscalers worldwide, with the U.S. hosting just over half of them.



**An electrical substation in the snow in winter.**

(Photo by iStock/Getty Images Plus)



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Ryan Long, president of Xcel Energy, headquartered in Minneapolis, illustrated the extreme nature of the demand.

"We now have, I would say, north of seven gigawatts of requests across the Xcel Energy footprint for data centers to locate in one of our eight states," he said. "And I'll be very frank that there's no way that we're going to be able to serve all of that in a reasonable amount of time."

Protecting existing customers from potential costs or energy shortages is another shared concern. Utility representatives emphasized the need for coal and natural gas to maintain a reliable "base load" when renewable sources like wind and solar are unavailable. Arick Sears of Iowa-based MidAmerican Energy underscored the point, noting that costs for each data center should depend on how much energy it consumes.

"We need to ensure that large-scale energy users are paying their fair share," he said.

Utilities also flagged the risk of "stranded costs," referring to a data center ceasing operations, leaving a utility with added infrastructure to meet a demand that no longer exists. They said financial safeguards will need to be written into power agreements with hyperscalers.

Speed of deployment is another pressing issue. Representatives from Montana-Dakota Utilities, headquartered in North Dakota, and NorthWestern Energy, headquartered in Sioux Falls, noted that some facilities expect to be operational within months of making a deal, straining infrastructure, planning and resources.

Grid managers Brian Tulloh of Indiana-based Midcontinent Independent System Operator and Lanny Nickell of Arkansas-based Southwest Power Pool echoed those concerns. They warned that data center growth is outpacing the grid's ability to meet demand and cautioned against decommissioning coal power plants too quickly. Setting aside how much it would cost to produce the required energy, Tulloh estimated that MISO needs \$30 billion in electric transmission infrastructure to support the demand from hyperscalers.

"The grid wasn't designed for that," Public Utilities Commissioner Chris Nelson told South Dakota Searchlight after the meeting.

Nelson was glad to hear the data centers will include backup generators, similar to hospitals, for power outages or when homes need prioritization. He said some even aim to have huge batteries to power the plant until the generators get going. They would consume massive amounts of diesel and natural gas until the outage is over.

Nelson said all of this makes modern nuclear energy facilities more attractive. He said few alternative "base load" options remain, and the public has little appetite for ramping up coal power.

NorthWestern Energy is exploring the possibility of constructing a small nuclear power plant in South Dakota, with an estimated cost of \$1.2 billion to \$1.6 billion for a 320-megawatt facility. The plant would be the first in the state since a test facility near Sioux Falls in the 1960s.

The company is conducting a study, partially funded by the Department of Energy. Details about the study and potential plant sites remain confidential.

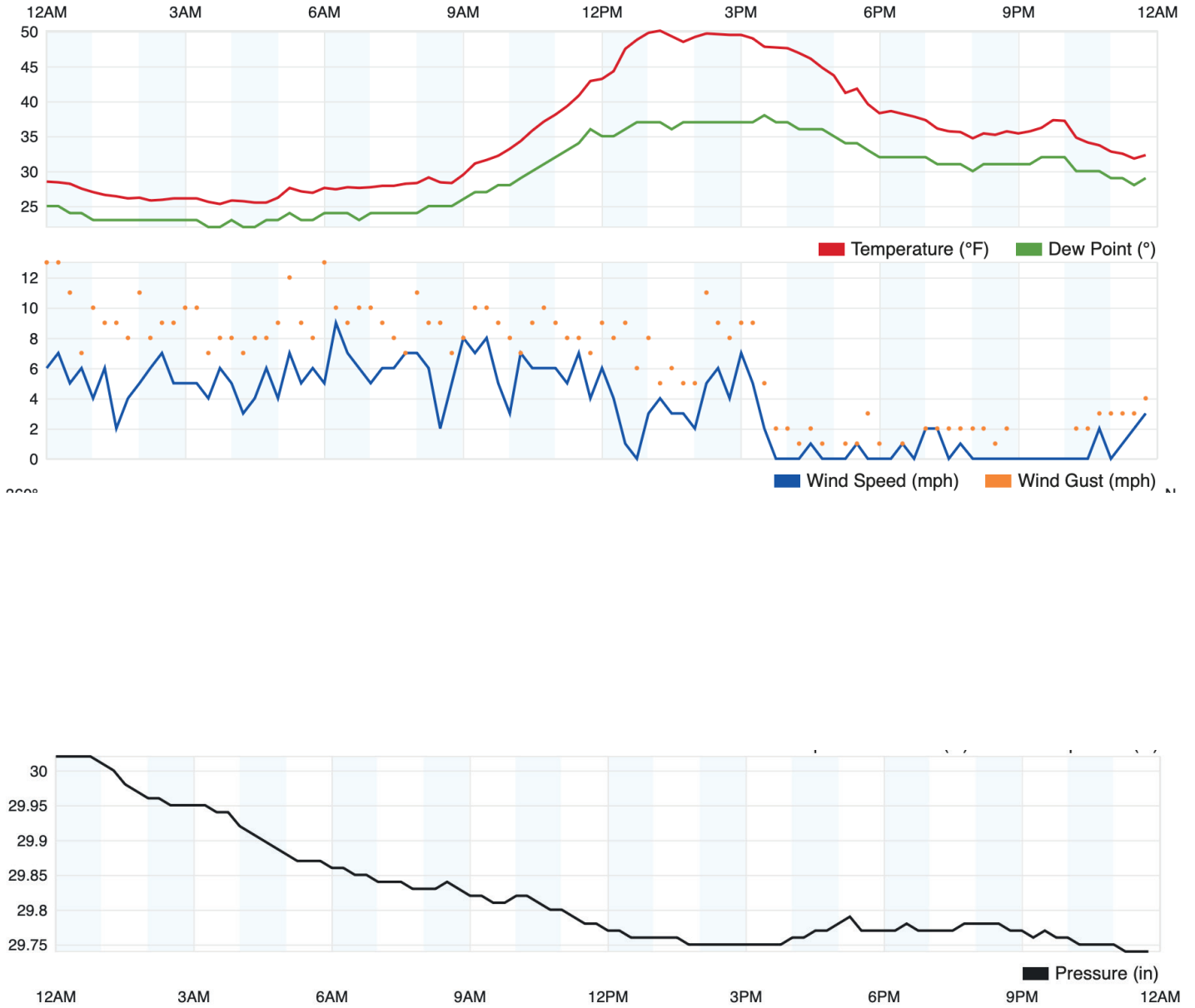
Additionally, South Dakota's Legislature has shown interest in nuclear energy, passing a resolution for further study on the topic that led to the publication of an issue memorandum by the Legislative Research Council.

*Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



**High: 44 °F**

Chance Rain

Tonight



**Low: 24 °F**

Partly Cloudy  
then Slight  
Chance Snow

Monday



**High: 27 °F**

Chance Snow  
and Blustery

Monday Night



**Low: 16 °F**

Mostly Cloudy

Tuesday



**High: 25 °F**

Mostly Cloudy  
then Chance  
Snow

Tonight



Lows: 25-34°F

Sunday



Highs: 37-53°F

Lows: 23-28°F

20-40% chance of rain  
along ND/SD border

Wind gusts near 35 mph  
possible west river



Sunday will have a 20-40% chance of rain along the ND/SD border. Accumulations are expected to be light but there is also a chance for some light freezing rain with very minimal impacts (ie maybe some slick spots on sidewalks). Areas west of the Missouri River could get some gusts near 35 mph Sunday afternoon.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50 °F at 1:09 PM

Low Temp: 25 °F at 3:41 AM

Wind: 13 mph at 12:09 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 52 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 2020

Record Low: -27 in 1927

Average High: 32

Average Low: 10

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.16

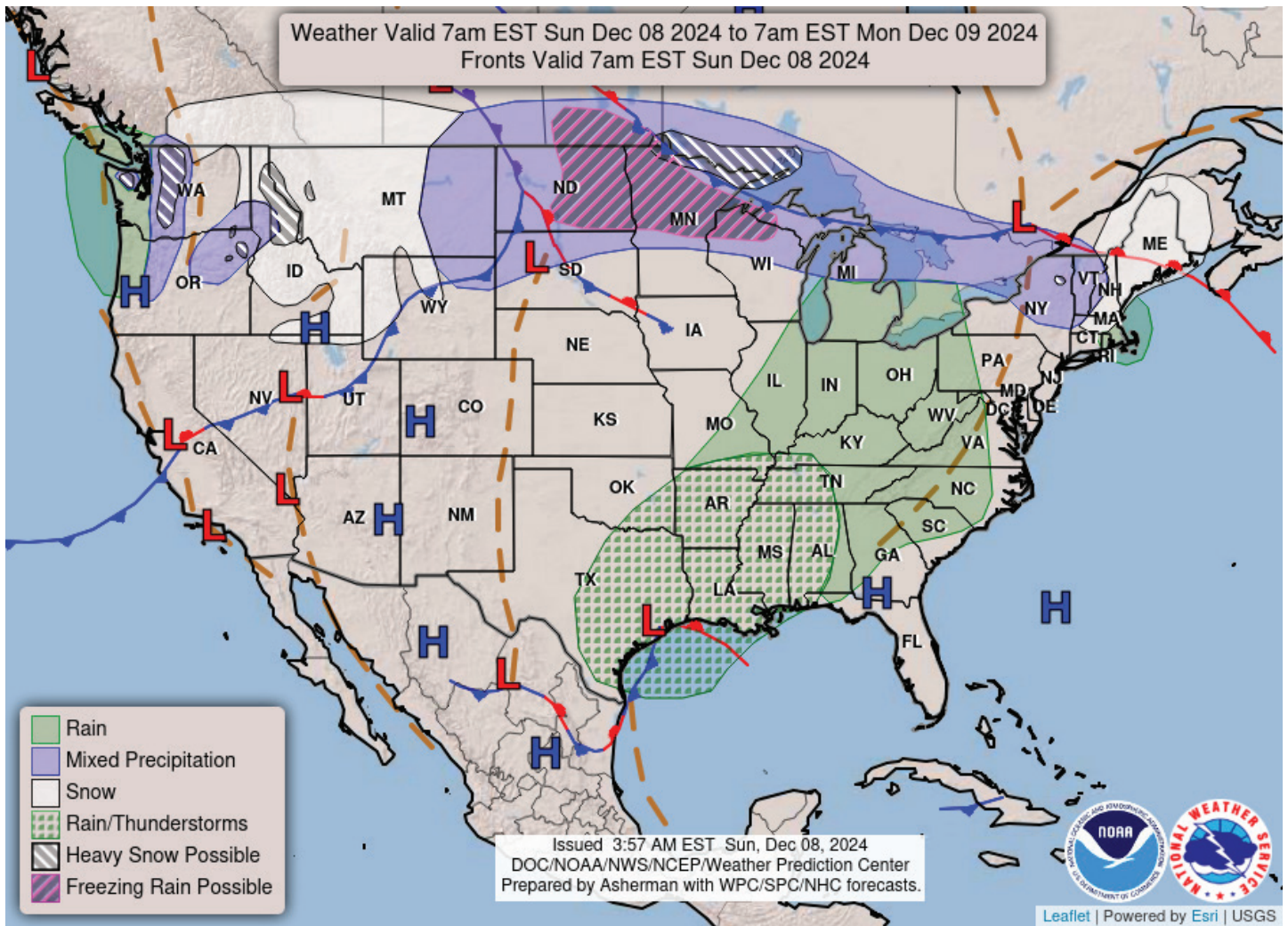
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.37

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:50:54 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:59:14 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 8, 1995: A powerful Arctic front moved across west central Minnesota and central, north central, and northeast South Dakota throughout the day with winds of 30 to 60 mph. With temperatures falling and one to four inches of snowfall in the morning and afternoon, the high winds produced blizzard conditions with blowing snow and extreme wind chills of 40 to 70 below zero. Many schools, college classes, and activities were canceled for the day. Travel was also significantly affected.

1892 - A tremendous ice fall occurred at Gay Hill, TX. Ice averaged four to six inches in diameter. (David Ludlum)

1935: From the Monthly Weather Review for December 1935, "The outstanding flood of December 1935 was the record-breaking overflow of Buffalo and White Oak Bayous at Houston, Texas on the 8 and 9th. This destructive flood was caused by excessive rainfall over Harris County, Texas during a 42 hour period on the 6th, 7th, 8th, with amounts ranging from 5.50 inches at Houston" to 16.49 inches at the Humble Oil Company in the northwestern part of Harris County.

1938 - The temperature at La Mesa, CA, soared to 108 degrees to set a U.S. record for the month of December. (The Weather Channel)

1963 - Lightning caused the crash of a jet airliner killing 81 persons at Elkton, MD. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - A cold front crossing the northwestern U.S. continued to produce high winds along the coast, and heavy snow blanketed parts of the western U.S. Snowfall totals in the mountains of western Nevada ranged up to 18 inches at Heavenly Valley, and near the Boreal Ski Resort, and winds at Reno NV gusted to 56 mph. Thunderstorms over southern Florida deluged the Florida Keys with up to five inches of rain. Strong winds, gusting to 48 mph at Gage OK, ushered wintry weather into the Central High Plains. Goodland KS, which one day earlier was 63 degrees, was blanketed with two inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Santa Ana winds buffeted southern California, with gusts to 92 mph reported at Laguna Peak. The high winds unroofed buildings, and downed trees and power lines, igniting five major fires, and numerous smaller ones. Damage was estimated at 15 to 20 million dollars. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A winter storm spread snow and freezing rain across much of the Atlantic Coast Region, from Georgia to New Jersey. Snowfall totals ranged up to seven inches, at Stanton VA and Tobacco MD. Up to six inches of snow blanketed the mountains of northern Georgia. More than one hundred auto accidents were reported in Gwinnett County GA. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



## A Gift For Eternity

Timothy did well in his first semester at college. A sense of excitement was building in the family as the day approached when he would be home for Christmas. His mother wanted to make it a special event, one he would remember for years to come.

"Let's give Timothy a wristwatch for Christmas," she said. "He's done so well and I want him to know how much we appreciate all of his hard work."

"But," protested his father, "what happened to that crush proof, waterproof, shockproof, scratchproof watch we gave him when he left for college?"

"He can't find it," said his mother.

In giving us the gift of His Son, God gave us Someone Who will be with us forever. A Gift that will be with us until the end of our lives and throughout eternity. An indestructible, unchanging, all-powerful, and ever-present Presence.

Jesus promised: "be sure of this – I am with you always and everywhere, even to the end of the age."

Some would ask, "What does it mean that He will be with us? Did he not leave His disciples when He ascended into heaven?" No, He didn't.

When He left them physically, He sent the Holy Spirit to be His presence with them personally. We know He was called "Immanuel – God with us" when He was born. We know He is with us now through the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: It's easy, Father, to lose sight of You and Your messages at this time of the year. But help us to pause, pray frequently and sense Your presence within us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 28:20 Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

*We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him*

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.06.24

16 21 33 39 45 24

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$619,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

7 14 31 44 46 8

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$16,470,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

1 17 34 41 45 14

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 48 Mins  
23 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

7 10 20 26 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$143,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

8 10 39 57 61 12

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

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

1 31 43 55 57 22

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$20,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)



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## Upcoming Groton Events

07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center  
07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm  
07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm  
07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day  
07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm  
07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church  
07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start  
07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm  
08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center  
**Cancelled:** Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm  
08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm  
08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament  
08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm  
09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport  
09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am  
10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm  
10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am  
10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm  
11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm  
11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm  
12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.  
12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close  
12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services, downtown Groton  
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp  
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm  
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon  
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm  
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
09/20/2025 NSU Gypsy Day  
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

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## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### Saturday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Dell Rapids 48, Beresford 46

Flandreau Indian 53, Crazy Horse 33

Freeman Academy-Marion 37, Colome 6

Jones County 47, Dupree 18

McLaughlin 57, St. Francis Indian 29

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

### **Oscar Cluff powers South Dakota State to 74-53 victory over Eastern Washington**

By The Associated Press undefined

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Oscar Cluff scored 19 points and grabbed 11 rebounds to lead South Dakota State over Eastern Washington 74-53 on Saturday night.

Joe Saylor added 18 points for the Jackrabbits (8-3). Matthew Mors scored 14.

The Eagles (2-8) were led by Andrew Cook with 13 points, six rebounds and four steals. Nic McClain added eight points.

### **Aidan Bouman, Quaron Adams rally South Dakota past Tarleton State 42-31 in FCS second-round duel**

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Aidan Bouman threw a go-ahead touchdown pass in the fourth quarter and Quaron Adams followed with a 70-yard touchdown on a reverse as No. 4 seed South Dakota pulled away late to beat 13th-seeded Tarleton State 42-31 on Saturday in the second round of the FCS playoffs.

South Dakota will host the winner of Saturday's matchup between No. 5 seed UC Davis and 12th-seeded Illinois State in the third round.

The Coyotes (10-2) trailed by seven points four times until Bouman connected with Keyondray Jones-Logan for a 12-yard touchdown and a 35-31 lead with 9:36 left to play.

Tim White intercepted a Victor Gabalis pass, giving South Dakota the ball at its own 15-yard line. Adams, a sophomore receiver, raced to the end zone three plays later for his first career rushing touchdown and the Texans (10-4) never recovered in their first trip to the postseason.

