

# Groton Daily Independent

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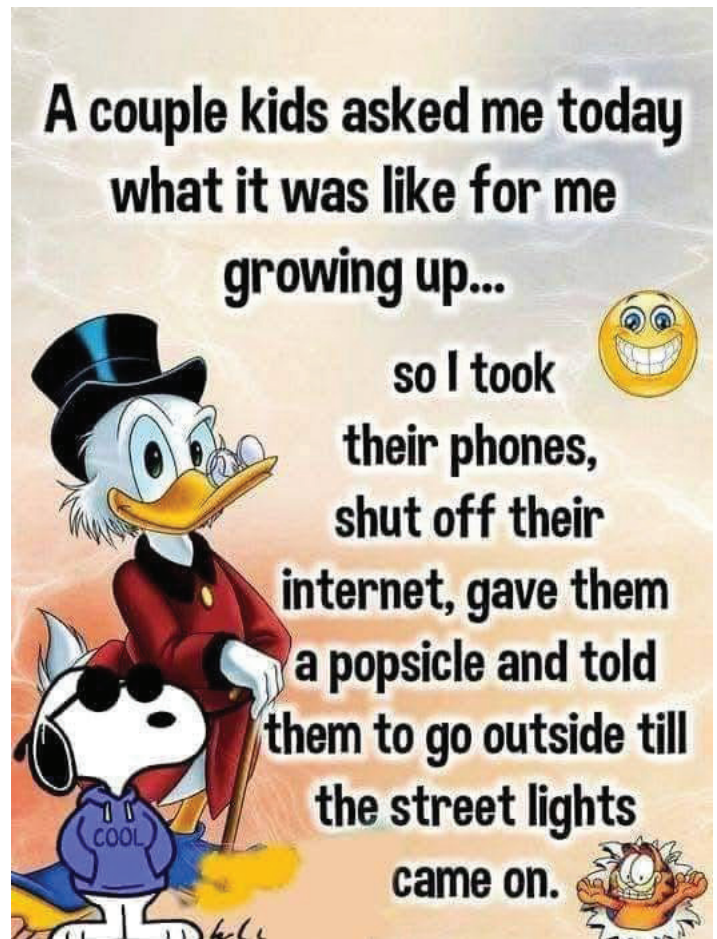
## Monday, Dec. 9

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

## Tuesday, Dec. 10

Senior Menu: Baked fish, au gratin, winter blend, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.  
School Lunch: Waffles.  
School Breakfast: Chicken strips, waffle fries.

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



Emmanuel Lutheran: Church Council, 6 p.m.  
JH Boys Wrestling at Pierre, 4 p.m.  
Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.  
Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center  
Groton United Methodist: Bible Study with Pastor Rob, 10 a.m.

## Wednesday, Dec. 11

Senior Menu: Ham and raisin sauce, baked sweet potato, cheesy green beans, Jell-O cake, dinner roll.  
School Breakfast: Muffins.  
School Lunch: Cheese quesadilla, refried beans.  
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; DFC Youth supper, 6 p.m.; Advent Service, 7 p.m.  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Caroling, 6 p.m.  
Groton United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

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# 1440

**Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.**

## Syrian Government Falls

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad resigned and fled the country yesterday to Russia, ending the Assad regime's 50 years in power.

The announcement came a little over one week after rebels captured the country's commercial capital of Aleppo in a days-long assault. They then captured the cities of Hama and Homs before taking control of the capital, Damascus, yesterday. The stunning offensive ended four years of a relatively quiet ceasefire and 13 years of civil war, in which an estimated 500,000 Syrians have been killed.

The rebels are led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, whose leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani established the group as an al-Qaida affiliate in 2012 under a different name. In 2016, the group severed ties with al-Qaida, rebranded, and sought to work closely alongside other rebel groups; it remains designated a terrorist organization by the US and UN.

Yesterday, Golani spoke from the historic Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. He declared victory and suggested the current prime minister would stay on until a transition of power is complete.

## Sycamore Gap Tree Trial

Two men are headed to trial today for allegedly cutting down Britain's famous Sycamore Gap tree last year. The 150-year-old tree stood symmetrically in a dip between two hills in northern England and was a major tourist attraction.

The tree stood alongside a portion of Hadrian's Wall, a 73-mile stone barrier built by Roman Emperor Hadrian in 122 CE to protect the empire's northwest frontier. The accompanying tree was planted in the late 1800s by landowner John Clayton. Since then, its placement between two Northumberland hills has made it a destination for marriage proposals and other life events. It was featured in the 1991 film "Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves" starring Kevin Costner and Morgan Freeman.

The tree—valued at roughly \$800K—was cut down in September 2023; a motive has not been publicly disclosed. Saplings have since reappeared, indicating the tree may regenerate itself.

## College Football Playoffs

The field for the inaugural 12-team college football playoff was revealed yesterday, with Big Ten champion Oregon capturing the top seed. The Ducks are followed by No. 2 Georgia, No. 3 Boise State, and No. 4 Arizona State, with each of the top four receiving a first-round bye.

Under the new system, the opening round will have the higher-seeded teams host games on campus: No. 5 Texas will host No. 12 Clemson; No. 6 Penn State will welcome No. 11 SMU; No. 7 Notre Dame faces No. 10 Indiana; and No. 8 Ohio State will take on No. 9 Tennessee. The biggest debate of selection day was SMU, which lost the ACC championship on a last-second field goal, nudging out Alabama.

A significant amount of money is at stake. Roughly \$115M will be distributed across the conferences based on which teams advance.

The first round will be held Friday, Dec. 20, and Saturday, Dec. 21.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Los Angeles Galaxy top New York Red Bulls 2-1 to win a record 6th MLS Cup.

Inter Miami star Lionel Messi named 2024 MLS MVP.

Taylor Swift ends "Eras" tour with final performance in Vancouver, Canada.

The \$2.2B tour was the highest-grossing of all time.

"Moana 2" tops \$600M at global box office, surpassing original film's total haul in 10 days.

Steve Mensch, president of Tyler Perry Studios, dies at 62 in plane crash.

The 2024 Kennedy Center Honors recognizes the Grateful Dead, director Francis Ford Coppola, jazz musician Arturo Sandoval, singer-songwriter Bonnie Raitt, and New York City's Apollo Theater with artistic lifetime achievement awards.

## Science & Technology

New AI-powered brain scans found to be twice as effective as doctors at pinpointing when strokes occurred in patients, providing assessments on how much damage is reversible.

Scientists reveal chemistry in tick saliva enabling insects to form a cement cone around their bite; the process allows them to bind to hosts for days.

Engineers develop biodegradable alternative to microbeads—tiny plastic pellets that pose significant environmental and health risks—used in consumer health and beauty products.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed Friday (S&P 500 +0.3%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq +0.8%) after November jobs report beat expectations, unemployment rate rose slightly.

Google sues to prevent the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau from supervising Google Payment Corp. like a bank; CFPB says Google failed to investigate fraud in its peer-to-peer Google Pay app, meant to rival Venmo.

President-elect Donald Trump names former PayPal Chief Operating Officer David Sacks as artificial intelligence and cryptocurrency advisor.

## Politics & World Affairs

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol survives impeachment vote Saturday amid boycott from members of his conservative party; opposition party can reintroduce motion to impeach Wednesday.

Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris holds its first mass in five years following 2019 fire and subsequent \$1B restoration.

Ghana ousts ruling party, reelects former President John Mahama; election comes amid cost-of-living crisis following 2022 default on \$30B in sovereign debt.



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- Cast aluminum auger gear box w/ 5-year limited warranty\*\*

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\* 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.

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## You have to start some time! Why not **now!**

5 months to get your through the winter!

Student: \$175.75, Single: \$202.40, Couple: \$298.90,  
Family: \$362.15

This will get you into the gym through the end of May!



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Physical Therapy  
\$20 per month

Annual Memberships:

Student: \$255.60

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Family: \$702.26



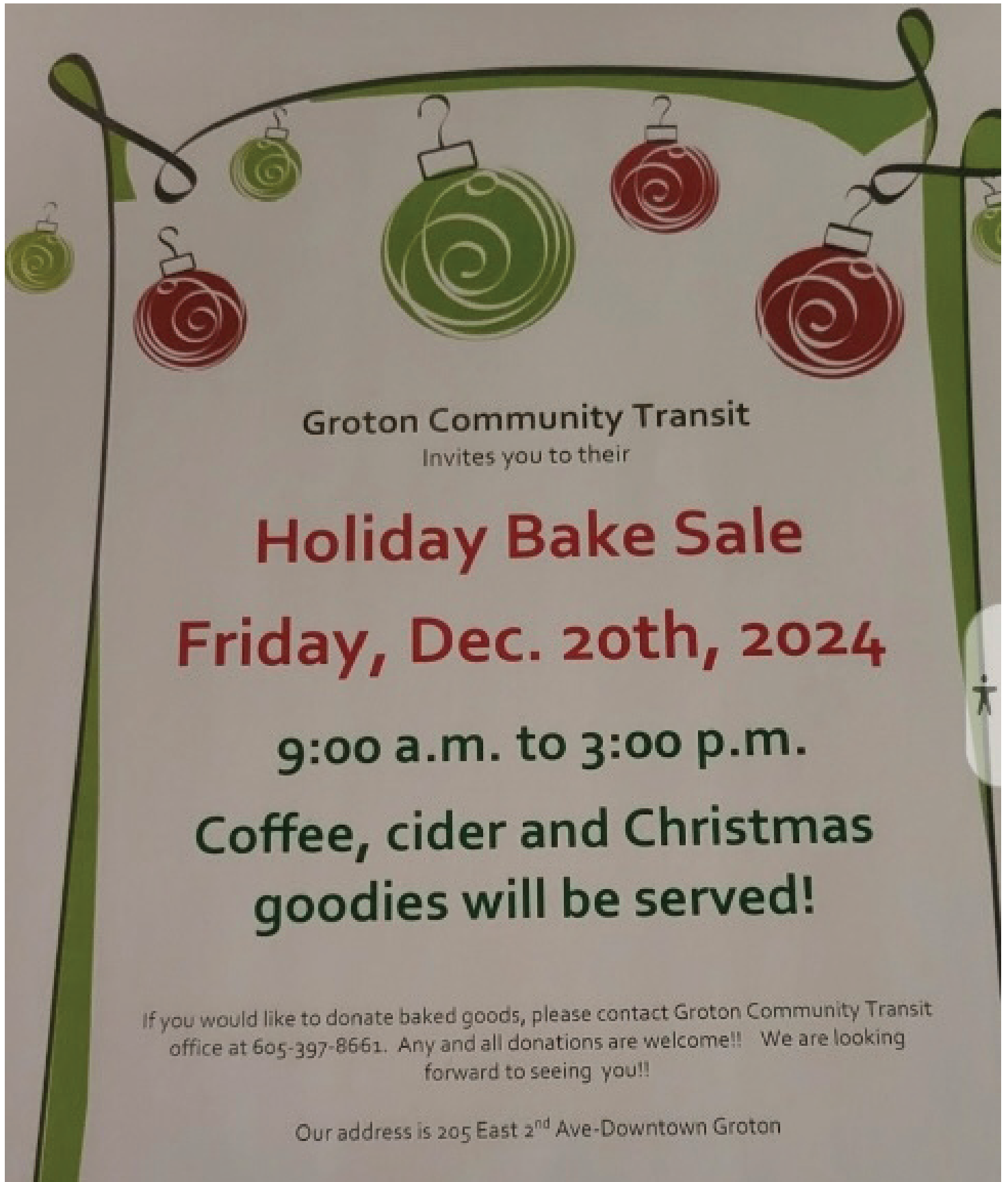
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Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

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**Living Heart Fitness Center**



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



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## Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

This game had all the makings of a trap game. Kirk Cousins was coming back to Minnesota, where he spent the past six seasons. The Falcons had lost their last three games, and they needed a win to stay in playoff contention. The Vikings, meanwhile, had won their last five games and already had double-digit wins in a season most "experts" said would be a down year for the purple and gold. Instead, the Vikings played perhaps the best game of their season and ran away with a 42-21 win, their first time scoring more than 40 points in five years.

The Falcons couldn't have written a better start to the game. They got the opening kickoff and went 70 yards on 11 plays to take a 7-0 lead, then forced the Vikings to punt, giving them the ball back with a chance to take a big early lead. The Falcons were moving the ball well again, but the Vikings' defense stiffened up and got the ball back for the offense after a failed fourth-down attempt by Atlanta. Two plays later, Sam Darnold hit Jordan Addison for a 49-yard touchdown, tying the game 7-7 to close out the first quarter.

Three plays into the second quarter Josh Metellus picked off an errant Kirk Cousins pass, but the Vikings' offense couldn't do anything with the sudden change of possession and went three-and-out. The Falcons ran eight plays on their next drive but only managed 27 yards before punting. Starting from the 20-yard line, the Vikings went 80 yards on nine plays, culminating in a TD catch for Justin Jefferson and giving the Vikings a 14-7 lead. With two minutes left in the half, Cousins and the Falcons' offense quickly marched down the field and kicked a field goal, cutting their deficit to four points going into halftime.

The Vikings got the ball to begin the second half, but Will Reichard (who is back from injury) missed a field goal. The Falcons also kicked a field goal on their first possession of the second half, but they made theirs, closing the gap 13-14. With the Falcons closing in, the Vikings wasted no time, and four plays later Darnold connected with Jefferson for a 52-yard touchdown, extending the lead to eight points. The Falcons, not wanting to be outdone, had a five-play, 70-yard TD drive – and they converted the two-point attempt, tying the game 21-21 entering the fourth quarter.

If you are anything like me, you were nervous entering the final 15 minutes. But the Vikings, in rare form, put the pedal to the metal and completely dominated the Falcons to close out the game. Darnold hit Addison for an 11-yard score, then the Falcons fumbled the ensuing kickoff, which led to ANOTHER Darnold to Addison TD connection, giving the Vikings a two-score lead. Cousins tried to lead a comeback, but Byron Murphy had a beautiful interception, giving the Vikings' offense the ball back at their two-yard-line. Seven plays and 98 yards later, Aaron Jones put the nail in the coffin with a 15-yard TD run, giving us the final score of 42-21.