Gabalis threw three first-half touchdown passes, giving Tarleton State leads of 7-0, 14-7 and 21-14 at halftime.

Travis Theis had two short touchdown runs in the first half to pull the Coyotes even and his 2-yard scoring run 51 seconds into the fourth quarter tied it at 28.

Tarleton State took its last lead on a 23-yard field goal by Corbin Poston with 11:23 left to play.

Bouman completed 18 of 22 passes for 213 yards and also had a 5-yard scoring toss to Jones-Logan off a deflected pass that stood up to a video review and tied the game at 21. Theis carried 25 times for 130 yards.

Gabalis totaled 379 yards on 23-for-31 passing with four touchdowns and three interceptions. Darius Cooper caught nine passes for 161 yards and three scores. Cody Jackson had the other touchdown reception.

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## Defending champ South Dakota State dominates Montana 35-18 in FCS 2nd round

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Mark Gronowski ran for two touchdowns and passed for two more and two-time defending national champion South Dakota State dominated Montana 35-18 in a second-round FCS playoff game on Saturday.

While Gronowski was leading an offense that piled up 399 yards, the third-seeded Jackrabbits' defense held the 14th-seeded Grizzlies to 306 yards — but 160 came on two fourth-quarter touchdown drives after the lead reached 35-3. Adam Bock contributed a 30-yard interception return in the fourth quarter.

South Dakota State (11-2), which beat Montana 23-3 in the national championship game in January, is home next weekend against sixth-seed Incarnate Word (11-2).

Gronowski was 12-of-16 passing for 151 yards. He hit Griffin Wilde for a pair of touchdowns covering 34 and 24 yards in the second quarter and scored on a pair of 1-yard sneaks in the first and fourth. He also had a 21-yard reception to set up his first quarter run that put the Jackrabbits on top 7-3.

Wilde had seven catches for 114 yards. Amar Johnson had 103 yards on 16 carries and Angel Johnson totaled 91 yards on 13 rushes.

Keali'i Ah Yat was 19 of 32 for 231 yards but had two critical interceptions for Montana (9-5). In addition to the pick-6, Tucker Large had a goal-line interception when the Grizzlies could have pulled within four points.

The Jackrabbits were 7 of 12 on third down, while the Grizzlies went 5 of 13 — 2 of 9 through three quarters.

## McLaughlin scores 23 as Northern Arizona knocks off South Dakota 95-82

By The Associated Press undefined

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Trenton McLaughlin scored 23 points as Northern Arizona beat South Dakota 95-82 on Saturday.

McLaughlin shot 6 of 14 from the field, including 2 for 7 from 3-point range, and went 9 for 12 from the line for the Lumberjacks (7-3). Jayden Jackson scored 20 points while going 6 of 9 and 7 of 9 from the free-throw line and added seven assists. Monty Bowser had 14 points and shot 6 for 7, including 2 for 3 from beyond the arc.

Isaac Bruns led the way for the Coyotes (7-4) with 22 points and seven rebounds. Chase Forte added 15 points, five assists and four steals for South Dakota. Paul Bruns also had nine points.

## Presidential pause in relocations

South Dakota News Watch undefined

Sioux Falls, SD (South Dakota News Watch)

MITCHELL, S.D. - It's a rare sight to see Tim Allen in the wood-paneled office space just off of Mitchell's Main Street. Sitting behind the counter on a Monday in October, he calls a customer.

"This is Tim with Tobin's. Guys should be there probably about 3:00, 3:30 to move the stuff out of the basement. Okay. Yep. Thank you. You bet. Bye."

Allen, one of the owners of North American moving company Tobin Transfer, is usually on the road, driving cross-country with a semitrailer full of people's possessions.

But this year is a presidential election year and without fail (2020 doesn't count because of the pandemic), business slows down. His cross-country shipments are down 7% so far this year.

"This is about the stupidest year I've seen," Allen says.

And he's seen a lot. Allen's been in the business since he was 13 and started working full-time when his parents bought the company in 1978. His sister, Becky Riggs, was 14 when she started.

"Our parents didn't let us go get into trouble and be hoodlums. They made us go to work," says Riggs,

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also an owner.

Through the decades, the moving business has gone through many changes. Insurance costs climbed, labor supply dwindled and semi trucks with automatic transmissions became the norm.

But there's at least one constant. Every four years the moving business takes a dip. Riggs doesn't even need to turn on the news to know there's a presidential election.

"I don't go to political rallies, but I know what's going on as soon as the phone don't ring," she says.

The why makes sense when Allen explains it.

"Companies don't know if the United States is going to take a different turn or if it's going to go back or going to move forward, everything is in an uproar," he says. So, many companies sit in a holding pattern, not relocating employees.

Just last month at a global conference in Washington for relocation companies, this topic was discussed.

Anthony Horton, CEO of Corporate Relocation International (CRI) was there. This year the company's volume is down 9-10% from 2023.

"Many companies sort of adopt a wait-and-see approach regarding hiring, relocations, other investments as they prefer to assess the political and regulatory landscape under the next administration before committing to any long-term plans," he tells News Watch.

And this presidential election was particularly uncertain. Economic policy proposals from President-elect Donald Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris were broad.

"They're both in their own way a little difficult to pin down," says Joseph Santos, director of Ness School of Management and Economics at South Dakota State University.

"That's the nature of political campaigning, to some extent. But they don't really have attached to them really, clearly defined plans in terms of policy."

North American Van Lines' corporate spokesperson declined to speak, citing the company's strict policy not to comment on political matters.

Sirva, which owns North American, Allied and Global Van Lines, among other relocation companies, produces a podcast. In an October episode titled "The Vote that Moves: Exploring the Impact of Political Elections on Global Talent Mobility," the participants discussed how 2024 is the biggest election year in world history, with half of the world's population voting in 72 countries.

Immigration is a key election topic globally, so who's elected can also make it harder for employees to relocate to certain countries.

Business in 2020 was once-in-a-lifetime for Allen. "You could have ran 24 hours a day and not moved everybody," he says.

He moved plenty of out-of-staters into South Dakota who were looking for fewer COVID restrictions and cheaper taxes, many from California and Washington.

According to U-Haul migration data from more than 2 million transactions, more trucks left California than entered in 2020, with the largest net loss of self-movers, ranking last in the nation for growth that year. Washington dropped from a top 5 growth state in 2019 to 36, indicating more people were leaving. South Dakota placed 25.

In the past two years, Allen has been contacted by seven of those families he moved into South Dakota in 2020. They now want to move out saying, "We can't deal with the politics in here," Allen recalls.

California remained dead last for growth in 2023 and Washington moved back toward the top with 7 place, according to more than 2.5 million U-Haul transactions. South Dakota climbed to 19 because it still had more people coming than leaving.

The American Trucking Associations, an industry trade group, says the economy generally dictates the direction of the moving industry.

"While it may be true that there is a level of uncertainty surrounding each election, we do not have data to demonstrate any measurable impact of elections on the industry. Economic indicators such as the federal interest rate and inflation are much more impactful," says spokesperson Jessica Gail.

Indeed, high interest rates serve a second punch this year to Allen's moving business. People don't want

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to upgrade their house with high interest rates on loans.

"So people can't get out of apartments and go to a home and start building equity neither. And it's just kind of that domino effect," he says.

In the office, Allen thumbs through a large desk calendar on the back counter. And yes, they prefer the paper. It's easier, as Riggs will tell you. And a calendar doesn't crash.

The daily squares filled with black ink show several moving appointments. But looks can be deceiving. They're short moves.

"These are both locals this afternoon," Allen points to today's date.

He expects cross-country travel to pick up in February, March and April. Until then, he spends more time in Mitchell with his wife. Allen's unsure if she's happy about that.

"Could be not such a good thing," he smiles.

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## **Syrian government falls to fast-moving rebels, ending 50 years of iron rule by the Assad family**

By ABDULRAHMAN SHAHEEN and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — The Syrian government collapsed early Sunday, falling to a lightning rebel offensive that seized control of the capital of Damascus and sent crowds into the streets to celebrate the end of the Assad family's 50 years of iron rule.

Syrian state television aired a video statement by a group of men saying that President Bashar Assad had been overthrown and all prisoners had been set free.

The man who read the statement said the opposition group, known as the Operations Room to Conquer Damascus, called on all rebel fighters and citizens to preserve the institutions of "the free Syrian state."

The statement emerged hours after the head of a Syrian opposition war monitor said Assad had left the country for an undisclosed location, fleeing ahead of insurgents who said they had entered Damascus following a remarkably swift advance across the country.

Many of the capital's residents were in disbelief at the speed at which Assad lost his hold on the country after nearly 14 years of civil war that killed hundreds of thousands of people, displaced half the country's prewar population of 23 million and drew in several foreign powers.

Celebrations erupt across the capital

As daylight broke over Damascus, crowds gathered to pray in the city's mosques and to celebrate in the squares, chanting "God is great." People also chanted anti-Assad slogans and honked car horns. Teen boys picked up weapons that had apparently been discarded by security forces and fired them in the air.

Revelers filled Umayyad Square in the city center, where the Defense Ministry is located. Men fired celebratory gunshots into the air and some waved the three-starred Syrian flag that predates the Assad government and was adopted by the revolutionaries. A few kilometers (miles) away, Syrians stormed the presidential palace, tearing up portraits of the toppled president.

Soldiers and police officers left their posts and fled, and looters broke into the Defense Ministry. Videos from Damascus showed families wandering into the presidential palace, with some emerging carrying stacks of plates and other household items.

"I did not sleep last night, and I refused to sleep until I heard the news of his fall," said Mohammed Amer Al-Oulabi, 44, who works in the electricity sector. "From Idlib to Damascus, it only took them (the

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opposition forces) a few days, thank God. May God bless them, the heroic lions who made us proud.”

Syria’s al-Watan newspaper, which was historically pro-government, wrote: “We are facing a new page for Syria. We thank God for not shedding more blood. We believe and trust that Syria will be for all Syrians.”

The newspaper added that media workers should not be blamed for publishing government statements in the past.

“We only carried out the instructions and published the news they sent us,” it said. “It quickly became clear now that it was false.”

A statement from the Alawite sect — to which Assad belongs and which has formed the core of his base — called on young Syrians to be “calm, rational and prudent and not to be dragged into what tears apart the unity of our country.”

Assad’s whereabouts are unknown

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said in a video statement that the government was ready to “extend its hand” to the opposition and turn its functions over to a transitional government. A video shared on Syrian opposition media showed a group of armed men escorting him out of his office and to the Four Seasons hotel on Sunday.

The prime minister had earlier told the Al Arabiya news network that he does not know where Assad and the defense minister are. He said he lost communication with Assad late Saturday.

Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told The Associated Press that Assad took a flight Sunday from Damascus.

A senior diplomat from the United Arab Emirates, which had sought to rehabilitate Assad’s image and has welcomed high-profile exiles in recent years, declined to comment on his whereabouts when asked by reporters at a conference in Bahrain.

Anwar Gargash said Assad’s destination at this point is a “footnote in history,” comparing it to the long exile of German Kaiser Wilhelm II after World War I.

Assad has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity during the war, including a 2013 chemical weapons attack on the outskirts of the capital.

There was no immediate comment from Iran, which had been Assad’s staunchest supporter. The Iranian Embassy in Damascus was ransacked after apparently having been abandoned. AP footage showed broken windows and documents scattered in the entryway.

Opposition forces had not reached Damascus since 2018, when Syrian troops recaptured areas on the outskirts of the capital following a yearslong siege.

Calls for an orderly transition as it remains unclear what comes next

The rebel advances since Nov. 27 were the largest in recent years, and saw the cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs fall in a matter of days as the Syrian army melted away. Russia, Iran and Lebanon’s Hezbollah militant group, which provided crucial support to Assad throughout the uprising, abandoned him in the final days as they reeled from other conflicts.

The rebels are led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, which has its origins in al-Qaida and is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the United Nations.

Its leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani has sought to remake the group’s image, cutting ties with al-Qaida, ditching hard-line officials and vowing to embrace pluralism and religious tolerance. HTS set up a “salvation government” in 2017 to administer a large region in northwestern Syria under its control.

“Golani has made history and sparked hope among millions of Syrians,” said Dureen Khalifa, a senior adviser with the International Crisis Group and an expert on Syrian groups. “But he and the rebels now face a formidable challenge ahead. One can only hope they rise to the occasion.”

The U.N.’s special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, called Saturday for urgent talks in Geneva to ensure an “orderly political transition.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, whose country is Assad’s chief international backer, said he feels “sorry for the Syrian people.”

The Gulf nation of Qatar, a key regional mediator, hosted an emergency meeting of foreign ministers and top officials from eight countries with interests in Syria late Saturday. The participants included Iran,

Saudi Arabia, Russia and Turkey.

Majed bin Mohammed al-Ansari, Qatar's foreign ministry spokesman and an adviser to the prime minister, told reporters that they agreed on the need "to engage all parties on the ground," including the HTS, and that the main concern is "stability and safe transition."

The Israeli military said Sunday it has deployed forces in a demilitarized buffer zone along its northern frontier with Syria following the rebel offensive there.

The military, which said it also sent troops to "other places necessary for its defense," said the deployment was meant to provide security for residents of the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. Israel captured the territory in the 1967 Mideast war and the international community, except for the United States, views it as occupied.

## **A farming project in South Africa is helping deaf people build skills and find jobs**

By MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — At the Westonaria agricultural park near Bekkersdal, east of Johannesburg, farm workers are busy tilling the soil and planting tomatoes and lettuce. Despite the hive of activity, there is silence around the park.

Most people here are deaf and communicate using sign language.

They are members of the Voiceout Deaf farming collective, started by entrepreneur Matebogo Victoria, to create a platform where deaf people can develop their skills in agriculture and find sustainable work.

Victoria, who has a hearing disability herself, understood perfectly the challenges faced by deaf people when competing for opportunities with their counterparts who do not face the same challenge.

While studying at the Tshwane University of Technology in the country's capital, Pretoria, Victoria had to attend classes with a hearing partner, as the university could not make the lectures accessible for her.

It is an all-too-common challenge for deaf people, according to Victoria.

"The government does not have facilities for communication (for deaf people). A lot of deaf people did not finish school. They cannot afford to travel far to reach schools, so normally they decide to leave school early," said Victoria.

Across South Africa, there are 44 schools for the deaf, offering sign language as a subject and using it as a medium of instruction.

Most are based far from where the students live, which sometimes leads to them dropping out of school as families struggle to afford the transportation costs.

Victoria, who used to work for Standard Bank, decided to leave her corporate job and start Voiceout as a way of allowing deaf people to gain agricultural skills.

"I make things simple for them, it is like a family when they are here. They become very much happy when they are here but when they go outside of this space, it becomes difficult for them," she said.

For Sibongile Maake, the opportunity to learn agriculture in a space where co-workers can easily communicate with her in sign language was transformational.

It has also afforded her an opportunity to earn a living and rely less on the welfare disability grants that are paid out by the government.

"I'm happy working here, it's (a) pleasure working here in the farm. I'm working slowly but surely and I am learning while also getting a salary. I can do things for myself, I can afford myself," said Maake.

Another worker, who said in sign language his name was John, said the challenges of communication reduced his chances of getting a job but the Voiceout Deaf project became a lifeline for him.

"Communication is always a barrier, so coming here at the farm is very much better because they are able to communicate in my own language so it makes life much easier for me," said John.

He and other workers are responsible for various activities at the farm including cleaning, ploughing, planting and harvesting the produce. The demand for their vegetables was so great that Voiceout Deaf has taken on two other farms, where John and his colleagues also work.

The project is breaking even: the farms currently supply some of the local supermarkets and chain stores with fresh produce.

In other South African provinces like Limpopo and North West, provincial governments are looking at farming as a source of training and employment for disabled people.

The farming sector is emerging as a solace for those with disabilities who also face the dire levels of unemployment in Africa's most developed economy.

As she goes around giving instructions monitoring activities on the farm, which consists of 10 greenhouses, Victoria laments how difficult it often is for people using sign language to understand the jargon of developed industries.

The Pan South African Language Board is responsible for setting the country's standards for sign language. A constitutionally mandated body responsible for promoting the development and use of South African languages, it recently scored a victory by having Parliament approve sign language as South Africa's 12th official language.

However, the board sometimes struggles to keep up with fast-evolving business language, Victoria says. "The difficulty is that sign language has not developed to an extent that it covers technical jargon used in various sectors. It is the same in agriculture. There are certain technical words used that are there in spoken language but not in sign language," she explains.

But beyond changing official attitudes, Victoria wants to inspire change in the farmers themselves.

"We need them (the deaf farmers) to think out of the box about agriculture. They need to be empowered to understand that agriculture is involved in the production of other products like toothpastes, perfumes, medicines. This is where we have to improvise and find ways to communicate with them in the simplest way possible," said Victoria.

## **The fall of Bashar Assad after 14 years of war in Syria brings to an end a decades-long dynasty**

By ZEINA KARAM and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syrian President Bashar Assad fled the country on Sunday, bringing to a dramatic close his nearly 14-year struggle to hold onto control as his country fragmented in a brutal civil war that became a proxy battlefield for regional and international powers.

Assad's exit stood in stark contrast to his first months as Syria's unlikely president in 2000, when many hoped he would be a young reformer after three decades of his father's iron grip. Only 34 years old, the Western-educated ophthalmologist appeared as a geeky tech-savvy fan of computers with a gentle demeanor.

But when faced with protests against his rule that erupted in March 2011, Assad turned to the brutal tactics of his father in an attempt to crush dissent. As the uprising hemorrhaged into an outright civil war, he unleashed his military to blast opposition-held cities, with support from allies Iran and Russia.

International rights groups and prosecutors alleged widespread use of torture and extrajudicial killings in Syria's government-run detention centers. The war has killed nearly half a million people and displaced half of the country's prewar population of 23 million.

The conflict appeared to be frozen in recent years, with Assad's government regaining control of most of Syria's territory while the northwest remained under the control of opposition groups and the northeast under Kurdish control.

Although Damascus remained under crippling Western sanctions, neighboring countries had begun to resign themselves to Assad's continued hold on power. The Arab League reinstated Syria's membership last year, and Saudi Arabia in May announced the appointment of its first ambassador since severing ties with Damascus 12 years ago.

However, the geopolitical tide turned quickly when opposition groups in northwest Syria in late November launched a surprise offensive. Government forces quickly collapsed while Assad's allies, preoccupied by other conflicts — Russia's war in Ukraine and the yearlong wars between Israel and the Iran-backed



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militant groups Hezbollah and Hamas — appeared reluctant to forcefully intervene.

An end to decades of family rule

Assad came to power in 2000 by a twist of fate. His father had been cultivating Bashar's oldest brother, Basil, as his successor, but in 1994, Basil was killed in a car crash in Damascus. Bashar was brought home from his ophthalmology practice in London, put through military training and elevated to the rank of colonel to establish his credentials so he could one day rule.

When Hafez Assad died in 2000, parliament quickly lowered the presidential age requirement from 40 to 34. Bashar's elevation was sealed by a nationwide referendum, in which he was the only candidate.

Hafez, a lifelong military man, ruled the country for nearly 30 years during which he set up a Soviet-style centralized economy and kept such a stifling hand over dissent that Syrians feared even to joke about politics to their friends.

He pursued a secular ideology that sought to bury sectarian differences under Arab nationalism and the image of heroic resistance to Israel. He formed an alliance with the Shiite clerical leadership in Iran, sealed Syrian domination over Lebanon and set up a network of Palestinian and Lebanese militant groups.

Bashar initially seemed completely unlike his strongman father.

Tall and lanky with a slight lisp, he had a quiet, gentle demeanor. His only official position before becoming president was head of the Syrian Computer Society. His wife, Asma al-Akhras, whom he married several months after taking office, was attractive, stylish and British-born.

The young couple, who eventually had three children, seemed to shun trappings of power. They lived in an apartment in the upscale Abu Rummaneh district of Damascus, as opposed to a palatial mansion like other Arab leaders.

Initially upon coming to office, Assad freed political prisoners and allowed more open discourse. In the "Damascus Spring," salons for intellectuals emerged where Syrians could discuss art, culture and politics to a degree impossible under his father.

But after 1,000 intellectuals signed a public petition calling for multiparty democracy and greater freedoms in 2001, and others tried to form a political party, the salons were snuffed out by the feared secret police, who jailed dozens of activists.

Tested by the Arab Spring, Assad relied on old alliances to stay in power

Instead of a political opening, Assad turned to economic reforms. He slowly lifted economic restrictions, let in foreign banks, threw the doors open to imports and empowered the private sector. Damascus and other cities long mired in drabness saw a flourishing of shopping malls, new restaurants and consumer goods. Tourism swelled.

Abroad, he stuck to the line his father had set, based on the alliance with Iran and a policy of insisting on a full return of the Israel-annexed Golan Heights, although in practice Assad never militarily confronted Israel.

In 2005, he suffered a heavy blow with the loss of Syria's decades-old control over neighboring Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. With many Lebanese accusing Damascus of being behind the slaying, Syria was forced to withdraw its troops from the country and a pro-American government came to power.

At the same time, the Arab world split into two camps — one of U.S.-allied, Sunni-led countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the other Syria and Shiite-led Iran with their ties to Hezbollah and Palestinian militants.

Throughout, Assad relied largely on the same power base at home as his father: his Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam comprising around 10% of the population. Many of the positions in his government went to younger generations of the same families that had worked for his father. Drawn in as well were members of the new middle class created by his reforms, including prominent Sunni merchant families.

Assad also turned to his own family. His younger brother Maher headed the elite Presidential Guard and would lead the crackdown against the uprising. Their sister Bushra was a strong voice in his inner circle, along with her husband, Deputy Defense Minister Assef Shawkat, until he was killed in a 2012 bombing. Bashar's cousin, Rami Makhlouf, became the country's biggest businessman, heading a financial empire

before the two had a falling-out that led to Makhlof being pushed aside.

Assad also increasingly entrusted key roles to his wife, Asma, before she announced in May that she was undergoing treatment for leukemia and stepped out of the limelight.

When 2011 protests erupted in Tunisia and Egypt, eventually toppling their rulers, Assad dismissed the possibility of the same occurring in his country, insisting his regime was more in tune with its people. After the Arab Spring wave reached Syria, his security forces staged a brutal crackdown while Assad consistently denied he was facing a popular revolt. He instead blamed "foreign-backed terrorists" trying to destabilize his regime.

His rhetoric struck a chord with many in Syria's minority groups — including Christians, Druze and Shiites — as well as some Sunnis who feared the prospect of rule by Sunni extremists even more than they disliked Assad's authoritarian rule.

As the uprising spiraled into a civil war, millions of Syrians fled to Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon and on to Europe.

Ironically, on Feb. 26, 2011, two days after the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak to protesters and just days before the wave of Arab Spring protests swept into his country, Assad e-mailed a joke he had run across mocking the Egyptian leader's stubborn refusal to step down.

## 'Reindeer' volunteers bring holiday magic to Ukrainian children living on the frontlines

By VASILISA STEPANENKO and EVGENIY MALOLETKA Associated Press

IZIUM, Ukraine (AP) — Hopes for victory, a swift end to the war and prayers for their loved ones' survival or return from Russian captivity are among the wishes scattered throughout letters sent to a volunteer group by Ukrainian children living in frontline areas.

While the volunteers, who are named reindeer after the magical beasts that pull Santa's sleigh, cannot fulfill many of these dreams, they strive to deliver on the simpler ones, such as requests for power banks to help families endure outages, bicycles, books, and even pets.

Every winter, the volunteers travel to heavily damaged cities to deliver gifts and ensure that, despite the war, Ukrainian children can celebrate the holiday season just like their peers around the world.

This year, the group received 2,310 letters, according to project manager Inna Achkasova from the NGO Ukrainian Frontiers, who launched the St. Nicholas' Reindeers initiative in 2015.

The children's wishes are published on the project's website. Donors affectionately known as magicians then choose a letter and buy the requested gift to make that child's dreams come true. The reindeer then deliver those gifts.

"Children are those who have no choice whatsoever. No one asks them whether they want to stay or leave," says project psychologist Kateryna Shutalova. "What happens to them is never their choice. And this makes them the most vulnerable."

But every child gets only one childhood, even if it's shaped by war. That's why, in their letters, the horrors that have impacted their lives coexist with wishes similar to those of children everywhere.

"My father is in captivity, and I live with my mother and brother," one boy wrote in his letter. He continued: "I love playing football and practice it professionally. I want a leather football."

Volunteers sift through all the letters, enduring the tragic stories of each child, to sort and deliver the gifts correctly. Among the writers are children who have lost loved ones to shelling, endured Russian occupation, seen their homes destroyed, have parents serving on the frontlines, or were forced to flee to escape the war.

"What struck me wasn't their wishes but how deeply children feel the need to tell their stories," Shutalova says.

Wearing reindeer antlers, the volunteers set out on their journey on Dec. 6, when Ukraine celebrates St. Nicholas Day. Their journey is expected to last until mid-January.

On a frosty morning in Kharkiv, covered by the season's first snow, a team of volunteers departs in two buses filled with gifts, headed for the formerly Russian-occupied city of Iziom, around 55 kilometers (35 miles) from the frontline.

At first, when the celebration has started, the children observe cautiously, their expressions somber, but that mood doesn't last. With each activity, they became more cheerful and engaged.

One of them is 9-year-old Alina Soboleva, who remains detached despite the volunteers' efforts. She watches the festivities unfold with a quiet gaze. Her grandmother, Svitlana Lokotosh, explains that Alina has been withdrawn since witnessing the deaths of her mother and other grandmother in a shelling in the courtyard of their home.

Alina had been watching through the window as her mother spoke on the phone. When the shell struck, a fragment hit her mother in the neck. Her grandmother rushed outside to help and was killed by another shell.

In her letter, Alina asked for two pet mice. She said it was her dream.

"Our only wish is for peace and quiet," says Lokotosh, who took Alina in after her mother's death. "So the children don't have to be afraid."

Shutalova explains that parents often find it hard to talk to their children about the war. They're either afraid, lack the emotional resources, or are overwhelmed by their feelings.

"But for children to process what they've been through, they need to talk, play, and express those emotions," she says.

At the celebration, parents stand against the walls, smiling as their children laugh and play despite having endured so much at such a young age.

Among them is Anna Bolharska, a 32-year-old mother of two. Her father-in-law was killed and her brother-in-law was injured during the occupation. In the spring of 2022, she and her children fled Iziom amid relentless shelling, only returning after Ukrainian forces liberated the city in September that year.

"I don't like to remember those times. We try to move forward because dwelling on it is too hard mentally," Bolharska says. "We try not to remind the children and to keep them distracted."

Her 9-year-old daughter, Myroslava Bolharska, dreams of becoming a veterinarian. In her letter, she asked for a guitar.

"During the war it seems everyone's dreams have changed — to wish for the war to end," she wrote.

The reindeers' winter journey will take them to over 40 towns in the coming weeks. They hope to realize many dreams and bring joy to the kids, even though some of their wishes are impossible to fulfill.

"Some children wrote in their letters that they want their childhood back," project co-founder Inna Achkasoova says, adding that the reindeer volunteers aim to ensure that every child feels seen, heard and loved.

## South Korean prosecutors detain ex-defense chief over martial law imposition

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korean prosecutors on Sunday detained a former defense minister who allegedly recommended last week's brief but stunning martial law imposition to President Yoon Suk Yeol, making him the first figure detained over the case.

The development came a day after Yoon avoided an opposition-led bid to impeach him in parliament, with most ruling party lawmakers boycotting a floor vote to prevent the two-thirds majority needed to suspend his presidential powers. The main opposition Democratic Party said it will prepare a new impeachment motion against Yoon.

On Sunday, ex-Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun was taken into custody at a Seoul detention facility after undergoing an investigation by prosecutors, a law enforcement official said, requesting anonymity in line with privacy rules.

The official gave no further details. But South Korean media reported that Kim voluntarily appeared at a Seoul prosecutors' office, where he had his mobile phone confiscated and was detained. The reports

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said police searched Kim's former office and residence on Sunday.

Repeated calls to Seoul prosecutors' offices and police agency were unanswered.

Senior prosecutor Park Se-hyun said in a televised statement Sunday that authorities launched a 62-member special investigation team on the martial law case. Park, who will head the team, said the probe would "leave no suspicions."

Yoon accepted Kim's resignation offer on Thursday after opposition parties submitted a separate impeachment motion against him.

Kim is a central figure in Yoon's martial law enforcement, which led to special forces troops encircling the National Assembly building and army helicopters hovering over it. The military withdrew after the parliament unanimously voted to overturn Yoon's decree, forcing his Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday.

In Kim's impeachment motion document, the Democratic Party and other opposition parties accused him of proposing martial law to Yoon. Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho told parliament that Kim Yong Hyun ordered the deployment of troops to the National Assembly.

The Democratic Party called Yoon's martial law imposition "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or a coup." It has filed complaints with police against at least nine people, including Yoon and Kim, over the alleged rebellion.

In a statement Wednesday, Kim said that "all troops who performed duties related to martial law were acting on my instructions, and all responsibility lies with me."

Prosecutor General Shim Woo Jung told reporters on Thursday the prosecution plans to investigate the rebellion charges against Yoon following complaints. While the president mostly has immunity from prosecution while in office, that does not extend to allegations of rebellion or treason.

The Defense Ministry said it has suspended three top military commanders over their alleged involvement in the martial law imposition. They were among those facing the opposition-raised rebellion allegations.

On Saturday, Yoon issued an apology over the martial law decree, saying he won't shirk legal or political responsibility for the declaration. He said he would leave it to his party to chart a course through the country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

Since taking office in 2022 for a single five-year term, Yoon has struggled to push his agenda through an opposition-controlled parliament and grappled with low approval ratings amid scandals involving himself and his wife. In his martial law announcement on Tuesday night, Yoon called parliament a "den of criminals" bogging down state affairs and vowed to eliminate "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces."

The declaration of martial law was the first of its kind in more than 40 years in South Korea. The turmoil has sparked alarm among key diplomatic partners like the U.S. and Japan.

The scrapping of Yoon's impeachment motion is expected to intensify protests calling for his ouster and deepen political chaos in South Korea, with a survey suggesting a majority of South Koreans support the president's impeachment. Yoon's martial law declaration drew criticism from the conservative ruling party, but it is determined to oppose Yoon's impeachment apparently because it fears losing the presidency to liberals.

Ruling People Power Party leader Han Dong-hun said Sunday the PPP will work with the government to determine Yoon's early and orderly exit from office in a way that minimizes confusion, but he didn't say when that would happen. He also claimed Yoon will not be involved in state affairs, including foreign policy.

Yoon's presidential office didn't immediately respond. The Democratic Party criticized Han Dong-hun's comments, saying that the exclusion of an incumbent president from state affairs isn't supported by the constitution. The party said authorities should immediately arrest Yoon and all others implicated in the case.

The presidential office said Sunday that Yoon accepted the resignation offer by Safety Minister Lee Sang-min, who has also faced an opposition-led impeachment motion over his alleged role in the martial law enforcement.

In a parliamentary hearing on Friday, Lee, one of Yoon's closest associates, defended Yoon's martial law decree, saying the president exercised his powers "within the boundaries of constitutional processes and law."

## Syrian government falls in stunning end to 50-year rule of Assad family

By BASSEM MROUE and ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The Syrian government fell early Sunday in a stunning end to the 50-year rule of the Assad family after a sudden rebel offensive sprinted across government-held territory and entered the capital in 10 days.

Syrian state television aired a video statement by a group of men saying that President Bashar Assad has been overthrown and all detainees in jails have been set free.

The man who read the statement said the Operations Room to Conquer Damascus, an opposition group, called on all opposition fighters and citizens to preserve state institutions of “the free Syrian state.”

The statement emerged hours after the head of a Syrian opposition war monitor said Assad had left the country for an undisclosed location, fleeing ahead of insurgents who said they had entered Damascus following the remarkably swift advance across the country.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said the government was ready to “extend its hand” to the opposition and turn its functions over to a transitional government.

“I am in my house and I have not left, and this is because of my belonging to this country,” Jalali said in a video statement. He said he would go to his office to continue work in the morning and called on Syrian citizens not to deface public property.

He did not address reports that Assad had fled.

Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights told The Associated Press that Assad took a flight Sunday from Damascus.

State television in Iran, Assad’s main backer in the years of war in Syria, reported that Assad had left the capital. It cited Qatar’s Al Jazeera news network for the information and did not elaborate.

There was no immediate statement from the Syrian government.

As daylight broke over Damascus, crowds gathered to pray in the city’s mosques and to celebrate in the squares, chanting “God is great.” People also chanted anti-Assad slogans and honked car horns. In some areas, celebratory gunshots rang out.

Soldiers and police officers left their posts and fled, and looters broke into the headquarters of the Ministry of Defense.

“My feelings are indescribable,” said Omar Daher, a 29-year-old lawyer. “After the fear that he (Assad) and his father made us live in for many years, and the panic and state of terror that I was living in, I can’t believe it.”

Daher said his father was killed by security forces and his brother was in detention, his fate unknown. Assad “is a criminal, a tyrant and a dog,” he said.

“Damn his soul and the soul of the entire Assad family,” said Ghazal al-Sharif, another reveler in central Damascus. “It is the prayer of every oppressed person and God answered it today. We thought we would never see it, but thank God, we saw it.”

The police headquarters in the capital appeared to be abandoned, its door left ajar with no officers outside. An Associated Press journalist shot footage of an abandoned army checkpoint where uniforms were discarded on the ground under a poster of Assad’s face. Footage broadcast on opposition-linked media showed a tank in one of the capital’s central squares.

It was the first time opposition forces had reached Damascus since 2018, when Syrian troops recaptured areas on the outskirts of the capital following a yearslong siege.

The pro-government Sham FM radio reported that the Damascus airport had been evacuated and all flights halted.

The insurgents also announced they had entered the notorious Saydnaya military prison north of the capital and “liberated” their prisoners there.

The night before, opposition forces took the central city of Homs, Syria’s third largest, as government

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forces abandoned it. The city stands at an important intersection between Damascus, the capital, and Syria's coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus — the Syrian leader's base of support and home to a Russian strategic naval base.