Sam Darnold completed 22 of 28 passes for 347 yards and five(!) touchdowns with no interceptions. His yards, TDs, and passer rating (157.9) are all career highs. This was the first five-passing TDs game for the Vikings since Daunte Culpepper in 2004 and only the seventh time in team history. It's safe to say Darnold is balling out this year.

Jordan Addison (eight catches for 133 yards and three touchdowns) and Justin Jefferson (seven catches for 132 yards and two touchdowns) had monster games. The Vikings have had some great WR duos in team history, like Cris Carter / Randy Moss, and Adam Thielen / Stefon Diggs, but this is the first time in team history that two Vikings receivers each had over 100 yards and at least two TDs. Jefferson also went over 7,000 career yards this game, making him the first player in NFL history to hit that mark before their 26th birthday.

Defensively, the Vikings only had one sack on the day (Jamin Davis, who was recently signed off the Packers' practice squad). However, the team did have two interceptions (Josh Metellus and Byron Murphy). Murphy's six interceptions this season is the most by a Vikings player since Jimmy Hitchcock had seven in 1998.

Looking ahead, the Vikings play on Monday night (12/16) at home against the Bears. This is a divisional matchup for the second time in the past four weeks, so anything can happen. The Vikings need this win to keep pace with the Detroit Lions (12-1) in the NFC North race and to keep the Packers (9-4) at bay. Skoll!



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MEMBER FDIC

## Roberts County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash  
Where: Interstate 29, mile marker 233, one mile north of Sisseton, SD  
When: 3:26 p.m., December 7, 2024

Driver 1: 41-year-old male from Bristol, SD, fatal injuries  
Vehicle 1: 2017 Ford F250 Super Duty  
Seat belt Used: No

Roberts County, S.D.- A Bristol, SD man received fatal injuries in a single vehicle crash Saturday afternoon near Sisseton, SD.

The name of the person involved has not been released pending notification of family members.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2017 Ford F250 pickup was traveling southbound on Interstate 29 near mile marker 233 when his vehicle entered the west ditch, struck a fence and billboard post and rolled. The driver sustained fatal injuries from the crash.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

## Name Released in Hutchinson County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash  
Where: 28594 432nd Avenue, one mile east of Menno, SD  
When: 9:40 p.m., December 04, 2024

Driver 1: Adam Van Hove, 49-year-old male from Freeman, SD, fatal injuries  
Vehicle 1: 2004 Cadillac Escalade  
Seat belt Used: No

Hutchinson County, S.D.- A 49-year-old Freeman, SD man died Wednesday night in a single vehicle crash near Menno, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Adam Van Hove, the driver of a 2004 Cadillac Escalade, was traveling east on US Highway 18. The vehicle went off the road into the north ditch, through a field, and then eventually collided with a tree. Van Hove was pronounced deceased at the scene.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

## “Anatomical Variations: Connecting Research & Patient Care”

The human body is composed of a typical pattern of anatomy, yet every structure varies in form from person to person. For example, humans develop with a standard set of defined muscles, yet the shape and mass of each muscle varies significantly among individuals. Sometimes, “anatomical variations” develop – that is, anatomical structures that do not conform to the typical range of regular morphology (for example, an entirely separate “extra” muscle that develops in one person).

Human anatomy is so intricate that the prevalence of an anatomical variation is thought to be certain in every individual; in this regard, what makes each of us unique is the very thing we have in common. Certain variations can elicit complex symptoms, muddle diagnoses, and complicate treatments. Fortunately, though, most anatomical variations are asymptomatic and pose little to no clinical concern. Sometimes variations can even be beneficial; for example, an accessory muscle-tendon unit can be useful autograft material in musculoskeletal reconstruction surgeries.

Anatomical variations are challenging to study because they are often found incidentally. In surgery, clinicians operate in a limited window of visibility in order to complete procedures with minimal incisions. When surgeons find an unexpected variation in their operating window, they often only see part of it and are not able to expose the entire structure. Anatomists, however, dissect the entire body (as an embalmed cadaver) and expose variations in full detail. Cadaveric case analyses of anatomical variations provide clinicians with insights for adjusting protocols to suit variations during surgery and in noninvasive treatment plans, and they help anatomists teach clinically significant variations to students learning human anatomy.

Strategic anatomist-clinician collaborations foster the mutual exchange of expert-level skills to promote the highest-quality medical education and patient care, particularly involving anatomical variations. These collaborative relationships form the fundamental underpinning of evidenced-based medicine and embrace the “bench-to-bedside” model for making translational research influential to patient care.

Modern technology has improved the study of anatomical variations. Many anatomical case analyses now involve radiologic imaging, histopathology, digital modeling, and other contemporary techniques, making them more relevant to clinicians and patient care. In the fast-paced disciplines of education and medicine, innovations such as virtual reality (VR) are being used to advance anatomy education and improve patient care. While defined variations and clinical conditions can be simulated by technology and offer many impactful benefits, tech-based programs are currently unable to generate accurate models of potential anatomical variations.

For the nearly 2500 years, human cadavers from whole body donors have served instrumental roles in establishing anatomical knowledge, including what is known about anatomical variations. Human cadavers are unparalleled for tactile feedback, unscripted anatomical variations, and clinical associations. They also convey more than anatomy; they are considered by most students as their first patients and teach students about clinical anatomy, variation, disease, ethics, humanity, respect, and many other important values. Educators, clinicians, and students remain extremely grateful to whole body donors for their selfless contributions to advancing medical education, knowledge, practice, and patient care – particularly as related to anatomical variations.

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Ethan Snow, PhD is an Anatomist and currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Innovation in Anatomy at South Dakota State University in Brookings, South Dakota. Follow The Prairie Doc® at [www.prairiedoc.org](http://www.prairiedoc.org), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Threads. Prairie Doc Programming includes On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show (most Thursdays at 7pm on SDPB or streaming on Facebook), 2 podcasts, and a Radio program (on SDPB), providing health information based on science, built on trust.



Ethan Snow, PhD

## EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: Is it true that glass recycling isn't worthwhile and that some municipalities are stopping doing it?  
-- R. Bigelow, Houston, TX

Glass recycling has long been touted as a sustainable way to reduce waste and conserve resources. But in recent years—while glass remains theoretically recyclable and environmentally friendly—a growing number of municipalities have been discontinuing glass recycling, citing various challenges.

The high cost of transporting and processing heavy and fragile glass is one such challenge. Recyclers complain that the expense of managing glass outweighs the potential profits. Also, the market for recycled glass has declined due to the availability of cheap virgin materials, as reported by the American Chemical Society (ACS). Tacoma, Washington, is one city that suspended glass recycling due to its costs.

Glass recycling also faces significant challenges due to contamination. When glass is mixed with other recyclables in single-stream systems, shards can contaminate paper and plastics, rendering entire batches unrecyclable. And sorting and separating different types of glass—such as colored and clear—adds to the complexity and cost of the process.

Glass recycling does save energy and reduces landfill waste. Producing glass from recycled materials consumes significantly less energy than doing it from raw materials. Furthermore, recycling reduces the need for extracting raw materials like sand, which has its own environmental footprint.