The rebels had already seized the cities of Aleppo and Hama, as well as large parts of the south, in a lightning offensive that began Nov. 27. Analysts said rebel control of Homs would be a game-changer.

The rebels' moves into Damascus came after the Syrian army withdrew from much of southern part of the country, leaving more areas, including several provincial capitals, under the control of opposition fighters.

The advances in the past week were by far the largest in recent years by opposition factions, led by a group that has its origins in al-Qaida and is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the United Nations. In their push to overthrow Assad's government, the insurgents, led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, have met little resistance from the Syrian army.

The U.N.'s special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, called Saturday for urgent talks in Geneva to ensure an "orderly political transition." Speaking to reporters at the annual Doha Forum in Qatar, he said the situation in Syria was changing by the minute. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, whose country is Assad's chief international backer, said he feels "sorry for the Syrian people."

In Damascus, people rushed to stock up on supplies. Thousands went to Syria's border with Lebanon, trying to leave the country. Lebanese border officials closed the main Masnaa border crossing late Saturday, leaving many stuck waiting.

Many shops in the capital were shuttered, a resident told The Associated Press, and those still open ran out of staples such as sugar. Some were selling items at three times the normal price.

The U.N. said it was moving noncritical staff outside the country as a precaution.

Assad's status

Syria's state media denied social media rumors that Assad left the country, saying he was performing his duties in Damascus.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammad Ghazi al-Jalali said Sunday he does not know where Assad or the defense minister are. He told Saudi television network Al-Arabiyya early Sunday that they lost communication Saturday night.

He has had little, if any, help from his allies. Russia is busy with its war in Ukraine. Lebanon's Hezbollah, which at one point sent thousands of fighters to shore up Assad's forces, has been weakened by a year-long conflict with Israel. Iran has seen its proxies across the region degraded by regular Israeli airstrikes.

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump on Saturday posted on social media that the United States should avoid engaging militarily in Syria. Separately, President Joe Biden's national security adviser said the Biden administration had no intention of intervening there.

Pedersen said a date for talks in Geneva on the implementation of a U.N. resolution, adopted in 2015 and calling for a Syrian-led political process, would be announced later. The resolution calls for the establishment of a transitional governing body, followed by the drafting of a new constitution and ending with U.N.-supervised elections.

Later Saturday, foreign ministers and senior diplomats from eight key countries, including Saudi Arabia, Russia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran, along with Pederson, gathered on the sidelines of the Doha Summit to discuss the situation in Syria.

In a statement, the participants affirmed their support for a political solution to the Syrian crisis "that would lead to the end of military activity and protect civilians."

The insurgents' march

A commander with the insurgents, Hassan Abdul-Ghani, posted on the Telegram messaging app that opposition forces had begun the "final stage" of their offensive by encircling Damascus.

HTS controls much of northwest Syria and in 2017 set up a "salvation government" to run day-to-day affairs in the region. In recent years, HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani has sought to remake the group's image, cutting ties with al-Qaida, ditching hard-line officials and vowing to embrace pluralism and religious tolerance.

The shock offensive began Nov. 27, during which gunmen captured the northern city of Aleppo, Syria's largest, and the central city of Hama, the country's fourth-largest city.

The Syrian government has referred to opposition gunmen as terrorists since conflict broke out in March 2011.

Qatar's top diplomat, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, criticized Assad for failing to take advantage of the lull in fighting in recent years to address the country's underlying problems. "Assad didn't seize this opportunity to start engaging and restoring his relationship with his people," he said.

## **Trump's return may be a boon for Netanyahu, but challenges abound in a changed Middle East**

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Shortly after Donald Trump's win in last month's U.S. election, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rushed to congratulate the president-elect: "History's greatest comeback!" he gushed.

If Trump's staunchly pro-Israel first term and his nominations for top administration positions are any indication, Netanyahu's glee is justified.

But much has transpired since Trump left office in early 2021. The wars in the Middle East, the lofty ambitions of Netanyahu's far-right governing coalition and Netanyahu's personal relationship with him could dampen that enthusiasm and complicate what on the surface looks like a seamless alliance.

"For Bibi, this is his dream. He wanted this," said Mazal Mualem, an Israeli journalist and Netanyahu biographer, referring to the Israeli leader by his nickname. "For Bibi, it's too good to be true."

With Netanyahu set to testify in his corruption trial and facing an international arrest warrant over the war in Gaza, Trump's backing will be all the more significant.

During Trump's first term, he adopted policies largely favorable to Netanyahu. Trump broke with long-standing U.S. policy to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moving the U.S. Embassy to the contested city over Palestinian objections.

He recognized Israel's claim to the Golan Heights, which the international community considers occupied Syrian territory. He also turned a blind eye to Israeli settlement construction in the occupied West Bank and presented a peace plan that would leave dozens of settlements intact.

The Palestinians seek all of the West Bank, captured in 1967, as the heartland of a future state, with east Jerusalem as its capital. The international community considers settlements in both areas illegal.

At Netanyahu's urging, Trump withdrew the U.S. from an Obama-era deal between world powers and Iran over its nuclear program and ramped up sanctions against Iran, while also killing a top Iranian general.

And in the final days of his presidency, Trump brokered a series of diplomatic deals between Israel and Arab countries, shattering a longstanding assumption that Arab countries would not normalize ties without progress on Palestinian statehood. The accords marked a major foreign policy achievement for Netanyahu.

Likely to top Netanyahu's wish list this time around is for Trump to be tough against Iran or perhaps even provide Israel with the weaponry it needs for an effective strike against Iran's nuclear program. Netanyahu will also want to see progress on normalization with Saudi Arabia, but he will seek to minimize Israeli concessions to the Palestinians in return. And he will likely expect Trump to give Israel a free hand in Gaza and not pressure it to withdraw troops, even under a ceasefire deal.

In the weeks since Trump's reelection, Netanyahu and his allies have expressed hope that the good times will return after strained relations with the Biden administration.

"The belief for now is that Trump will deliver," said Aviv Bushinsky, a former adviser to Netanyahu. He said Netanyahu's appointment of a hard-line settlement advocate as ambassador to Washington was a sign of the Israeli leader's confidence in the future under Trump.

Netanyahu could certainly use the boost, especially after seeing his popularity drop after the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks.

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Despite important battlefield gains against Hamas, including the death of its leader in October, and the recent ceasefire that ended nearly 14 months of fighting with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, opinion polls have repeatedly predicted that Netanyahu's governing coalition would fall far short of a required majority to stay in power if new elections were held now.

Netanyahu is also scheduled to testify in his long-running corruption trial this month, setting the stage for a spectacle that could draw unwelcome attention. And the International Criminal Court warrant, which could complicate his travel to dozens of countries worldwide, is a new blow to the Israeli leader. Some of Netanyahu's aides are also embroiled in a series of scandals over leaked or doctored sensitive wartime documents.

But there are no guarantees that Netanyahu will get what he wants from Trump.

For starters, it's not clear whether their relationship is as strong as it once was. Netanyahu upset Trump when he congratulated President Joe Biden for his win in 2020, despite Trump's claims that the election was stolen from him. Although Netanyahu visited Trump in Florida earlier this year, it's not clear if Trump will hold a grudge once back in office.

Trump also returns to the White House with a Middle East roiled by conflict, potentially scrambling their alignment.

Although the ceasefire with Hezbollah appears to be holding, Israel is still fighting in Gaza 14 months after the Hamas attack that triggered the war. Trump has indicated he wants Israel to wrap things up in the war-ravaged Palestinian enclave, but he hasn't said what that might entail. He has demanded that Israeli hostages held in Gaza be freed before he is sworn in in January, warning that if they are not released, there will be "HELL TO PAY," without elaborating.

It is far from clear whether Netanyahu's postwar vision of Gaza — which includes an open-ended military presence in the territory — is acceptable to Trump.

Trump also may have bigger plans for the region. He has talked in the past of normalizing ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, the wealthiest and most influential Arab country. His first-term peace plan, while heavily favoring Israel, nonetheless called for the establishment of a Palestinian state, albeit far smaller than what the Palestinians seek.

Progress on either of these tracks would require Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians.

Saudi Arabia has repeatedly said there will be no normalization with Israel without a clear path to Palestinian independence — an idea that Netanyahu and his hard-line governing partners reject. Even if Netanyahu comes around, his government would almost certainly collapse.

"Netanyahu is convinced that he will be able to recruit Trump to his goals, as happened in the past. However, the American president-elect has been sending, as usual, difficult-to-decipher messages since the victory on Nov. 5," wrote Amos Harel, a commentator with the liberal Haaretz daily.

Trump's strategy on Iran is also murky. Eytan Gilboa, an expert on U.S.-Israel relations at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, said Netanyahu expects Trump to resume exerting "maximum pressure" on Tehran to rein in its nuclear program, but he might give negotiations a chance in a second term bid to secure a legacy as a peacemaker.

Trump's possible positions on any of these issues could force Netanyahu to choose sides, setting him up for a clash with the parties that hold the key to his political survival.

"Netanyahu has described Trump as Israel's greatest friend in the White House. And if Trump asks something of him, he won't be able to say no," Gilboa said. "All sorts of problems can arise here."

## **Opposition fighters reportedly drive Syrian leader from the country. Who are they and what now?**

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

Syria's government appears to have fallen after opposition fighters said they entered Damascus following a stunning advance.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali said the government was ready to "extend its hand" to



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the opposition and hand over its functions to a transitional government.

"I am in my house and I have not left, and this is because of my belonging to this country," Jalili said in a video statement. He said he would go to his office to continue work in the morning and called on Syrian citizens not to deface public property.

A Syrian opposition war monitor, Rami Abdurrahman, said Assad left the country on a flight from Damascus early Sunday. Jalili did not address reports of Assad's departure.

Opposition fighters entered Syria's capital in a swiftly developing crisis that has taken much of the world by surprise. Syria's army has abandoned key cities with little resistance. Who are these opposition fighters? If they take control of Damascus after seizing some of Syria's largest cities, what then?

Here is a look at the stunning reversal of fortune for Assad and the government in just the past 10 days, and what might lie ahead as Syria's 13-year civil war reignites.

The aim? Overthrow the government

This is the first time that opposition forces have reached the outskirts of the Syrian capital since 2018, when the country's troops recaptured the area following a yearslong siege.

The approaching fighters are led by the most powerful insurgent group in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, along with an umbrella group of Turkish-backed Syrian militias called the Syrian National Army. Both have been entrenched in the northwest. They launched the shock offensive on Nov. 27 with gunmen capturing Aleppo, Syria's largest city, and the central city of Hama, the fourth largest.

The HTS has its origins in al-Qaida and is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the United Nations. But the group said in recent years it cut ties with al-Qaida, and experts say HTS has sought to remake itself in recent years by focusing on promoting civilian government in their territory as well as military action.

HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani told CNN in an exclusive interview Thursday from Syria that the aim of the offensive is to overthrow Assad's government.

Possible rifts ahead

The HTS and Syrian National Army have been allies at times and rivals at times, and their aims might diverge.

The Turkish-backed militias also have an interest in creating a buffer zone near the Turkish border to keep away Kurdish militants at odds with Ankara. Turkey has been a main backer of the fighters seeking to overthrow Assad but more recently has urged reconciliation, and Turkish officials have strongly rejected claims of any involvement in the current offensive.

Whether the HTS and the Syrian National Army will work together if they succeed in overthrowing Assad or turn on each other again is a major question.

Others take advantage

While the flash offensive against Syria's government began in the north, armed opposition groups have also mobilized elsewhere.

The southern areas of Sweida and Daraa have both been taken locally. Sweida is the heartland of Syria's Druze religious minority and had been the site of regular anti-government protests even after Assad seemingly consolidated his control over the area.

Daraa is a Sunni Muslim area that was widely seen as the cradle of the uprising against Assad's rule that erupted in 2011. Daraa was recaptured by Syrian government troops in 2018, but rebels remained in some areas. In recent years, Daraa was in a state of uneasy quiet under a Russian-mediated ceasefire deal.

And much of Syria's east is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led group backed by the United States that in the past has clashed with most other armed groups in the country.

Syria's government now has control of only three of 14 provincial capitals: Damascus, Latakia and Tartus.

What's next?

A commander with the insurgents, Hassan Abdul-Ghani, posted on the Telegram messaging app that opposition forces have started carrying out the "final stage" of their offensive by encircling Damascus.

And Syrian troops withdrew Saturday from much of the central city of Homs, Syria's third largest, according to a pro-government outlet and the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. If that

city is captured, the link would be cut between Damascus, Assad's seat of power, and the coastal region where he enjoys wide support.

"Homs to the coastal cities will be a very huge red line politically and socially. Politically, if this line is crossed, then we are talking about the end of the entire Syria, the one that we knew in the past," said a Damascus resident, Anas Joudeh.

Assad appears to be largely on his own as allies Russia and Iran are distracted by other conflicts and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah has been weakened by its war with Israel, now under a fragile ceasefire.

The U.N. special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, seeks urgent talks in Geneva to ensure an "orderly political transition," saying the situation is changing by the minute. He met with foreign ministers and senior diplomats from eight key countries including Saudi Arabia, Russia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran on the sidelines of the Doha Summit.

## Search for UnitedHealthcare CEO's killer yields evidence, but few answers

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — They have seen him smiling on a hostel security camera, but don't know his name. They found the backpack he discarded while fleeing, but don't know where he's gone.

As the search for UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's killer goes on, investigators are reckoning with a tantalizing dichotomy: They have troves of evidence, but the shooter remains an enigma.

Police don't know who he is, where he is, or why he did it, though they are confident it was a targeted attack instead of a random act.

"The net is tightening," New York City Mayor Eric Adams said Saturday.

Hours after he spoke, police divers were seen searching a pond in Central Park, where the killer fled after the shooting. Officers have been scouring the park for days for any possible clues and found his bag there Friday.

Late Saturday, police released two additional photos of the suspected shooter that appeared to be from a camera mounted inside a taxi. The first shows him outside the vehicle and the second shows him looking through the partition between the back seat and the front of the cab. In both, his face is partially obscured by a blue, medical-style mask.

Retracing the gunman's steps using surveillance video, police say, it appears he left the city by bus soon after the shooting Wednesday morning outside the New York Hilton Midtown. He was seen on video at an uptown bus station about 45 minutes later, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said.

With the high-profile search expanding across state lines, the FBI announced late Friday that it was offering a \$50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction, adding to a reward of up to \$10,000 that the NYPD has offered. Police say they believe the suspect acted alone.

Police provided no updates on the hunt Saturday, but investigators are urging patience — even with a killer on the loose.

Hundreds of detectives are combing through video recordings and social media, vetting tips from the public and interviewing people who might have information, including Thompson's family and coworkers and the shooter's randomly assigned roommates at the Manhattan hostel where he stayed.

"This isn't 'Blue Bloods.' We're not going to solve this in 60 minutes," Kenny told reporters Friday. "We're painstakingly going through every bit of evidence that we can come across."

The shooter paid cash at the hostel, presented what police believe was a fake ID and is believed to have paid cash for taxi rides and other transactions. He didn't speak to others at the hostel and almost always kept his face covered with a mask, only lowering it while eating.

But investigators caught a break when they came across security camera images of an unguarded moment in which he briefly showed his face soon after arriving in New York on Nov. 24.

Police distributed the images to news outlets and on social media but so far haven't been able to ID him using facial recognition — possibly because of the angle of the images or limitations on how the NYPD is

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allowed to use that technology, Kenny said.

On Friday evening, investigators found a backpack in Central Park that had been worn by the gunman, police said. They didn't immediately reveal what, if anything, it contained but said it would be tested and analyzed.

Another potential clue, a fingerprint on an item he purchased at a Starbucks minutes before the shooting, has so far proven useless for identifying him, Kenny said.

Aided by surveillance cameras on nearly every building and block, police have been able to retrace the shooter's movements.

They know he ambushed Thompson at 6:44 a.m. as the executive arrived at the Hilton for his company's annual investor conference, using a 9 mm pistol that resembled the guns farmers use to put down animals without causing a loud noise. They know ammunition found near Thompson's body bore the words "delay," "deny" and "depose," mimicking a phrase used by insurance industry critics.

Kenny said the fact that the shooter knew UnitedHealthcare group was holding a conference at the hotel and what route Thompson might take to get there suggested that he could possibly be a disgruntled employee or client.

Investigators know from surveillance video that the shooter fled into Central Park on a bicycle and ditched it around 7 a.m. near 85th Street.

He then walked a couple blocks and got into a taxi, arriving at 7:30 a.m. at the George Washington Bridge Bus Station, which is near the northern tip of Manhattan and offers commuter service to New Jersey and Greyhound routes to Philadelphia, Boston and Washington.

Investigators don't know what happened next. They are searching through more surveillance video but have yet to locate video of the shooter getting on a bus or exiting the station.

"We have reason to believe that the person in question has left New York City," Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch told CNN on Friday.

Police have determined from video that the gunman was in the city for 10 days before the shooting. He arrived at Manhattan's main bus terminal on a Greyhound bus that originated in Atlanta, though it's not clear whether he embarked there or at one of about a half-dozen stops along the route.

Immediately after that, he took a cab to the vicinity of the Hilton and was there for about a half hour, Kenny said.