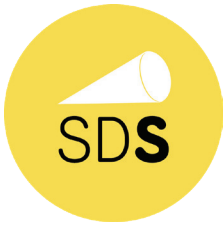
When recycling programs are halted, glass waste often ends up in landfills, where it can take hundreds of years to decompose. This not only increases environmental pollution but also undermines public confidence in the broader recycling system. To address these challenges, investment in better recycling infrastructure is needed. Technologies that can separate and process glass more effectively can make recycling programs more viable. Additionally, expanding bottle redemption programs could incentivize consumers to recycle glass responsibly.

Government incentives could encourage manufacturers to incorporate more recycled glass into their production processes, creating a sustainable market for these materials. Collaboration between public and private sectors can also help reduce costs and increase the economic feasibility of glass recycling.

The environmental benefits of glass recycling make it worth preserving. Improved infrastructure, market reforms, and responsible recycling practices can work together to make it a viable solution once again.



**Critics point out that glass recycling is often a money-loser for the cities and towns that end up underwriting it.** Credit: Pexels.com.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### COMMENTARY

## Trump demands are a test of courage for Thune and other senators by Marc Johnson

The United States Senate is arguably the least democratic (small “d”) institution in any democracy in the world, with the possible exception of the British House of Lords.

The Senate exists without proportional representation. Every state has two senators without regard to population. Wyoming’s two senators represent 586,000 citizens, while California’s 39 million citizens are represented by two senators.

The Senate has quirky rules: unlimited debate (the filibuster); much happens by unanimous consent (or doesn’t happen when one senator objects); seniority rules meaning a cranky old senator like Chuck Grassley of Iowa, age 91, will soon again chair the powerful Judiciary Committee. Grassley has been a senator since 1981, meaning the youngest senator, Jon Ossoff of Georgia, wasn’t alive when Grassley took office.

The Senate has six-year terms, a function of the Founders’ unfortunately naive belief that a longer term of office insulates senators from the worst of grubby political pressures.

The Senate has extraordinary powers, again thanks to the original thinkers who came up with the idea of an institution to balance the rambunctious House of Representatives. Senators have the constitutional duty to “advise and consent” – or not consent – on presidential appointments to the Cabinet and judiciary. The Senate, by super majority vote, can ratify treaties. The Senate judges, when it cares to, the impeachment of high governmental officials. The Senate traditionally has had a major voice in foreign policy. And the Senate, when it cares to, has the power to investigate. Google Watergate, the CIA, Teapot Dome or even the sinking of the Titanic to see what the Senate has historically done to expose and inform.

Now, as the Founders would certainly have appreciated, the Senate faces an enormous historical test – a power-hungry president committed to vastly enlarging executive power at the expense of the legislative branch. Donald Trump has signaled that he expects a GOP Congress will do his bidding no questions asked. Questions must be asked.

The widely floated idea that the Senate should allow “recess” appointments to critical executive branch



**Majority Leader-elect John Thune, R-South Dakota, speaks to reporters following the weekly Senate Republican policy luncheon at the U.S. Capitol on Nov. 19, 2024, in Washington, D.C.** (Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

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jobs should be dead on arrival, but incoming Majority Leader John Thune of South Dakota hasn't ruled out the Senate rolling over for Trump.

"I think that all options are on the table, including recess appointments," Thune said recently while disingenuously suggesting that Republicans might need to forgo advising and consenting because Democrats might not "play ball." But caving on the constitutional demand for Senate concurrence in major appointments isn't about Democrats. It's about Trump.

Still, there are modestly hopeful signs that at least some Republicans won't diminish their own and the Senate's power by simply giving a grasping president who he wants in his Cabinet – an accused sex abuser, vaccine denier or Russian stooge just to flag three of the worst of the nominees.

Idaho's James Risch, easily one of the most partisan Republicans in the Senate who spent the first Trump term defending the administration's feckless foreign policy, has – so far at least – refused to commit to supporting some of Trump's craziest nominees, a group properly termed by commentator Charlie Sykes as a "cabinet of zealots, toadies, and cretins."

"Ask me this question again after the hearings," Risch said regarding support for the inconceivable nominations of a Fox New host, Pete Hegseth, to be secretary of Defense and a Putin apologist, Tulsi Gabbard, to head the national intelligence agencies. "These appointments by the president are constrained by the advice and consent of the Senate," Risch said. And demonstrating that he recalls his oath of office, Risch added, "The Senate takes that seriously, and we vet these."

Despite his earlier comments Thune has shown a hint of backbone, telling a home state audience recently, "Every president is going to come in and try to do as much as they can by executive action ... Congress, in some cases, is going to be the entity that sometimes will have to put the brakes on."

Trump's return to the White House will test, sooner than later, whether the Senate has the ability – meaning individual senators possess the courage – to use its substantial power to constrain Trump's most dangerous inclinations, including appointing a gang of woefully compromised incompetents.

Congress also, of course, has the power of the purse and should scotch any Trumpy plan to illegally "impound" dollars appropriated by the legislative branch. Expect Trump to push this issue to the limit. Hope for the sake of the Constitution that Thune and fellow senators resist more effectively than they did when during his first administration Trump diverted military funding to his border wall, a project you may recall that Mexico was never going to pay for.

Republican senators know, certainly better than most of their voters, that Trump cares nothing about the nuts and bolts of the federal government. More than any man who has held the office Trump is an agent of chaos, destruction and revenge.

But the Senate was designed to obstruct and delay would-be tyrants just as it was designed to give small states like Idaho and South Dakota outsized influence in the business of the federal government.

Mike Mansfield, the great Montanan who led the Senate for 16 years, spent his tenure gently persuading fellow senators to behave as national legislators and not merely as partisan representatives of individual states. Mansfield's perspective has never been more important.

"In the end, it is not the Senators as individuals who are of fundamental importance," Mansfield said in 1963. "In the end, it is the institution of the Senate. It is the Senate itself as one of the foundations of the Constitution. It is the Senate as one of the rocks of the Republic."

The rock of the Republic must be solid if the Constitution is to hold.