At around 11 p.m. on the night he arrived, he went by taxi to the HI New York City Hostel. It was there, while speaking with an employee in the lobby, that he briefly pulled down the mask and smiled, giving investigators the brief glimpse they are now relying on to identify and capture a killer.

## Taiwan reports 14 Chinese warships and 4 balloons near the island

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — China sent 14 warships, seven military aircraft and four balloons near Taiwan between Saturday and Sunday, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry, as Beijing ramps up pressure on the island it claims as its own.

China's military activities come amid speculation Beijing might organize military drills around the island in response to Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te's recent visit to Pacific allies, including U.S. stops in Hawaii and Guam.

China claims Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy of 23 million people, as its own territory, and bristles at other countries' formal exchanges with Taiwan. The United States, like most countries, doesn't recognize Taiwan as a country but is its main unofficial backer and sells it arms.

The Chinese government has pledged to annex Taiwan, through military force if necessary, and sends ships and military planes near the island almost daily.

The 14 warships, seven military planes and four balloons were reported over 24 hours between 6 a.m. on Saturday and 6 a.m. on Sunday, according to Taiwan's Defense Ministry. The ministry said six of the aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial demarcation zone between Taiwan and China.

One of the balloons brushed over the island's northern tip, according to the ministry.

Lai on Friday called on China to refrain from threats and said Beijing's military exercises "will not be able

to win the respect” of neighboring countries.

Lai’s first overseas trip since taking office in May included visits to the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Palau, three of the 12 countries that have diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The rest of the world, including the U.S., has official ties with China.

Lai’s stops in Hawaii and Guam — from where he had phone calls with U.S. Congress leaders — angered China, which opposes U.S. arms sales and military assistance to Taiwan.

There was widespread speculation China might organize war games around Taiwan in response to the visit, though it was unclear when they might start.

In October, China held drills around Taiwan involving a record one-day total of 153 aircraft, 14 navy vessels and 12 Chinese government ships in response to a Lai speech in which he rejected Beijing’s claims over Taiwan.

Beijing has labeled Lai a separatist and refuses to speak to him.

## **Sen. Joni Ernst wants to hear from Hegseth on sex assault in the military and women in combat**

By TARA COPP Associated Press

SIMI VALLEY, Calif. (AP) — Republican Sen. Joni Ernst made her most expansive comments yet on Pete Hegseth, telling a largely GOP audience at a California security conference Saturday that she needs to hear more from President-elect Donald Trump’s embattled defense secretary pick on key issues before she decides whether to support him.

“I am a survivor of sexual assault,” said Ernst of Iowa, a military veteran who has spent much of her time as a lawmaker working on improving how attacks are reported and prosecuted within the ranks. “I’ve worked very heavily on sexual assault measures within the military. So I’d like to hear a lot more about that.”

Ernst is one of several Senate Republicans who control the fate of Hegseth, an infantry combat veteran and former “Fox & Friends” weekend host who spent the past week on Capitol Hill trying to win the support of Republican senators who would need to confirm him to lead the Pentagon.

Hegseth has been fighting for his nomination amid allegations of excessive drinking and the revelation that he made a settlement payment after being accused of a sexual assault that he denies.

Trump, Vice President-elect JD Vance and others have defended him in recent days. Trump told NBC’s “Meet the Press” in an interview recorded Friday that he believes Hegseth will be confirmed and that senators have called him to tell him that Hegseth is fantastic.

“Pete is doing well now,” the president-elect said in an excerpt of the interview set to air Sunday. “I mean, people were a little bit concerned. He’s a young guy with a tremendous track record.”

Ernst has faced pressure from Trump supporters to back Hegseth. Unlike most of her Republican Senate peers, Ernst is not only a sexual assault survivor but also served in combat as an Army National Guard lieutenant colonel — work that Hegseth has railed against.

He said as recently as last month that women “straight up” should not serve in combat roles.

“I’d like to hear about the role of women in combat in our great United States military,” Ernst said Saturday at the Reagan National Defense Forum in California.

She also wanted to see how Hegseth — who has no Pentagon leadership experience — would handle financial issues at the Defense Department.

“Balancing the books and managing and providing oversight for a \$877 billion industry is extremely important,” Ernst said.

A day earlier, Hegseth posted on social media that he “had another substantive conversation with Senator Ernst, I appreciate her sincere commitment to defense policy, and I look forward to meeting with her again next week.”

Ernst said she looks forward to seeing him in front of the Senate Armed Services Committee as well as part of a confirmation process “where he’ll have to answer some very tough questions.”

“There will be a very thorough vetting before he moves forward,” Ernst said, adding that she wants to

ensure it's a fair process.

In meeting with Ernst, Hegseth will likely need to further explain a 2017 California police report after a woman accused Hegseth of sexually assaulting her after he took her phone, blocked the door to a hotel room and refused to let her leave after the two had met at a Republican conference.

Asked in an interview Wednesday for Megyn Kelly's SiriusXM satellite radio show if he sexually assaulted the woman, Hegseth said "absolutely not." He called it a "really unfortunate situation" and said he paid her a settlement because he "had to," contending that her lawyers said they would "out him."

Hegseth said the payment was to keep the matter quiet because he was afraid it would affect his Fox News job. His 2017 accuser has remained anonymous, and on Saturday, Ernst said she would trust the FBI "to vet this and present it to the committee."

## South Korea's president avoids an impeachment attempt over short-lived martial law

By KIM TONG-HYUNG and HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's embattled President Yoon Suk Yeol avoided an opposition-led attempt to impeach him over his short-lived imposition of martial law, as most ruling party lawmakers boycotted a parliamentary vote Saturday to deny a two-thirds majority needed to suspend his presidential powers.

The scrapping of the motion is expected to intensify protests calling for Yoon's ouster and deepen political chaos in South Korea, with a survey suggesting a majority of South Koreans support the president's impeachment. Yoon's martial law declaration drew criticism from his own ruling conservative People Power Party, but the party is also determined to oppose Yoon's impeachment apparently because it fears losing the presidency to liberals.

After the motion fell through, members of the main liberal opposition Democratic Party rallied inside the National Assembly, chanting slogans calling for Yoon's impeachment or resignation.

The party's floor leader, Park Chan-dae, said it will soon prepare for a new impeachment motion. Opposition parties could submit a new impeachment motion after a new parliamentary session opens next Wednesday.

"We'll surely impeach Yoon Suk Yeol, who is the greatest risk to Republic of Korea," party leader Lee Jae-myung said. "We'll surely bring back this country to normal before Christmas Day or year's end."

Many experts worry Yoon won't be able to serve out his remaining 2 ½ years in office. They say some PPP lawmakers could eventually join opposition parties' efforts to impeach Yoon if public demands for it grow further.

The ruling party risks "further public outrage and national confusion if they don't find a formula fast for Yoon's departure," said Duyeon Kim, a senior analyst at the Center for a New American Security in Washington.

PPP chair Han Dong-hun said his party will seek Yoon's "orderly" early exit but didn't say when he can resign.

Protests against Yoon are swelling

On Saturday, tens of thousands of people packed several blocks of roads leading to the National Assembly, waving banners, shouting slogans and dancing. Protesters also gathered in front of PPP's headquarters near the Assembly, shouting for its lawmakers to vote to impeach Yoon. A smaller crowd of Yoon's supporters, which still seemed to be in the thousands, rallied elsewhere in Seoul, calling the impeachment attempt unconstitutional.

Impeaching Yoon required support from 200 of the National Assembly's 300 members. The Democratic Party and five other small opposition parties, which filed the motion, have 192 seats combined. But only three lawmakers from PPP participated in the vote. The motion was scrapped without ballot counting because the number of votes didn't reach 200.

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National Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik called the result "very regrettable" and an embarrassing moment for the country's democracy.

If Yoon is impeached, his powers will be suspended until the Constitutional Court decides whether to remove him from office. If he is removed, an election to replace him must take place within 60 days.

The president apologizes for turmoil

Earlier Saturday, Yoon issued an apology over the martial law decree, saying he won't shirk legal or political responsibility for the declaration and promising not to make another attempt to impose it. He said would leave it to his party to chart a course through the country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

"The declaration of this martial law was made out of my desperation. But in the course of its implementation, it caused anxiety and inconveniences to the public. I feel very sorry over that and truly apologize to the people who must have been shocked a lot," Yoon said.

Since taking office in 2022, Yoon has struggled to push his agenda through an opposition-controlled parliament and grappled with low approval ratings amid scandals involving himself and his wife. In his martial law announcement on Tuesday night, Yoon called parliament a "den of criminals" bogging down state affairs and vowed to eliminate "shameless North Korea followers and anti-state forces."

The declaration of martial law was the first of its kind in more than 40 years in South Korea. The turmoil has paralyzed South Korean politics and sparked alarm among key diplomatic partners like the U.S. and Japan.

"Yoon's credibility overseas has been undermined by declaring martial law, so he won't be able to exercise leadership in his foreign policies especially when his days are numbered," Kim, the analyst, said. "Its government bureaucracy will need to continue business as usual for existing alliance and foreign policy initiatives as best it can because there is a lot of important work to do globally."

Tuesday night saw special forces troops encircling the parliament building and army helicopters hovering over it, but the military withdrew after the National Assembly unanimously voted to overturn the decree, forcing Yoon to lift it before daybreak Wednesday. Eighteen lawmakers from the ruling party voted to reject Yoon's martial law decree along with opposition lawmakers. PPP later decided to oppose Yoon's impeachment motion.

Yoon's speech fueled speculation that he and his party may push for a constitutional amendment to shorten his term, instead of accepting impeachment, as a way to ease public anger over the marital law and facilitate Yoon's early exit from office.

Lee told reporters that Yoon's speech was "greatly disappointing" and that the only way forward is his immediate resignation or impeachment. His party called Yoon's martial law "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or coup."

Lawmakers on Saturday first voted on a bill appointing a special prosecutor to investigate stock price manipulation allegations surrounding Yoon's wife.

Yoon accused of ordering arrests of politicians

On Friday, Han, who criticized Yoon's martial law declaration, said he had received intelligence that during the brief period of martial law Yoon ordered the country's defense counterintelligence commander to arrest unspecified key politicians based on accusations of "anti-state activities."

Hong Jang-won, first deputy director of South Korea's spy agency, told lawmakers Friday that Yoon had ordered him to help the defense counterintelligence unit to detain key politicians including Han, Lee and Woo.

The Defense Ministry said Friday it suspended three military commanders including the head of the defense counterintelligence unit over their involvement in enforcing martial law.

Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho has told parliament that Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun ordered the deployment of troops to the National Assembly. Opposition parties accused Kim of recommending to Yoon to enforce martial law.

Kim Yong Hyun resigned Thursday, and prosecutors imposed an overseas travel ban on him.

## Trump isn't back in office but he's already pushing his agenda and negotiating with world leaders

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — He's making threats, traveling abroad and negotiating with world leaders.

Donald Trump has more than a month and a half to go before he's sworn in for a second term. But the Republican president-elect is already moving aggressively not just to fill his Cabinet and outline policy goals, but to achieve them.

Trump has threatened to impose a 25% tariff on goods from Canada and Mexico, prompting emergency calls and a visit from Canada's prime minister that resulted in what Trump claimed were commitments from both U.S. allies on new border security measures.

The incoming president has warned there will be "ALL HELL TO PAY" if Hamas does not release the hostages being held in Gaza before his inauguration on Jan. 20, 2025.

And this weekend, Trump returned to the global stage, joining a host of other foreign leaders for the reopening of the Notre Dame Cathedral five years after it was ravaged by a fire. There, he was welcomed like a sitting dignitary, with a prime seat next to French President Emmanuel Macron.

Absent in Paris: lame duck President Joe Biden, who has largely disappeared from headlines, except when he issued a pardon of his son, Hunter, who was facing sentencing for gun crimes and tax evasion. First lady Jill Biden attended in his place.

"I think you have seen more happen in the last two weeks than you've seen in the last four years. And we're not even there yet," Trump said in an over-the-top boast at an awards ceremony Thursday night.

For all of Trump's bold talk, though, it is unclear how many of his efforts will bear fruit.

### Breaking precedent

The pre-inauguration threats and deal-making are highly unusual, like so much of what Trump does, said Julian Zelizer, a political historian at Princeton University.

"Transitions are always a little complicated in this way. Even though we talk about one president at a time," he said, "the reality is one president plus. And that plus can act assertively sometimes."

Zelizer said that is particularly true of Trump, who was president previously and already has relationships with many foreign leaders such as Macron, who invited both Trump and Biden to Paris this weekend as part of the Notre Dame celebration.

"Right now he's sort of governing even though he's not the president yet. He's having these public meetings with foreign leaders, which aren't simply introductions. He's staking out policy and negotiating things from drug trafficking to tariffs," Zelizer said.

### Foreign leader meetings

Trump had already met with several foreign leaders before this weekend's trip. He hosted Argentinian President Javier Milei in Florida at his Mar-a-Lago club in November. After the tariff threat, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a pilgrimage to Mar-a-Lago for a three-hour dinner meeting. Canadian officials later said the country is ready to make new investments in border security, with plans for more helicopters, drones and law enforcement officers.

Incoming Trump aides have also been meeting with their future foreign counterparts.

On Wednesday, several members of Trump's team, including incoming national security adviser Mike Waltz, met with Andriy Yermak, a top aide to Zelenskyy, in Washington, as Ukraine tries to win support for its ongoing efforts to defend itself from Russian invasion, according to a person familiar with the meeting. Yermak also met with Trump officials in Florida, he wrote on X.

That comes after Trump's incoming Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, traveled to Qatar and Israel for high-level talks about a cease-fire and hostage deal in Gaza, according to a U.S. official familiar with the efforts, meeting with the prime ministers of both countries. The official was not authorized to publicly discuss the matter and spoke on condition of anonymity.

One president, two voices

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There is no prohibition on incoming officials or nominees meeting with foreign officials, and it is common and fine for them to do so — unless those meetings are designed to subvert or otherwise impact current U.S. policy.

Trump aides were said to be especially cognizant of potential conflicts given their experience in 2016, when interactions between Trump allies and Russian officials came under scrutiny. That included a phone call in which Trump's incoming national security adviser, Michael Flynn, discussed new sanctions with Russia's ambassador to the United States, suggesting things would improve after Trump became president. Flynn was later charged with lying to the FBI about the conversation.

Trump's incoming press secretary Karoline Leavitt said that "all transition officials have followed applicable laws in their interactions with foreign nationals."

She added: "World leaders recognize that President Trump is returning to power and will lead with strength to put the best interests of the United States of America first again. That is why many foreign leaders and officials have reached out to correspond with President Trump and his incoming team."

Such efforts can nonetheless cause complications.

If, say, Biden is having productive conversations on a thorny foreign policy issue and Trump weighs in, that could make it harder for Biden "because people are hearing two different voices" that may be in conflict, Zelizer said.

Leaders like Russia's Vladimir Putin and Netanyahu may also anticipate a more favorable incoming administration and wait Biden out, hoping for a better deal.

Coordination between incoming and outgoing administrations

Although there is no requirement that an incoming administration coordinate calls and meetings with foreign officials with the State Department or National Security Council, that has long been considered standard practice.

That is, in part, because transition teams, particularly in their early days and weeks, do not always have the latest information about the state of relations with foreign nations and may not have the resources, including interpretation and logistical ability, to handle such meetings efficiently.

It is unclear the level of State Department involvement, but the Biden and Trump teams say they have been talking, particularly on the Middle East, with the incoming and outgoing administrations having agreed to work together on efforts to free hostages who remain held in Gaza, according to a U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment publicly about the sensitive talks and spoke on condition of anonymity.

That includes conversations between Witkoff and Biden's foreign policy team as well as Waltz and Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan.

Last month, Biden administration officials said they had kept Trump's team closely apprised of efforts to broker a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hezbollah on the Israel-Lebanon border.

"I just want to be clear to all of our adversaries, they can't play the incoming Trump administration off of the Biden administration. I'm regularly talking to the Biden people. And so, this is not a moment of opportunity or wedges for them," Waltz said Friday in a Fox Business interview.

Sullivan echoed those comments at the Ronald Reagan National Defense Forum Saturday.

"It has been professional. It has been substantive. And frankly, it has been good," he said of their coordination on national security issues. "Obviously we don't see eye to eye on every issue, and that's no secret to anybody," he went on. But he said both teams believe "it is our job on behalf of the American people to make sure this is a smooth transition," particularly given the seriousness of issues like the war in Ukraine, conflicts in the Middle East and threats from China.

"The nature of the world we find ourselves in today only elevates our responsibility to be engaged, to talk regularly, to meet regularly, to be transparent, to share, and to make sure it's an effective transition," he said.

Taking credit already

Trump's team, meanwhile, is already claiming credit for everything from gains in the stock and cryptocurrency markets to a decision by Walmart to roll back diversity, equity and inclusion policies Trump opposes.

"Promises Kept — And President Trump Hasn't Even Been Inaugurated Yet," read one press release that



claimed, in part, that both Canada and Mexico have already pledged "immediate action" to help "stem the flow of illegal immigration, human trafficking, and deadly drugs entering the United States."

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has stopped short of saying Trump mischaracterized their call in late November. But she said Friday that Trump "has his own way of communicating, like when we had the phone call and he wrote that we were going to close the border. That was never talked about in the phone call."

Earlier this week, Mexico carried out what it claimed was its largest seizure of fentanyl pills ever. Seizures over the summer had been as little as 50 grams per week, and after the Trump call, they seized more than a ton.

Biden, too, tried to take credit for the seizure in a statement Friday night.

## **2 Pearl Harbor survivors, ages 104 and 102, return to Hawaii to honor those killed in 1941 attack**

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii (AP) — Ira "Ike" Schab, a 104-year-old Pearl Harbor attack survivor, was so determined to stand and salute during a remembrance ceremony honoring those killed in the Japanese bombing that thrust the U.S. into World War II some 83 years ago that he spent six weeks in physical therapy to build the strength to do so.

On Saturday, Schab gingerly rose from his wheelchair and raised his right hand, returning a salute delivered by sailors on a destroyer and a submarine passing by in the harbor. His son and a daughter supported him from either side.

"I was honored to do it. I'm glad I was capable of standing up," he said afterward. "I'm getting old, you know."

Schab is one of only two servicemen who lived through the attack who made it to an annual observance hosted by the U.S. Navy and National Park Service on a grass field overlooking the harbor. A third survivor had been planning to join them but had to cancel because of health issues.

The Dec. 7, 1941, bombing killed more than 2,300 U.S. servicemen. Nearly half, or 1,177, were sailors and Marines on board the USS Arizona, which sank during the battle. The remains of more than 900 Arizona crew members are still entombed on the submerged vessel.

Dozens of survivors once joined the event but their attendance has declined as survivors have aged. Today there are only 16 still living, according to a list maintained by Kathleen Farley, the California state chair of the Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors. Military historian J. Michael Wenger has estimated there were some 87,000 military personnel on Oahu on the day of the attack.

Schab agreed when ceremony organizers asked him earlier this year to salute on behalf of all survivors and World War II veterans.

"He's been working hard, because this is his goal," said his daughter Kimberlee Heinrichs, who traveled to Hawaii with Schab from their Beaverton, Oregon, home. "He wanted to be able to stand for that."

Schab was a sailor on the USS Dobbin at the time of the attack, serving as the tuba player in the ship's band. He had showered and put on a clean uniform when he heard the call for a fire rescue party.

He hurried topside to see Japanese planes flying overhead and the USS Utah capsizing. He quickly went back below deck to join a daisy chain of sailors feeding shells to an anti-aircraft gun topside.

Ken Stevens, 102, who served on the USS Whitney, joined Schab at the ceremony. USS Curtiss sailor Bob Fernandez, 100, was unable to come due to health issues.

Attendees observed a moment of silence at 7:54 a.m., the same time the attack began eight decades ago. F-22 jets in missing man formation flew overhead shortly after.

Fernandez, speaking in a phone interview from California, where he lives with his nephew in Lodi, recalled feeling shocked and surprised as the attack began.

"When those things go off like that, we didn't know what's what," Fernandez said. "We didn't even know we were in a war."

Fernandez was a mess cook on the Curtiss and his job that morning was to bring sailors coffee and food as he waited tables during breakfast. Then they heard an alarm sound. Through a porthole, Fernandez saw a plane with the red ball insignia painted on Japanese aircraft fly by.

Fernandez rushed down three decks to a magazine room where he and other sailors waited for someone to unlock a door storing 5-inch (12.7-centimeter), 38-caliber shells so they could begin passing them to the ship's guns.

He has told interviewers over the years that some of his fellow sailors were praying and crying as they heard gunfire up above.

"I felt kind of scared because I didn't know what the hell was going on," Fernandez said.

The ship's guns hit a Japanese plane that crashed into one of its cranes. Shortly after, its guns hit a dive bomber that then slammed into the ship and exploded below deck, setting the hangar and main decks on fire, according to the Navy History and Heritage Command.

Fernandez's ship, the Curtiss, lost 21 men and nearly 60 of its sailors were injured.

Many laud Pearl Harbor survivors as heroes, but Fernandez doesn't view himself that way.

"I'm not a hero," he said. "I'm just nothing but an ammunition passer."

## **US announces nearly \$1 billion more in longer-term weapons support for Ukraine**

By TARA COPP Associated Press

SIMI VALLEY, Calif. (AP) — The United States will provide nearly \$1 billion more in longer-term weapons support to Ukraine, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Saturday as the Biden administration rushes to spend all the congressionally approved money it has left to bolster Kyiv before President-elect Donald Trump takes office next month.

The latest package will include more drones and munitions for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS, that the U.S. has provided. While these weapons are critically needed now, they will be funded through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which pays for longer-term systems to be put on contract.

The weapon systems purchased are often intended to support Ukraine's future military capabilities, not make an immediate difference on the battlefield.

The \$988 million package is on top of an additional \$725 million in U.S. military assistance, including counter-drone systems and HIMARS munitions, announced Monday that would be drawn from the Pentagon's stockpiles to more quickly get to the front lines. The U.S. has provided Ukraine with more than \$62 billion in military aid since Russia's invasion in February 2022.

"The baton will soon be passed," Austin said. "Others will decide the course ahead. And I hope that they will build on the strength that we have forged over the past four years."

Ukraine is facing an intensified onslaught by Russia, which is now using thousands of North Korean troops to augment its fight to take back the Kursk region. Moscow also has launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile and regularly strikes Kyiv's civilian infrastructure.

With questions about whether Trump will maintain military support to Ukraine, the Biden administration has been trying to spend every dollar remaining from a massive foreign aid bill passed earlier this year to put Ukraine in the strongest position possible.

"This administration has made its choice. So has a bipartisan coalition in Congress. The next administration must make its own choice," Austin said in a speech at an annual gathering of national security officials, defense firms and lawmakers at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California.

Trump had a hastily arranged meeting Saturday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and France's Emmanuel Macron while in Paris for the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral. Macron and other European leaders are trying to persuade Trump to maintain support for Ukraine.

Trump, a longtime admirer of Russian President Vladimir Putin, has criticized U.S. aid for Ukraine and called for bringing a quick end to the war, raising concerns in Ukraine about what terms may be laid out

for any future negotiations.

Austin said he was "confident that President Reagan would have stood on the side of Ukraine, American security and human freedom."

It was one of Austin's last major speeches as President Joe Biden's defense secretary and a cap to his more than 41 years serving as a soldier and general.

Under Austin's watch, the Pentagon in 2022 launched a regular meeting that now counts more than 50 countries to figure out how to get the tens of millions of rounds of ammunition and billions of dollars in advanced weaponry to Ukraine. Without that flow of support, it's possible the country would have fallen to Russia after it invaded.

"Together, we have helped Ukraine survive an all-out assault by the largest military in Europe," Austin said.

Austin and Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, the longtime Republican leader, were honored at the conference for their lifetime of service, and they used the opportunity to press for the U.S. to continue to build and support its alliances, a sharp contrast to Trump's "America First" policy.

Austin called the Ukraine Defense Contact Group "the most consequential global coalition since the time of President George H.W. Bush and Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait," showing that "America and our friends have become the arsenal of Ukrainian democracy."

Before Saturday's announcement, there was roughly \$8 billion left to use to pull existing weapons out of U.S. stockpiles and to put additional weapons on contract to help Ukraine.

"We're not going to stop Putin by telling Ukraine we aren't going to give you anything more," Rep. Adam Smith of Washington state, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said at a panel at the Reagan National Defense Forum.

## **Trump is welcomed by Macron to Paris with presidential pomp and joined by Zelenskyy for their talks**

By SYLVIE CORBET, ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed Donald Trump to Paris on Saturday with a full dose of presidential pomp as the two held a hastily arranged meeting with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy before celebrating the grand reopening of the Notre Dame Cathedral.

On a day that mixed pageantry with attention to pressing global problems, the once and future American president was warmly embraced by Macron upon arriving at the Elysee Palace.

"It's a great honor for French people to welcome you five years later," Macron told Trump. "Welcome back again."

Trump said it was a "very great honor" to be there, while hinting at challenges ahead.

"It certainly seems like the world is going a little crazy right now. And we'll be talking about that," Trump said.

An actual red carpet was rolled out for Trump as Macron bestowed the kind of full diplomatic welcome that France offers sitting American presidents, complete with trumpets blaring and members of the Republican Guard in full uniform. It was a clear sign that even though Trump doesn't take office until Jan. 20, 2025, Macron and other European leaders are already working to win his favor and treating him as America's representative on the world stage.

President Joe Biden declined an invitation to attend the Notre Dame ceremony, five years after a devastating fire, with the White House citing a scheduling conflict. First lady Jill Biden was the official U.S. representative in his place.

Macron and leaders across Europe are trying to persuade the president-elect to maintain support for Ukraine in its defense against Russia's invasion. Macron's office said the war, along with conflicts in the Mideast, would be discussed.

As Trump arrived at the official residence of the French president, Macron went out of his way to project an image of close ties, offering handshakes and plenty of back-patting for the cameras.

In a video posted later on X, Macron could be heard asking Trump: "You remember?" as both men en-

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tered a reception room.

"I remember," Trump answered.

Trump spent about 90 minutes inside, meeting first with Macron before they were joined by Zelenskyy for about 35 minutes.

Macron had long planned to meet separately with Zelenskyy. The French president's office said the three-way talks were proposed by Macron and arranged shortly before Trump's arrival. Trump has pledged to end the war in Ukraine swiftly but has not specified how, raising concerns in Kyiv about what terms may be laid out for any future negotiations.

A person familiar with Trump's plans had said before the meeting was announced that while Trump and Zelenskyy were attending the cathedral ceremony and surrounding events and probably would interact, Trump's transition team had not worked with the Ukrainians to schedule formal talks.

After the place meeting, a Trump senior transition official did not push back on the idea that it had come together at the last minute, but said it had been "discussed fully and agreed to" and that Trump had been "fully briefed" ahead of time.

The three leaders spoke in English, and translator was in the room, according to a French official.

Accompanying Trump to Paris was a small contingent of advisers that included incoming chief of staff Susie Wiles, along with Steve Witkoff, a longtime friend and real estate investor whom Trump has tapped as his special envoy to the Middle East, and Massad Boulos, who is the father-in-law of Trump's daughter Tiffany and will serve as senior adviser on Arab and Middle Eastern affairs.

The group did not appear to include anyone with expertise on Ukraine.

"United States, Ukraine and France. Together on this historic day. United for Notre-Dame. Let's continue to work together for peace and security," Macron wrote on X afterward.

Trump's victory last month threw into doubt the Biden administration's flow of money and arms to Ukraine — aid bolstered even more on Saturday by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's announcement of a \$988 million package that brings American military support to more than \$62 billion since Russia's invasion in February 2022.

Trump has characterized Zelenskyy as "the greatest salesman on Earth" for winning billions in U.S. aid. Trump also has said he work out a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine within a day of taking office and has promoted his good relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In an effort to build trust with the incoming U.S. administration, Zelenskyy's top aide Andriy Yermak met key members of Trump's team on a two-day trip to the U.S. earlier this week.

Macron has argued that Ukraine's defeat or a cease-fire with Russia on unfavorable terms to Ukraine would be viewed as a loss for the U.S. and even Trump himself, according to two European officials familiar with the matter.

After arriving at Notre Dame for the ceremony, Trump was greeted by Macron and his wife, Brigitte. He was given prime seating at the service right between them — a better location than Jill Biden, who sat on Brigitte Macron's other side — and many current heads of government and state.

Inside, Trump also greeted Zelenskyy as well as Britain's Prince William, who Trump met with later at the British ambassador's residence in Paris. Trump was greeted in the foyer, shook the royal's hand and said "good man, this one."

Trump told reporters the Prince of Wales was doing "a fantastic job" before the two went to sit down and talk in a private room reserved for high-profile figures in the residence that once was the Paris town home of Princess Pauline Borghese, the youngest sister French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte.

Prince William was also scheduled to meet separately with Jill Biden, according to the British royal palace.

Elon Musk, the billionaire CEO of Tesla and X who has spent considerable time with Trump since the election and spent millions to elect him, was also in attendance at Notre Dame.

Macron, who has had an up-and-down relationship with Trump, has made a point of cultivating their bond since the Republican defeated Democrat Kamala Harris. But Macron's office nonetheless played down the significance of the invitation, saying other politicians not now in office had been invited as well.

Trump was invited as president-elect of a "friendly nation," Macron's office said, adding, "This is in no way exceptional, we've done it before."

Trump is known to revel in pomp and circumstance. One of his first trips as president his first term was to Paris, where Macron made him the the guest of honor at Bastille Day events. Trump later said he wanted to replicate the grand military parade back in the United States.

Relations between France and the U.S. during Trump's first term began warmly enough but grew increasingly strained over time.

Macron was the guest of honor at Trump's first state dinner, and Trump traveled to France several times. But the relationship suffered after Macron criticized Trump for questioning the need for NATO and raising doubts about America's commitment to the mutual defense pact.

During the 2024 presidential campaign, Trump often mocked Macron, imitating his accent and threatening to impose steep tariffs on wine and champagne bottles shipped to the U.S. if France tried to tax American companies.

But Macron was one of the first global leaders to congratulate Trump last month after the election.

When he accepted the invitation to travel to Paris, Trump said Macron had done "a wonderful job ensuring that Notre Dame has been restored to its full level of glory, and even more so. It will be a very special day for all!" Trump was president in 2019, when a fire nearly destroyed the 861-year-old landmark.

## **An archbishop's knock formally restores**

### **Notre Dame to life as winds howl and heads of state look on**

By THOMAS ADAMSON and JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Howling winds couldn't stop Notre Dame Cathedral 's heart from beating again.

With three resounding knocks on its doors by Paris Archbishop Laurent Ulrich, wielding a specially designed crosier carved from fire-scorched beams, the monument roared back to life Saturday evening. For the first time since a devastating blaze nearly destroyed it in 2019, the towering Gothic masterpiece reopened for worship, its rebirth marked by song, prayer, and awe beneath its soaring arches.

The ceremony, initially planned to begin on the forecourt, was moved entirely inside due to unusually fierce December winds sweeping across the Île de la Cité, flanked by the River Seine. Yet the occasion lost none of its splendor. Inside the luminous nave, choirs sang psalms, and the cathedral's mighty organ, silent for nearly five years, thundered to life in a triumphant interplay of melodies.

The restoration, a spectacular achievement in just five years for a structure that took nearly two centuries to build, is seen as a moment of triumph for French President Emmanuel Macron, who championed the ambitious timeline — and a welcome respite from his domestic political woes.

The evening's celebration, attended by 1,500 dignitaries, including President-elect Donald Trump, US first lady Jill Biden, Britain's Prince William, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, underscored Notre Dame's enduring role as both a spiritual and cultural beacon. Observers see the event as Macron's, and his intention to pivot it into a fully fledged diplomatic gathering, while highlighting France's ability to unite on the global stage despite internal political crises.

Dramatic three knocks and bell Emmanuel

As the cathedral's largest bell, the 13-ton Emmanuel — which was not named after the French leader — tolled into the Paris night, signaling the start of the ceremony, the crowd inside Notre Dame fell into an expectant hush. Emmanuel, a legacy of King Louis XIV, had rung through centuries of French history, and its peal now resonated as a call to witness another epochal moment.

Outside the cathedral's monumental doors, Ulrich raised his fire-scarred crosier. "Brothers and sisters, let us enter now into Notre Dame," he declared. "It is she who accompanies us on our path to peace."

With the congregation of over 2,500 people watching in silence, Ulrich struck the floodlit doors, the base of his crosier reverberating against the wood. Inside, the choir answered with soaring hymns, their voices filling the nave. Illuminations on the cathedral facade heightened the drama. On the final strike, the heavy doors swung open, revealing the glowing interior of restored blond Lutetian limestone.

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Adding to the ceremony's visual splendor, Ulrich and the clergy wore vibrant liturgical garments designed by French fashion designer Jean-Charles de Castelbajac. Known for his signature pop-art aesthetic, Castelbajac created 2,000 colorful pieces for 700 celebrants, blending modern elements with medieval touches.

Flooded with light and song, the cathedral came alive in a moment of breathtaking spectacle. What had been a silent, soot-blackened ruin five years ago now blazed with renewed vitality, marking the culmination of a nearly \$1 billion global effort to resurrect it.

## Macron's political woes

Speaking inside the cathedral, Macron expressed "gratitude" Saturday to those who saved, helped, and rebuilt Notre Dame, his voice reverberating through the nave.

"I stand before you ... to express the gratitude of the French nation," he said, before voices flooded the space with song, harmonies not heard in over five years.

"Tonight, the bells of Notre Dame are ringing again. And in a moment, the organ will awaken," sending the "music of hope" cascading through the luminous interior to Parisians, France, and the world beyond, he said.

The celebration is expected to give a much-needed boost to the embattled French leader, whose prime minister was ousted this week, plunging the nation's politics into more turmoil.

Macron has called Notre Dame's reopening "a jolt of hope." Observers say he hoped the occasion would briefly silence his critics and showcase France's unity and resilience under his leadership — a rare moment of grace in a presidency now facing a grave crisis.

## Monumental feats of restoration

Inside Notre Dame, 42,000 square meters of stonework—equivalent to six soccer pitches—gleamed anew, revealing intricate carvings and luminous limestone. Above, 2,000 oak beams, nicknamed "the forest," restored the cathedral's iconic spire and roof.