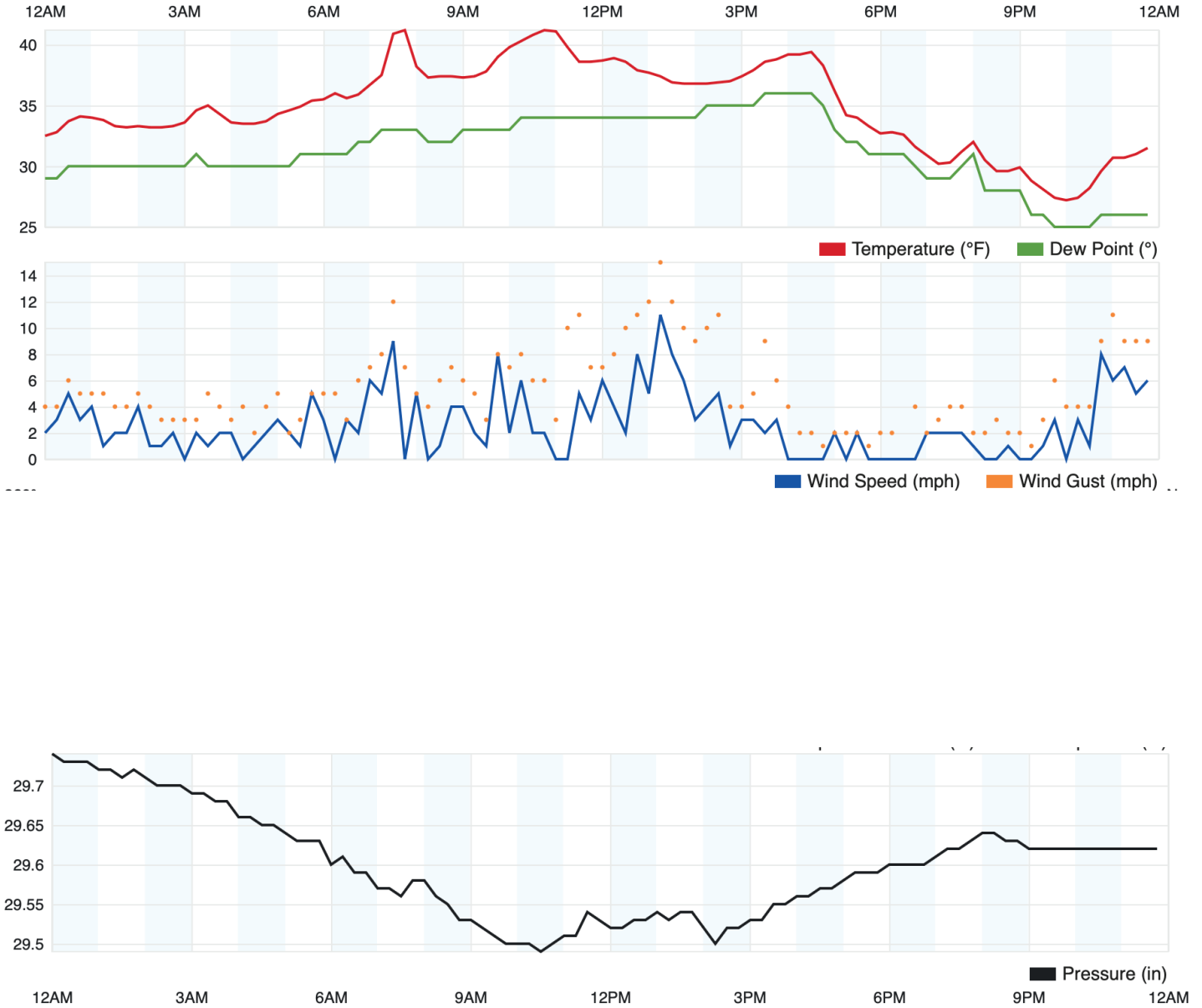
*Marc C. Johnson, a journalism graduate of South Dakota State University, is a fellow at the Mansfield Center at the University of Montana and the author most recently of "Mansfield and Dirksen: Bipartisan Giants of the Senate," published by the University of Oklahoma Press.*



# Groton Daily Independent

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Broton Daily Independent

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## Wind Advisory

### Monday



High: 32 °F ↓↓

Snow Likely and Patchy Blowing Snow

### Monday Night



Low: 16 °F

Mostly Cloudy

### Tuesday



High: 29 °F

Mostly Cloudy then Chance Snow

### Tuesday Night



Low: -2 °F

Mostly Cloudy

### Wednesday



High: 7 °F

Cold



## Light Snow and Strong Winds Monday

December 8, 2024  
3:18 PM

### Key Messages



**Light snow** will move in over portions of north central SD overnight and northeastern SD/west central MN through Monday morning

- Snow accumulations of a trace to possibly a couple tenths of an inch



Light snow along with winds gusts of 30-40 mph could cause **patchy blowing snow** over the northern portions of the Sisseton Hills

- ◆ Could impact the Monday morning commute



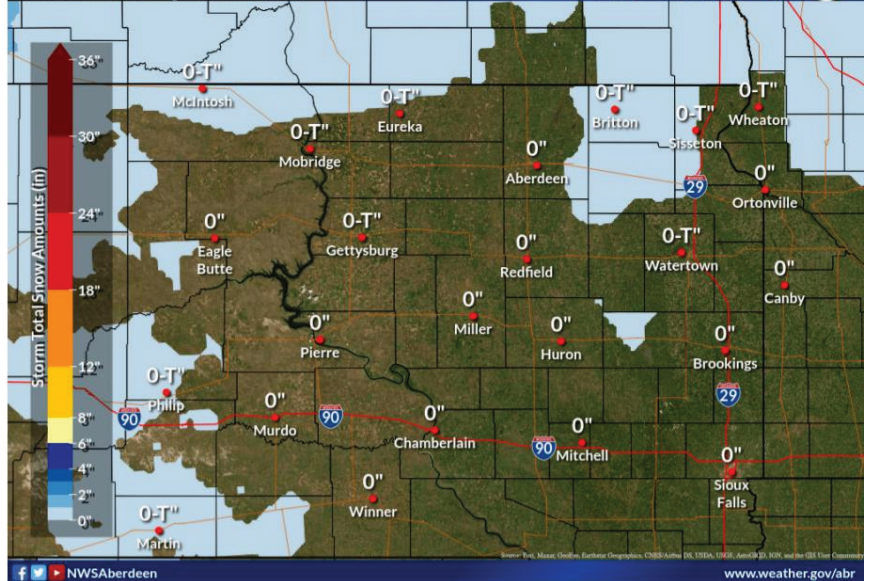
Roads may become slick where snow is falling

### Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast

Valid Sun 6:00PM through Mon 6:00PM CST

Weather Forecast Office  
Aberdeen, SD

Issued Dec 08, 2024 2:47 PM CST



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Occasional snow showers will occur across the northern part of the region late tonight into Monday morning with accumulations being minimal. Winds will increase out of the northwest between 40 and 50 mph with the highest gusts over central SD.