The great organ, dormant for over five years, roared back to life like a slumbering giant. With its 7,952 pipes—ranging from pen-sized to torso-wide—and a renovated console featuring five keyboards, 115 stops, and 30 foot pedals, it responded to Archbishop Laurent Ulrich's command: "Wake up, organ, sacred instrument."

The first low rumble grew into a triumphant symphony as four organists pulled out the stops, weaving improvised responses to the archbishop's invocations. Eight times, Ulrich addressed the organ; eight times, its voice filled the nave with breathtaking sound.

Guests marveled at the spectacle, many capturing the moment on their phones. "It's a sense of perfection," said François Le Page of the Notre Dame Foundation, who last saw the cathedral cloaked in scaffolding in 2021. "It was somber then. Now, it's night and day."

The Rev. Andriy Morkvas, a Ukrainian priest who leads the Volodymyr Le Grand church in Paris, reflected on his first visit to Notre Dame in over a decade. "I didn't recognize it," he said. "God is very powerful; He can change things." He expressed hope that the cathedral's revival could inspire peace in his homeland, drawing strength from the presence of Ukraine's president. "I think that will have a big impact," he said. "I hope Notre Dame and Mary will help us resolve this conflict."

The reopening of Notre Dame comes at a time of profound global unrest, with wars raging in Ukraine and the Middle East.

For Catholics, Notre Dame's rector said the cathedral "carries the enveloping presence of the Virgin Mary, a maternal and embracing presence."

"It is a magnificent symbol of unity," Olivier Ribadeau Dumas said. "Notre Dame is not just a French monument — it is a magnificent sign of hope."

The international range of dignitaries coming to Paris underline the cathedral's significance as a symbol of shared heritage and peace.

Canadian visitor Noelle Alexandria, who had traveled to Paris for the reopening, was struck by the cathedral's ability to inspire. "She's been nearly ruined before, but she always comes back," Alexandria said. "Not many of us could say the same after such tragedy, but Notre Dame can."

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Historical details enrich the occasion

Guests entered through Notre Dame's iconic western façade, whose arched portals adorned with biblical carvings were once a visual guide for medieval believers. Above the central Portal of the Last Judgment, the Archangel Michael is depicted weighing souls, as demons attempt to tip the scales. These stone figures, designed to inspire both awe and fear, set the stage for a ceremony steeped in history.

Inside, the hum of hundreds of guests awaiting the service filled the cathedral with human sounds once more — a stark contrast to the construction din that echoed there for years. Tuners restoring the great organ often worked through the night to find the silence needed to perfect its 7,952 pipes, ranging from pen-sized to torso-wide.

Notre Dame echoed to the sound of a sustained standing ovation after the showing of a short movie that documented the gargantuan rebuilding effort. Outside, the word "MERCY" — thank you — was projected against the cathedral's iconic western facade. The movie showed the terrible wounds left by the inferno — the gaping holes torn into its vaulted ceilings and the burned roof.

But that was followed by images of all types of artisans, many using traditional handicraft techniques, who collectively restored Notre Dame to look better now than ever. "We went from night to light," said one of the workers in the movie.

Security is tight for this global event

Security will be high through the weekend, echoing measures taken during the Paris Olympics earlier this year.

The Île de la Cité — the small island in the River Seine that is home to Notre Dame and the historic heart of Paris— is closed to tourists and non-residents. Police vans and barriers blocked cobblestoned streets in a large perimeter around the island, while soldiers in thick body armor and sniffer dogs patrolled embankments. A special security detail is following Trump.

Public viewing areas along the Seine's southern bank will accommodate 40,000 spectators, who can follow the celebrations on large screens.

For many, Notre Dame's rebirth is not just a French achievement but a global one — after the reopening, the cathedral is set to welcome 15 million visitors annually, up from 12 million before the fire.

## How 'Mufasa' rose with Aaron Pierre and Blue Ivy's voices along with new Lin-Manuel Miranda music

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

SAN DIEGO (AP) — When Aaron Pierre was cast as Mufasa, the weight of following in the late James Earl Jones' legendary footsteps was enough to rattle any actor. But instead of letting the pressure roar too loudly, he harnessed his nerves to breathe fresh life into his young lion character.

"I had a lot of nerves and I actually think those nerves served me because that is what the adolescent version of that lion is," Pierre said in an interview Friday at the San Diego Safari Park about his leading role in "Mufasa: The Lion King." He took the reins as the new voice of Mufasa after Jones played the iconic King Mufasa in both the 1994 and 2019 versions of Disney's "The Lion King."

Here are some details and insights about "Mufasa" ahead of its release in theaters on Dec. 20.

First, a tribute to James Earl Jones

Jones' voice isn't heard in the movie, but it opens with a brief tribute to the beloved actor, who died in September.

Pierre had hoped to meet Jones for the first time, but didn't get the chance. Now, he's determined to honor his idol by building on his character's legacy.

"I imagine that an individual experiencing those things might have moments of not being sure and I wasn't sure about myself," he said. "Aaron wasn't sure about Aaron going into this, I tried to channel those emotions as opposed to being something that prohibited me as something that propelled me forward. I gave it my best. I hope that I was able to serve James Earl Jones and honor James Earl Jones and the character."

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Mufasa's heart-wrenching origin story

The live-action prequel offers a fresh exploration into Mufasa's origin.

After the events in the 2019 film, Rafiki takes on the role of a storytelling sage, weaving the untold tale of Mufasa for Kiara — the spirited granddaughter of Mufasa and the daughter of Simba and Nala. The duo Timon and Pumbaa stick around for Rafiki's flashback.

Rafiki reveals that Mufasa's cubhood wasn't all royal ease and sunlit horizons. After a heart-wrenching tragedy of being separated from his parents, young Mufasa finds himself lost and alone.

"He's been separated from his family. He's an orphan. He's been ostracized, he's been dismissed. He's been degraded," said Pierre, the British actor who's starred in the "Genius: MLK/X" series and the Netflix action hit "Rebel Ridge."

Mufasa was a stray until fate led him to Taka, the compassionate heir of a different pride. Taka, with his fierce yet nurturing mother, offer the displaced cub a new beginning in their pride.

Over the years, Mufasa and Taka's bond grows from camaraderie to brotherhood. But their loyalty is put to the ultimate test during a journey that uncovers Mufasa's true origins and rightful kingdom as well as the reasons behind Taka becoming Scar.

"There was a bit of Taka resting on the privilege that he was supposed to be afforded," said Kelvin Harrison Jr., who plays Taka. He drew some inspiration from Jeremy Irons, who voiced the villainous Scar in the 1994 original.

"There's a little bit of 'Well, it seems like I need to command attention,'" continued Harrison, who starred in "The Trial of the Chicago 7" and "Waves." "It seems like the only way to win over a pride of anything is to assert dominance. That was Taka's version of that, which ended up being a staple as Scar."

Beyoncé's daughter Blue Ivy makes her feature film debut

Beyoncé might have a small role in "Mufasa," but her daughter Blue Ivy Carter is the family's shining star in the film.

The eldest daughter of Beyoncé and Jay-Z makes her feature film debut, lending her voice as Kiara, the daughter of Simba and Nala, who is portrayed by her superstar mother.

"She came into this prepared," said director Barry Jenkins, who heard Blue Ivy's narration on the audio book of Oscar winner Matthew Cherry's "Hair Love." He said the 12-year-old phenom displayed some skills that could not be ignored.

"She was the main character and this whole movie starts with just voices," Jenkins said. "They're doing almost like a radio play and hearing that quality in her voice, I thought, 'Oh, I think that's my character,'" he continued. "Then she auditioned and it was clear that she is my character."

While recording for Kiara's character, Jenkins said Blue Ivy, who won a Grammy for co-writing her mom's 2019 hit "Brown Skin Girl," was a pro.

"I don't know Blue Ivy's life, but I imagine she grows up a little bit different than everyone else," he said. "I think because of that she's grown up and so she had all these wells of understanding, experience, emotional knowledge that she brought to the character. She was awesome."

Jenkins likens the Kiara character to the many children who will see the movie. In the film, she eagerly listens to John Kani's Rafiki tell her grandfather's origin story while Timon (Billy Eichner) and Pumbaa (Seth Rogen) accompany them in a cave.

"They get to see themselves in that character and she's learning the story about Mufasa," Jenkins said. "She's learning how he went through the same trials and tribulations, the same growth as she is."

Blue Ivy did not record her vocals with the three cast members, but Rogen applauded her skills.

"She was great," he said. "I could have sworn we were in that cave with her."

Lin-Manuel Miranda's secret ingredient

When Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote new songs for the film, he often leaned on the famous Billie Jean King quote: "Pressure is a privilege."

Miranda was up for the challenge to leave his own imprint on the storied franchise much like his predecessors. He said there are seven new songs on the soundtrack, which will be released Dec. 13.

"I was emboldened by the fact that there's the '94 original which is like an immortal classic," said Miranda,



the "Hamilton" creator and Grammy, Emmy and Tony winner.

"But there's also the Broadway musical and there's also Beyoncé's album 'The Lion King: The Gift,' which I think expanded the musical vocabulary of what can be a 'Lion King' song. So I felt a lot of space to create because I felt like 'Lion King' is practically a genre of music and there was room to play and find new stuff within it."

Miranda said his "secret ingredient" was Lebo M, who's known for his opening vocals on the classic melody "Circle of Life." He said his lyrics were inspired by the script.

"His harmonies, the choral arrangements he created for the Broadway musical and for the show, I think were so important to the success of the music of these movies," Miranda said. "I think it was exciting for him to work on new songs."

## **Pope creates 21 cardinals, many of them reformers in their own right, to carry out his reform plans**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis on Saturday installed 21 new cardinals, many of whom are key figures in his reform agenda: A Dominican preacher who acted as the spiritual father for Francis' recent gathering of bishops, a Neapolitan "street priest" like himself, and a Peruvian bishop who has strongly backed his crackdown on abuse.

Francis' 10th consistory to create new princes of the church is also the biggest infusion of voting-age cardinals in his 11-year pontificate, further cementing his imprint on the group of men who will one day elect his successor. With Saturday's additions, Francis will have created 110 of the 140 cardinals under 80, thus eligible to vote in a conclave.

Francis appeared at the ceremony in the St. Peter's Basilica with a significant bruise on his chin, but presided over the ritual without apparent problems.

A Vatican spokesman said later Saturday that the bruise was caused by a contusion Friday morning, when Francis hit his nightstand with his chin. The pontiff, who turns 88 later this month, appeared slightly fatigued on Saturday but carried on as normal with the scheduled ceremony.

Francis has suffered several health problems in recent years and now uses a wheelchair due to knee and back pain. In 2017, while on a trip to Colombia, Francis sported a black eye after he hit his head on a support bar when his popemobile stopped suddenly.

His consistory brings the number of voting-age cardinals well over the 120-man limit set by St. John Paul II. But 13 existing cardinals will turn 80 next year, bringing the numbers back down.

This consistory is notable too because the 21 men being elevated aren't the same ones Francis named Oct. 6 when he announced an unusual December consistory.

One of Francis' original picks, Indonesian Bishop Paskalis Bruno Syukur, the bishop of Bogor, asked not to be made a cardinal "because of his desire to grow more in his life as a priest," the Vatican said. Francis quickly substituted him with the Naples archbishop, Domenico Battaglia, known for his pastoral work in the slums and rough parts of Naples.

Which country gets the most new cardinals?

Battaglia is one of five Italians getting the red hat, keeping the once-dominant Italian presence in the College of Cardinals strong. Turin is getting a cardinal in its archbishop, Roberto Repole, as is Rome: Baldassare Reina, who on the same day Francis announced he was becoming a cardinal also learned that Francis had promoted him to be his top administrator for the diocese of Rome.

Francis, who is technically bishop of Rome, has been conducting a years-long reorganization of the Rome diocese and its pontifical universities. Reina – who is also grand chancellor of the pre-eminent Pontifical Lateran University – will be expected to execute the reform.

Another Italian is the oldest cardinal: Angelo Acerbi, a 99-year-old retired Vatican diplomat. He is the only one among the 21 new cardinals to be older than 80 and thus ineligible to vote in a conclave. Francis'

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picks on Saturday also include the youngest cardinal: the 44-year-old head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Melbourne, Australia, Mykola Bychok.

"I think that there is a special sign which was made by the Pope to nominate me as the youngest cardinal in the world," Bychok said. "Ukraine has been fighting for three years, officially and maybe unofficially from 2014, after the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula and two regions, Donetsk and Lugansk. ... Maybe my weak voice will help to stop this war not only in Ukraine, but as well in other countries around the world."

Yet another Italian is one of two Vatican priests who do jobs in the Holy See that don't usually carry the red hat: Fabio Baggio is undersecretary in the Vatican development office. Francis also decided to make a cardinal out of George Jacob Koovakad, the priest who organizes the pope's foreign travels.

Other picks have high-profile roles in Francis' reforms.

The archbishop of Lima, Peru, Carlos Gustavo Castillo Mattasoglio, made headlines recently because of an extraordinary essay he penned for El Pais newspaper in which he called for the suppression of an influential Peruvian Catholic movement, the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, which also has a presence in the U.S.

Castillo called the group a "failed experiment" of the church in Latin America, one of several conservative, right-wing movements that cropped up in the 1970s and 1980s as a counterweight to the more left-leaning liberation theology.

"My hypothesis is that the Sodalitium obeys a political project," Castillo wrote. "It is the resurrection of fascism in Latin America, artfully using the church by means of sectarian methods."

Francis has recently expelled the Sodalitium's founder and several top members following a Vatican investigation.

What are the geographic breakdowns?

Castillo is one of five new Latin American cardinals named by history's first Latin American pope. They include the archbishop of Santiago del Estero, Argentina, Vicente Bokalic Igllic; the archbishop of Porto Alegre, Brazil, Jaime Spengler; the archbishop of Santiago, Chile, Fernando Natalio Chomali Garib and the archbishop of Guayaquil, Ecuador, Luis Gerardo Cabrera Herrera.

Francis has long sought to broaden the geographic diversity of the College of Cardinals to show the universality of the church, particularly where it is growing. Asia got two new cardinals: Tarcisio Isao Kikuchi, the archbishop of Tokyo; and Pablo Virgilio Sinogco David, the bishop of Kalookan, Philippines. Africa also got two new cardinals: the archbishop of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Ignace Bessi Dogbo, and the bishop of Algiers, Algeria, Jean-Paul Vesco.

"There hasn't been an African pope, but it's a possibility in the church," Dogbo said in an interview on the eve of his installation. "And I think that this eventuality — which is not necessarily a demand — if this eventuality were to arise, the universal church would have to be ready to take it on."

Francis also tapped the archbishop of Tehran, Iran, Dominique Joseph Mathieu, the bishop of Belgrade, Serbia, Ladislav Nemet, while the lone North American cardinal named is the archbishop of Toronto, Frank Leo.

The Lithuanian-born cardinal-elect, Rolandas Makrickas, has a special job in this pontificate: As the archpriest of the St. Mary Major basilica, he hosts Francis every time the pope returns from a foreign trip, since the pope likes to pray before an icon of the Madonna in the church. Additionally, Makrickas oversaw a recent financial reform of the basilica and would have been involved in identifying the future final resting place for Francis, since the Argentine pope has said he will be buried there.

The pope's preacher

Perhaps the most familiar new cardinal to anyone who has been following Francis' reform agenda is the Dominican Timothy Radcliff, the spiritual father of the just-concluded synod, or gathering of bishops. The years-long process aimed to make the church more inclusive and responsive to the needs of rank-and-file Catholics, especially women.

A British theologian, the white-robed Radcliffe often provided clarifying, if not humorous interventions during the weeks-long debate and retreats. At one point he set off a mini-firestorm by suggesting that external financial pressures influenced African bishops to reject Francis' permission to allow blessings for

gay couples. He later said he just meant that the African Catholic Church is under pressure from other well-financed faiths.

As the synod was winding down, he offered some valuable perspective.

"Often we can have no idea as to how God's providence is at work in our lives. We do what we believe to be right and the rest is in the hands of the Lord," he told the gathering. "This is just one synod. There will be others. We do not have to do everything, just try to take the next step."

## **An explosion destroys an apartment block in a Dutch city, killing at least 3 and injuring others**

By MOLLY QUELL Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — An explosion and fire rocked a neighborhood in the Dutch city of The Hague on Saturday, killing three people and injuring other people and destroying several apartments, according to authorities.

The cause of the disaster was unclear. Mayor Jan van Zanen said investigators were looking into "all possibilities." Police said they are looking for a car seen leaving the scene in case that helps with the investigation.

Van Zanen said three bodies were pulled from the rubble. Emergency authorities said four people were rescued and taken to the hospital. The mayor said rescuers were no longer looking for survivors but for eventual bodies, given that the "slim chance of survival" under what's left of the apartments. He could not specify how many people might still be unaccounted for.

Residents of the northeastern neighborhood of Mariahoeve in The Hague heard a huge bang and screams before dawn. One woman told local media that she thought an earthquake had happened.

Dutch authorities deployed a specialized urban search and rescue team to the scene, with four dogs trained to find victims. The team was previously used during the devastating earthquake in Turkey in 2023.