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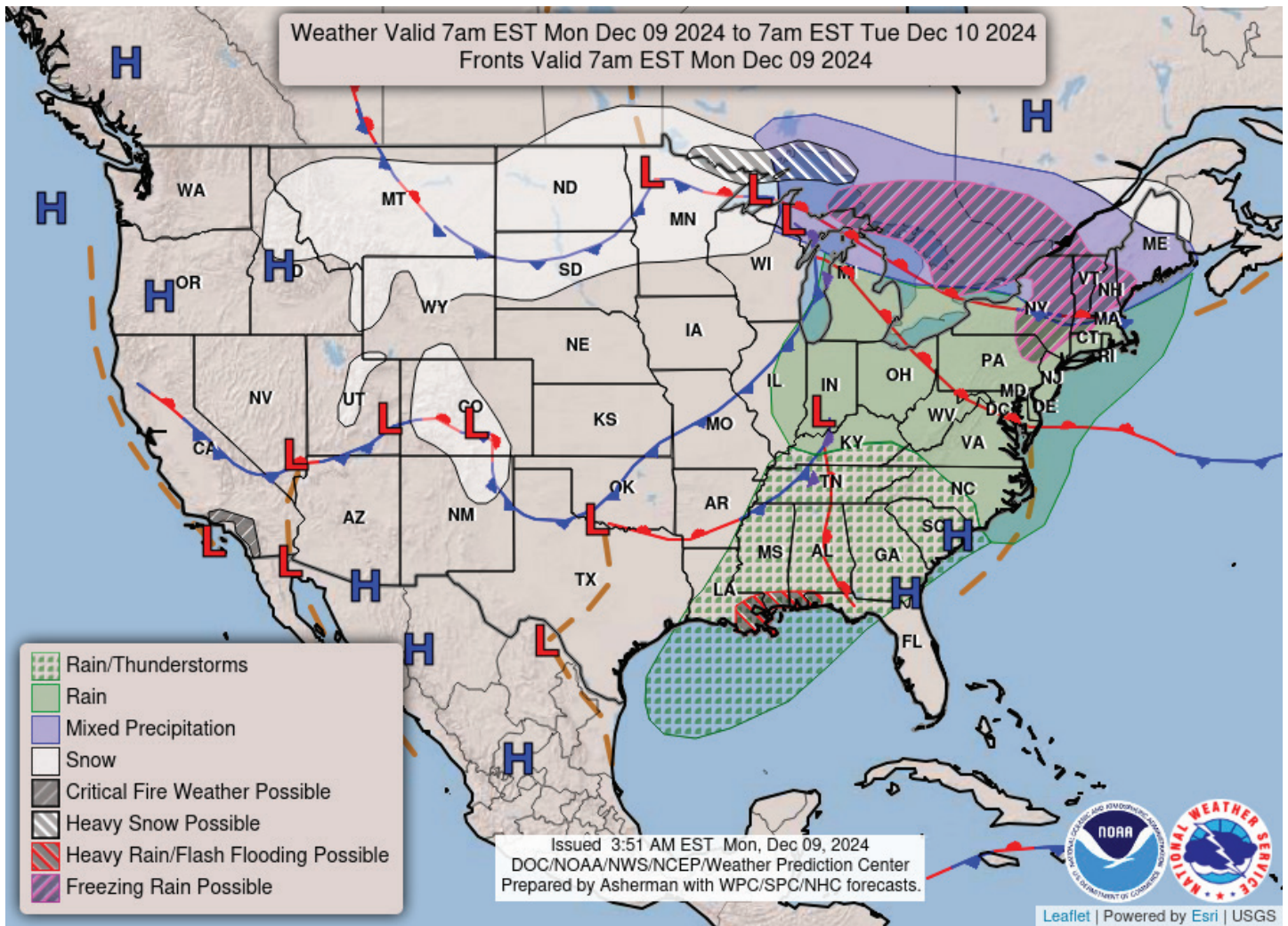
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 41 °F at 7:37 AM**  
**Low Temp: 27 °F at 10:00 PM**  
**Wind: 17 mph at 1:19 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

Day length: 8 hours, 51 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 61 in 1939  
Record Low: -27 in 1955  
Average High: 31  
Average Low: 10  
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.18  
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00  
Average Precip to date: 21.39  
Precip Year to Date: 21.71  
Sunset Tonight: 4:50:52 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:00:08 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 9, 1961: A snowstorm moved through the area and dropped 3 to 6 inches of snow east of the Missouri River and 1 to 3 inches to the west of the river from late afternoon on the 8th through late afternoon on the 9th. The storm was accompanied by high winds, blowing snow, icy highways, and temperatures falling to near zero. Three men were killed and one injured in a two-car crash near Watertown as snow and blowing snow sharply reduced visibilities. A skidding accident on a slippery highway near Winner resulted in an automobile fatality of one man. In a rural area near Vale, in Meade County, one man abandoned his stalled vehicle and was found the next day, frozen to death. 6 inches of snow fell at Sisseton and Wheaton, with 5 inches at Aberdeen and Watertown and 3 inches at Mobridge. Only an inch fell at Pierre.

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

1917: A severe winter storm struck the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes Region. It produced 25 inches of snow and wind gusts to 78 mph at Buffalo NY. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Vevay Indiana, with drifts fourteen feet high.

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)

2003: Although it never threatened land, a subtropical storm became Tropical Storm Peter approx. 700 miles WNW of the Cape Verde Islands. Combined with Tropical Storm Odette from earlier in the month, this is the first time since 1887 that two tropical storms formed in the Atlantic Basin in December.



## Can You See Him Now?

It was the very first Christmas that Jo Ann's church had a Nativity scene on the front lawn. Working anxiously, she kept arranging, then rearranging, the figures to make certain they could all be seen.

Finally, she sent her friend, Alice, to the edge of the lawn and asked, "How do they look?"

"Fine, they are all O.K.," came the answer.

Suddenly Jo Ann began to rearrange them once again. "What are you doing? I said they were fine," said Alice grumpily.

"Yes, I heard what you said," responded Jo Ann. "But I just want to make sure that Jesus is visible so all of the people can see Him!"

Often Santa gets more attention than our Savior does during these Holy Days. Children anxiously stand in line waiting their turn to ask for gifts and have their picture taken with him. Rarely, however, do children pose at the manger to have a picture taken with the Baby Jesus. Could it be that He is not visible to most people at Christmas? Do we make any effort at all to make Him visible? Is He lost in the pile of gifts? Is He hidden behind the tree?

Matthew wrote about a group of shepherds who said, "Let's go to Bethlehem...and see this wonderful thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about."

This "wonderful thing," Jesus, is what the world needs to see. Let's be certain He is always visible – especially in our lives!

Prayer: Lord, may we not allow Your Son to be hidden or to be placed behind the "false idols" that so many worship at Christmas. May we make Him visible! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us."

*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 1 Days 17 Hrs 34  
DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[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 16 Hrs 49 Mins  
DRAW: 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.08.24

1 2 39 40 42 4

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 17 Hrs 4 Mins  
DRAW: 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

7 10 20 26 35

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

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 4  
DRAW: Mins 46 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

8 10 39 57 61 12

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 33 Mins  
DRAW: 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.07.24

1 31 43 55 57 22

Power Play: 2x

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

NEXT 17 Hrs 33 Mins  
DRAW: 46 Secs

[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



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

### **Syrian premier says government still functioning but foreign and domestic challenges loom**

By SARAH EL DEEB, BASSEM MROUE and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Syria's prime minister said Monday that most Cabinet ministers are still working from offices in Damascus after rebels entered the capital over the weekend and overthrew President Bashar Assad. Streams of refugees crossed in from neighboring countries, hoping for a more peaceful future.

But there were already signs of the difficulties ahead for the rebel alliance now in control of much of the country, which is led by a former senior al-Qaida militant who severed ties with the extremist group years ago and has promised representative government and religious tolerance.

Israel said it is carrying out airstrikes on suspected chemical weapons sites and long-range rockets to keep them from falling into the hands of extremists. Israel has also seized a buffer zone inside Syria after Syrian troops withdrew.

In a separate development, the Kremlin said Russia has granted political asylum to Assad, a decision taken by President Vladimir Putin. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on Assad's specific whereabouts and said Putin was not planning to meet with him.

In northern Syria, Turkey said allied opposition forces seized the town of Manbij from Kurdish-led forces backed by the United States, a reminder that even after Assad's departure to Russia the country remains split among armed groups that have fought in the past.

Damascus was quiet on Monday, with life slowly returning to normal while most shops and public institutions were closed. In public squares, some people were still celebrating. Civilian traffic resumed but there was no public transport, leaving some to hitchhike. Long lines formed in front of bakeries and other food stores.

There was little sign of any security presence, and Associated Press reporters saw a few SUVs on the side of a main boulevard that appeared to have been broken into, with their windows shattered and their doors open.

In some areas, small groups of armed men were stationed in the streets. A video circulating online showed a man in military fatigues holding a rifle attempting to reassure residents of the Mezzeh neighborhood in Damascus that they would not be harmed.

"We have nothing against you, neither Alawite, nor Christian, nor Shiite, nor Druze, but everyone must behave well, and no one should try to attack us," the fighter said.

Prime minister says the government is still operational

Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali, who remained in his post after Assad and most of his top officials vanished over the weekend, has sought to project normalcy.

"We are working so that the transitional period is quick and smooth," he told Sky News Arabia TV on Monday, saying the security situation had already improved from the day before, when joyful crowds gathered in public squares and celebratory gunfire rang out across the capital.

He said the government is coordinating with the insurgents, and that he is ready to meet rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, who made a triumphal appearance at a famed Damascus mosque on Sunday.

Syrians who only days ago were working at all levels of the bureaucracy in Assad's regime were now flipping to the new reality.

At the court of Justice in Damascus, which was stormed by the rebels to free detainees, Judge Khitam Haddad, an aide to the justice minister in the outgoing government, said Sunday that judges were ready to resume work quickly.

"We want to give everyone their rights. We don't their rights to be wasted," Haddad told AP outside the courthouse. "We want to build a new Syria and to keep the work but with new methods."

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Meanwhile, a Syrian opposition war monitor said a top aide to Assad's brother, Maher, was found dead in his office near Damascus. A video that circulated on social media purportedly showed Maj. Gen. Ali Mahmoud covered with blood and with his clothes burned. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said it was not clear if he was killed or died by suicide.

Maher Assad, whose whereabouts are unknown, led the army's 4th Armored Division, which played a major role in the civil war that erupted in 2011, after a popular uprising against Assad led to a violent crackdown on dissent and the rise of an insurgency.

Israel confirms it has struck suspected chemical weapons, rockets

Israelis have welcomed the fall of Assad, who was a key ally of Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group, while expressing concern over what comes next. Israel says its forces temporarily seized a buffer zone inside Syria dating back to a 1974 agreement after Syrian troops withdrew in the chaos.

"The only interest we have is the security of Israel and its citizens," Gideon Saar told reporters on Monday. "That's why we attacked strategic weapons systems, like, for example, remaining chemical weapons, or long-range missiles and rockets, in order that they will not fall in the hands of extremists."

Saar did not provide details about when or where the strikes took place.

An AP journalist in Damascus reported airstrikes in the area of the Mezzeh military airport, southwest of the capital, on Sunday. The airport has previously been targeted in Israeli airstrikes. Strikes were also heard in the capital on Monday.

Israel has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in Syria in recent years, targeting what it says are military sites related to Iran and Hezbollah. Israeli officials rarely comment on individual strikes.

Syria agreed to give up its chemical weapons stockpile in 2013, after the government was accused of launching an attack near Damascus that killed hundreds of people. But it is widely believed to have kept some of the weapons and was accused of using them again in subsequent years.

Turkey says its allies have taken northern town

Officials in Turkey, which is the main supporter of the Syrian opposition to Assad, say its allies have taken full control of the northern Syrian city of Manbij from a U.S.-supported and Kurdish-led force known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF.

The SDF said a Turkish drone struck in the village of al-Mistriha in eastern Syria, killing 12 civilians, including six children.

Turkey views the SDF, which is primarily composed of a Syrian Kurdish militia, as an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey. The SDF has also been a key ally of the United States in the war against the Islamic State group.

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan on Monday expressed hope for a new era in Syria in which ethnic and religious groups can live peacefully under an inclusive government. But he warned against allowing Islamic State or Kurdish fighters to take advantage of the situation, saying Turkey will prevent Syria from turning into a "haven for terrorism."

## Middle East latest: Israeli strikes in Gaza kill 6, target suspected chemical weapons sites in Syria

By The Associated Press undefined

Palestinian medical officials said Monday that Israeli strikes in the central Gaza Strip overnight killed at least six people, including one woman.

The strikes came as ousted Syrian leader Bashar Assad fled to Moscow on Sunday and received asylum from his longtime ally hours after rebels seized control of Damascus.

Russian President Vladimir Putin personally made the decision to offer asylum to Assad, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Monday. Peskov wouldn't comment on Assad's specific whereabouts. He said that Putin wasn't planning to meet with Assad.

The U.N. Security Council plans to hold emergency closed consultations on Syria later Monday at Russia's request.

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Among the dead in the overnight Israeli strikes were Raed Ghabaien, who was released from Israeli detention in 2014, according to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, where the casualties were taken.

He was killed along with his wife when an Israeli strike hit their tent in the central town of Zuweida, the hospital records showed. Two other people were killed in a strike that hit their house late Sunday in the built-up Nuseirat refugee camp. Another two were killed in a strike in the Wadi Gaza area early Monday.

An Associated Press journalist counted the bodies at the hospital's morgue.

Israel's offensive has killed over 44,500 Palestinians in the Gaza since the start of the war, according to local health authorities. They say most of the dead are women and children but do not distinguish between fighters and civilians.

Israel says it only strikes militants and blames Hamas for civilian deaths because its fighters operate in residential areas.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250, including older adults and children. Around 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third of whom are believed to be dead.

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Here's the Latest:

UN human rights chief calls for accountability over violations in Syria

GENEVA — The U.N. human rights chief, Volker Türk, says any political transition in Syria must ensure accountability for perpetrators of serious violations during the country's civil war, and guarantee that those responsible are held to account.

Speaking Monday to reporters in Geneva, Türk said Syrians took to the streets a day earlier "with much hope and much anxiety for the future" after President Bashar Assad quit power and left the country.

The rights chief said reform of the security apparatus in Syria will be important for the transition, which "must also ensure that the tragedy of missing people is addressed."

He suggested that Assad himself should be held to account.

"We will need to make sure that those who are responsible for this violations — be it on the side of the previous government, the president and others — but also all others who are responsible for violations, that they are brought to account," Türk said.

Turkish foreign minister says Ankara hopes for 'an inclusive government' in Syria

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said Monday that Ankara hopes the fall of the Syrian government will usher in a new era where different ethnic and religious groups can live peacefully under an inclusive new government.

Fidan also said his country hopes that a "new Syria" would maintain good relations with its neighbors and bring stability to the volatile region.

"The developments in Syria yesterday have given us a glimmer of hope," Fidan said in a speech to Turkish ambassadors. "We expect international actors, especially the United Nations, to reach out to the Syrian people and support the formation of an inclusive government."

The minister said Turkey would continue to support Syria's territorial and political unity and work toward the country's "prosperity, security and stability."

But Fidan said it was important that the Islamic State group and Kurdish militants do not take advantage of the situation, adding that Turkey "would work with determination" to prevent Syria from turning into a "haven for terrorism."

"Turkey, which has reached out to its Syrian brothers during difficult times, will also be by their side, as the new page opens in Damascus," Fidan said. "We believe that the Syrian people will also make good use of this golden opportunity."