Soon after the explosion, a line of ambulances could be seen waiting nearby in anticipation of more victims. The spokesperson for the local hospital said that they were on standby to deal with injuries.

The mayor called it "an extremely heavy day."

"I had expected a different Saturday," van Zanen told a news conference.

Prime Minister Dick Schoof said in a statement he was shocked by the images of the disaster. "My thoughts go out to the victims, all other people involved and the emergency services who are now working on the scene," he said.

The Dutch royal family expressed similar sentiments. "Our thoughts are with those affected in The Hague after the explosion and fire this morning," including those "who are afraid of the fate of their loved ones," King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima said in a statement.

## **UnitedHealthcare CEO's shooting opens a door for many to vent frustrations over insurance**

By TOM MURPHY and DEVI SHASTRI AP Health Writers

For years, patients in the U.S. health care system have grown frustrated with a bureaucracy they don't understand.

Doctors are included in an insurer's network one year but not the next. Getting someone on the phone to help can be next to impossible. Coverage of care and prescriptions is often unceremoniously denied.

This week's fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson has unleashed a wave of public feeling — exasperation, anger, resentment, helplessness — from Americans sharing personal stories of interactions with insurance companies, often seen as faceless corporate giants.

In particular, the words written on ammunition found at the shooting scene — "delay," "deny" and "depose," echoing a phrase used to describe how insurers dodge claim payouts — amplified voices that have long been critical of the industry.

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"All of a sudden, I am fired up again," said Tim Anderson, describing how his wife, Mary, had to deal with UnitedHealthcare coverage denials before she died from Lou Gehrig's disease, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, in 2022.

Anderson said they couldn't get coverage for machines to help his wife breathe or talk — toward the end, she communicated by blinking when he showed her pictures. The family had to rely on donations from a local ALS group, he said.

"The business model for insurance is don't pay," said Anderson, 67, of Centerville, Ohio.

"When Mary could still talk, she said to me to keep fighting this," he added. "It needs to be exposed."

For Anderson and others, Thompson's death and the message left at the scene have created an opportunity to vent their frustrations. Conversations at dinner tables, office water coolers, social gatherings and on social media have pivoted to the topic, as police efforts to find the gunman keep the case in the news.

Hans Maristela said he understands why the chatter is bubbling up. The 54-year-old caregiver in California was moved to comment on Facebook about UnitedHealthcare's reputation of denying coverage. As a Catholic, he said, he grieves Thompson's death and feels for his family, especially with the holidays around the corner.

But he sees frustration with insurers even among his clients, most of them wealthy older people who've not been shielded from high out-of-pocket costs.

"And then you know the CEO of this company you pay a lot of money to gets \$10 million dollars a year, you won't have a lot of sympathy for the guy," Maristela said, citing Thompson's compensation package that included base pay and stock options. "Health care is a business, I understand, but the obsession with share price, with profit, has to be reevaluated."

University of Pennsylvania researcher Michael Anne Kyle said she's not surprised by the growth of conversation around insurers.

"People are often struggling with this by themselves, and when you see someone else talk about it, that may prompt you to join the conversation," she said.

Kyle studies how patients access care and said she's seen frustration with the system build for years. Costs are rising, and insurers are using more controls such as prior authorizations and doctor networks to manage them. Patients are often stuck in the middle of disputes between doctors and insurers.

"Patients are already spending a lot of money on health care, and then they're still facing problems with the service," she said.

Insurers often note that most of the money they bring in goes back out the door to pay claims, and that they try to corral soaring costs and the overuse of some care.

In Ohio, Anderson said his initial reaction to the CEO shooting was to question whether it was connected to a coverage denial, like the ones he'd experienced with his wife.

"I definitely do not condone killing people," he said. "But I read it and said, 'I wonder if somebody had a spouse whose coverage was denied.'"

It's something Will Flanary, a Portland-based ophthalmologist and comedian with a large social media following, saw online a lot in the shooting's immediate aftermath and found very telling.

"It's zero sympathy," he said. "And the lesson to take away from that is not, 'Let's shame people for celebrating a murder.' No, it's: 'Look at the amount of anger that people have toward this system that's taken advantage of people and do something to try to fix that.'"

Flanary's content, published under the name Dr. Glaucomflecken, started out as niche eye doctor jokes and a way to cope with his own experiences with two cancer diagnoses and a sudden cardiac arrest. But it has evolved, featuring character skits that call attention to and satirize the decisions of large health insurers, including UnitedHealthcare.

He said he's never seen conversations around health insurance policy take off the way they did this week — and he hopes these new voices can help bring about change.

"I'm always talking about how powerful social media can be with advocacy," he said, "because it really is the only way to put a significant amount of pressure on these corporations who are doing bad things for patients."

## The DNC chair candidates discuss Joe Biden, Kamala Harris and winning Latino voters

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (AP) — Four people are running to be the next Democratic National Committee chair, looking to take on the task of reinvigorating a party demoralized by a second loss to President-elect Donald Trump.

Others may still get into the race as the party reckons with the 2024 election, which saw Trump gain with nearly every demographic group in a decisive repudiation of the incumbent party. The committee's roughly 450 members will elect a successor for outgoing chairperson Jaime Harrison on Feb. 1.

The four declared candidates spoke to The Associated Press this week in Scottsdale, Arizona, where they were making their pitch in public and private at a meeting of state Democratic chairs. Here is a sampling of their responses.

Should Joe Biden have dropped out sooner?

The 82-year-old incumbent has been criticized for seeking reelection when many Americans were concerned about his age, and he has been accused of not giving Vice President Kamala Harris enough time to distinguish herself against Trump.

KEN MARTIN, Democratic chairman in Minnesota and DNC vice chair: "To me it's an academic exercise. You can't change the past. So for us, it's really about what lessons can we draw right now that can inform the future."

MARTIN O'MALLEY, former Maryland governor and Social Security administrator: "I don't know. You guys playing this D.C. parlor game on me, I'm not going to engage in that. Sorry."

JAMES SKOUFIS, New York state senator: "Yes. A 107-day runway made for an exceptionally difficult set of circumstances. And it was clear to most Democrats at the time that President Biden was not well-situated to run for reelection. And if dropping out sooner would have meant a primary, so be it. Vice President Harris, I'm very confident, still would have likely been the nominee if there was a primary. She would have been a stronger nominee with that longer runway."

BEN WIKLER, chair of the Wisconsin Democratic Party: "My campaign slogan is 'unite, fight, win.' And to me, uniting means a reckoning with how we can adapt to do better, but not recriminations about different things in the past. So my focus is on learning every lesson that we can apply in these next four years and beyond to build the new capacities that are going to allow us to win the lessons that were out of reach in 2024 and the last few years."

Did Kamala Harris spend too much time with Liz Cheney and courting Republican votes?

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and other progressives argued before and after Election Day that Harris should have focused more on working-class voters and less on Republicans and right-leaning voters disaffected with Trump.

MARTIN: "Were there things we can learn from the election? Sure. We're going to have to dig into all that. One thing I would say that's important is that we have to make sure that we are competing in all spaces and we're talking to all voters. And I'm not suggesting we spend a lot of time talking to Republican voters, don't get me wrong. But we need to make sure that we are reaching outside of just our comfort zone and our base and trying to really make a significant play for independent voters."

O'MALLEY: "I don't know. That's another parlor game thing and I'm not going to second-guess that. The only thing I know for sure, from all the people I've talked to now across the country, is that there's pretty widespread belief that Americans' primary concern in this election was economic anxieties about the future. Fear of the future. Fear that their own work wasn't sufficient to keep their head above water. And we failed to speak to their economic concerns."

SKOUFIS: "I believe it was absolutely the right thing to be spending time and hitting the stump with Liz Cheney and other Republicans, disaffected former Trump administration officials. That was absolutely the right thing to do. And similarly, we absolutely need to be doing more of rebuilding the fraying edges of our tent on the left. They're not mutually exclusive."

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WIKLER: "I live in a state where the suburban counties that Liz Cheney and Kamala Harris visited actually grew vote share for Democrats relative to 2020. Harris did better in the (suburban Milwaukee) counties than Biden had in the 2020 election. And I think there were some voters who are traditionally Republican who are making up their mind in the last second who saw that Republicans like them could vote for a Democrat this year. At the same time, there's a ton of working-class folks who didn't hear our message and who we need to find more ways to reach, that often won't rely on being familiar with political figures that play a big role in cable news but aren't present in people's lives. And figuring out how to reach those folks, I think, is the next big challenge that we need to build on."

How do Democrats do better with Latino voters, particularly Latino men?

While Harris won Latino voters overall, Trump made major inroads with Hispanic voters, especially men, according to AP VoteCast data.

MARTIN: "Every hot take right now that we see is completely garbage. It's just hogwash because it's not based in any research. We don't know how much ad spend was spent targeting the Latino man. We don't know what the outreach and field programs were. We don't know what universes we targeted and how we were talking to the Latino community. What were the treatments to those universes? All of those pieces, right? Which organizations were tasked with mobilizing and turning out the Latino community, particularly Latino men? All of that has to be on the table to really figure out, what did we do, where were the gaps, how did we fall down? And then you can apply the prescription."

O'MALLEY: "I may sound like a broken record, but I really do believe it is the economic issues. It is the union jobs, living wages, opportunity for all ... . Too many people heard 'defending America, defending democracy,' and they thought this meant defending the status quo."

SKOUFIS: "I think it's showing up. We have to stop speaking in overly academic terms. Sometimes young voters in particular look at us and they think that we ought to be better running for chancellor of a small liberal arts college rather than public office."

WIKLER: "Most Latino voters, most Black voters, most white voters are working-class folks who have many issues that they care about. But all those issues take a back seat to the core question of whether you can keep a roof over your head and food on your table and make sure your kids have clothes to wear to school. The thing that Democrats have the chance to do is ... to show that we're on the side of those working folks."

Would you support restoring Iowa and New Hampshire as the first states in 2028?

The DNC at Biden's behest made South Carolina the first primary state this year, angering New Hampshire Democrats who went ahead with their primary anyway.

MARTIN: "What I think is important is to make sure that that process is open and transparent, that all states who want to have an opportunity to be considered and that ultimately the end product, whatever calendar we come up with, not only reflects the great diversity of this country and honors some of the traditions of our Democratic Party, but is also, most importantly, putting us in a position to win by having a rigorous and efficient process that battle tests our nominee."

O'MALLEY: "That will be a decision for the DNC to make in an open and transparent process. Period."

SKOUFIS: "I'm willing to bet I'm the only DNC chair candidate that will give you a straightforward answer on this one. Whether people like the change or not, South Carolina was moved to pole position in the presidential nominating contests. I believe they deserve to have at least a first crack at a competitive primary. Dean Phillips versus Joe Biden was not a serious primary. And so I think they deserve to have a chance at a serious open primary, which will certainly happen in 2028. And then only after then we can evaluate how it went and whether we should reevaluate the order."

WIKLER: "My view is that the nominating calendar should serve the goal of finding the nominee who's going to win the general election. And we do that through a process that honors our coalition, that honors our traditions, and gives every candidate a fighting chance to be heard and make their case to become the next nominee."

## Days after gunman killed UnitedHealthcare's CEO, police push to ID him and FBI offers reward

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The gunman who killed the CEO of the largest U.S. health insurer likely left New York City on a bus soon after the brazen ambush that has shaken corporate America, police officials said. But he left something behind: a backpack that was discovered in Central Park.

Nearly four days after the shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, police still did not know the gunman's name or whereabouts or have a motive for the killing. Investigators were looking at whether the shooter may have been a disgruntled employee or client of the insurer, Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny told reporters.

The FBI announced Friday night it was offering a \$50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction.

Video of the gunman fleeing Wednesday's shooting showed him riding a bicycle into Central Park and later taking a taxi to a bus terminal that offers commuter service to New Jersey and Greyhound routes to Philadelphia, Boston and Washington, D.C, according to Kenny.

Police have video of the man entering the bus station but no video of him exiting, leading them to believe he left the city, Kenny said.

Investigators on Friday found a backpack in the park that had been worn by the gunman during the shooting, police said, following a massive sweep to find it in a vast area with lakes and ponds, meadows, playgrounds and woods.

Police didn't immediately reveal what, if anything, it contained but said it would be analyzed for clues.

The gunman made sure to conceal his identity with a mask during almost all of his time in the city, including during the attack and while he ate, yet left a trail of evidence in view of the nation's biggest city and its network of security cameras.

The gunman arrived in New York City on Nov. 24 and shot Thompson 10 days later outside his company's annual investor conference at a hotel just blocks from Radio City Music Hall and Rockefeller Center.

The gunman got off a bus that originated in Atlanta and made several stops along the way, Kenny said. Police have not determined where he got on the bus. Investigators have a list of passengers, but none of them would have had to provide an ID when they climbed aboard, Kenny said.

Investigators believe the suspect used a fake identification card and paid cash, Kenny said, when he checked in at the hostel, which has a café along with shared and private rooms and is blocks from Columbia University.

Investigators have tested a discarded water bottle and protein bar wrapper in a hunt for his DNA. They also were trying to obtain additional information from a cellphone found along the gunman's escape route.

Photos of the suspected shooter that were taken in the lobby of a hostel on Manhattan's Upper West Side appear to be from the only time he removed his mask, Kenny said. The images, showing a man smiling in the lobby of the HI New York City hostel. They are among a collection of photos and video circulated since the shooting — including footage of the attack, as well as images of the suspected gunman at a Starbucks beforehand.

"From every indication we have from witnesses, from the Starbucks, from the hostel, he kept his mask on at all times except for the one instance where we have him photographed with the mask off," Kenny said.

His roommates at the hostel also said he didn't speak to them. Nothing of investigative value was found in a search of the suspected shooter's hotel room.

Asked how close he felt police were to making an arrest, Kenny said, "This isn't 'Blue Bloods.' We're not going to solve this in 60 minutes. We're painstakingly going through every bit of evidence that we can come across. Eventually, when an apprehension is made, we will have to present all of these facts to a judge and jury, so we're taking our time, doing it right and making sure we're going to get justice for this victim and closure for his family."

Security video of the shooting shows the killer approaching Thompson from behind, firing several shots

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with a gun equipped with a silencer, barely pausing to clear a jam while the executive fell to the sidewalk. Police were looking into the possibility that the weapon was a veterinary pistol, which is a weapon commonly used on farms and ranches if an animal has to be euthanized quietly, Kenny said — though he stressed that hadn't been confirmed.

The words "delay," "deny" and "depose" were scrawled on the ammunition, one word on each of three bullets, Kenny said. A law enforcement official previously told The Associated Press the words were "deny," "defend" and "depose." The messages mirror the phrase "delay, deny, defend," which is commonly used by lawyers and critics about insurers that delay payments, deny claims and defend their actions.

Thompson, a father of two sons who lived in a Minneapolis suburb, had been with Minnesota-based UnitedHealthcare since 2004 and served as CEO for more than three years.

The insurer's parent company, UnitedHealth Group Inc., was holding its annual meeting in New York for investors. The company abruptly ended the conference after Thompson's death.

UnitedHealth Group said it was focused on supporting Thompson's family, ensuring the safety of employees and assisting investigators. "While our hearts are broken, we have been touched by the huge outpouring," the company said.

UnitedHealthcare provides coverage for more than 49 million Americans. It manages health insurance coverage for employers and state and federally funded Medicaid programs.

In October, UnitedHealthcare was named along with Humana and CVS in a Senate report detailing how its denial rate for prior authorizations for some Medicare Advantage patients has surged in recent years.

The shooting has rocked the health insurance industry in particular, causing companies to reevaluate security plans and delete photos of executives from their websites. A different Minnesota-based health care company said Friday it was temporarily closing its offices out of an abundance of caution, telling employees to work from home.

## Today in History: December 8, U.S. enters World War II

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Sunday, Dec. 8, the 343rd day of 2024. There are 23 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 8, 1941, the United States entered World War II as Congress declared war against Imperial Japan a day after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Also on this date:

In 1980, rock star and former Beatle John Lennon was shot to death outside his New York City apartment building by Mark David Chapman.

In 1987, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev signed a treaty at the White House calling for the destruction of intermediate-range missiles.

In 2012, Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel became the first freshman to win the Heisman Trophy.

In 2014, the U.S. and NATO ceremonially ended their combat mission in Afghanistan, 13 years after the Sept. 11 terror attacks sparked their invasion of the country to topple the Taliban-led government.

In 2016, John Glenn, whose 1962 flight as the first U.S. astronaut to orbit the Earth made him an all-American hero and propelled him to a long career in the U.S. Senate, died in Columbus, Ohio, at age 95.

In 2017, Japanese pitching and hitting star Shohei Ohtani announced that he would sign with the Los Angeles Angels.

In 2022, Russia freed WNBA star Brittney Griner in a high-profile prisoner exchange with the U.S., which released Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout.

Today's Birthdays: Flutist James Galway is 85. Author Bill Bryson is 73. Actor Kim Basinger (BAY'-sing-ur) is 71. Actor Wendell Pierce is 62. Actor Teri Hatcher is 60. Basketball Hall of Famer Teresa Weatherspoon is 59. Baseball Hall of Famer Mike Mussina is 56. Actor Dominic Monaghan is 48. Singer Nicki Minaj is 42. Country singer Sam Hunt is 40. Actor AnnaSophia Robb is 31.