Israel says a drone that appears to have originated in Yemen hit a city in central Israel

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military said Monday that a drone that appeared to have originated in Yemen slammed into a city in central Israel.

Video posted by Israeli news sites showed a large burst of smoke erupting from a high-rise apartment

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building.

The military said sirens were not sounded to warn of the incoming drone. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

Iran-backed militants in Yemen have been attacking Israel since Hamas' assault on southern Israel in October 2023.

Their drones have at times evaded Israel's sophisticated aerial defense system.

Turkey-backed forces take full control of Syrian city from U.S.-backed and Kurdish-led force

ANKARA, Turkey — The Turkish-backed forces known as the Syrian National Army launched an offensive against the Syrian Democratic Forces in the northern Syrian city of Manbij on Dec. 6, days after expelling SDF fighters from the city of Tal Rifaat.

Turkish security officials said Monday that "control of Manbij has been secured," without providing further details. The officials provided the information on condition of anonymity, in line with Turkish regulations.

Turkey views the SDF, which is primarily composed of a Syrian Kurdish militia group, as an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, and a terrorist organization. The force, however, has been a key partner of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State group.

Separately, the U.S.-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said in a statement on Monday that a Turkish drone strike in the village of al-Mistriha north of Raqqa in eastern Syria killed 12 civilians, including six children.

Top aide to Assad's brother found dead, war monitor says

BEIRUT — A Syrian opposition war monitor says a top aide to the brother of Syria's ousted president was found dead in his office near the capital, Damascus.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Maj. Gen. Ali Mahmoud, who was in charge of Maher Assad's office, had led a 2018 military campaign in southern Syria.

A video that circulated on social media allegedly showed Mahmoud covered in blood while sitting on a chair. His clothes appear to have been set on fire. It was not clear if he was killed by Maher Assad or he committed suicide, the observatory's chief Rami Abdurrahman said.

Maher Assad was in charge of the army's 4th Armored Division which played a major role in Syria's conflict since it began in March 2011.

Israel says it has struck suspected chemical weapons sites and long-range rockets in Syria

JERUSALEM — Israel's foreign minister says the strikes were to prevent them from falling into the hands of hostile actors.

Gideon Saar said Monday that "the only interest we have is the security of Israel and its citizens."

"That's why we attacked strategic weapons systems, like, for example, remaining chemical weapons, or long-range missiles and rockets so that they will not fall in the hands of extremists."

Syrian prime minister says Cabinet working to ensure smooth transition of power

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria's prime minister says most Cabinet ministers who are in Damascus are performing their duties from their offices to promote security and that food and medicine are available to the public.

"We are working so that the transitional period is quick and smooth," Mohammed Ghazi Jalali told Sky News Arabia TV station on Monday.

The government is working with insurgents, Jalali said, adding that he is ready to meet their leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, who heads the jihadi Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS.

US Central Command forces launch airstrikes in central Syria

TAMPA, Fla. — U.S. Central Command says its forces launched dozens of airstrikes targeting Islamic State group camps and operatives in central Syria.

The strikes on Sunday were intended to "disrupt, degrade, and defeat ISIS, in order to prevent the terrorist group from conducting external operations and to ensure that ISIS does not seek to take advantage of the current situation to reconstitute in central Syria," it said in a statement.

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The airstrikes hit over 75 targets using B-52s, F-15s and A-10s, it said, noting that damage assessments were underway and there were no indications of civilian casualties.

Japanese official says Tokyo is 'gravely worried' about situation in Middle East

TOKYO — Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi says Tokyo is watching recent development in Syria "with serious interest," while hoping for an improvement in human rights conditions for the Syrian people.

"Japan is gravely worried about large number of deaths among citizens and strongly concerned about further worsening of the humanitarian conditions," Hayashi said Monday.

He added that Japan is "hopeful" that the latest developments could lead to an improvement in the situation.

New Zealand foreign minister calls for 'peaceful transition' in Syria

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — New Zealand Foreign Minister Winston Peters says his country is closely following developments related to the collapse of former President Bashar Assad's government in Syria.

"This was a regime that perpetrated significant human rights abuses, including repeated chemical weapons attacks, against its own people for many years," Peters said in a statement issued on Monday. "Now we need to see a peaceful transition with civilians protected and UN Security Council resolutions upheld. This is critical for moving towards a sustainable and comprehensive political solution."

## **Russia has used its hypersonic Oreshnik missile for the first time. What are its capabilities?**

By The Associated Press undefined

The silent black-and-white surveillance camera video of the Russian missile attack in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro was brief but chilling: Six huge fireballs pierced the darkness and slammed into the ground at astonishing speed.

Within hours of the Nov. 21 attack on the military facility, Russian President Vladimir Putin took the rare step of speaking on national TV to boast about the new, hypersonic missile. He warned the West that its next use could be against Ukraine's NATO allies who allowed Kyiv to use their longer-range missiles to strike inside Russia.

Putin said the missile was called the "Oreshnik" — Russian for "hazelnut tree."

A look at the weapon, how it fits into Moscow's battle plan and what political message Russia wants to send by using it:

What's known about the Oreshnik?

A satisfied smile played across Putin's face as he described how the Oreshnik streaks to its target at 10 times the speed of sound, or Mach 10, "like a meteorite," and claimed it was immune to any missile defense system. Ukrainian military officials said it reached Mach 11.

Gen. Sergei Karakayev, head of Russia's Strategic Missile Forces, said the Oreshnik could carry nuclear or conventional warheads and has a range to reach any European target.

The Pentagon said the Oreshnik was an experimental type of intermediate-range ballistic missile, or IRBM, based on Russia's RS-26 Rubezh intercontinental ballistic missile, or ICBM. The attack marked the first time such a weapon was used in a war.

Intermediate-range missiles can fly between 500 to 5,500 kilometers (310 to 3,400 miles). Such weapons were banned under a Soviet-era treaty that Washington and Moscow abandoned in 2019.

Ukraine's Main Intelligence Directorate said the missile had six warheads, each carrying six submunitions. Its payload of independently targetable warheads, like a cluster of hazelnuts growing on a tree, could be the inspiration for the missile's name.

Video of the attack appeared to show six warheads surrounded by clouds of plasma raining down in a fiery descent. The six submunitions released by each warhead apparently were unarmed but had high kinetic energy estimated to deliver a destructive force equivalent to tons of explosives.

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Putin claimed the weapon is so powerful that using several such missiles — even fitted with conventional warheads — could be as devastating as a nuclear strike. It's capable of destroying underground bunkers "three, four or more floors down," he boasted, threatening to use it against the government district in Kyiv.

Ukraine's Security Service showed The Associated Press wreckage of the missile -- charred, mangled wires and an ashen airframe — at Dnipro's Pivdenmash plant that built missiles when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union. There were no fatalities in the attack, and authorities haven't described the damage to the plant. They said the missile was fired from the 4th Missile Test Range of Kapustin Yar in Russia's Astrakhan region on the Caspian Sea.

What other missiles has Russia used?

Russia has used an assortment of missiles to pummel Ukraine since the start of its invasion in February 2022, but none had the range and power of Oreshnik.

They included subsonic long-range cruise missiles that carry about 500 kilograms (1,100 pounds) of explosives, enough to inflict a significant damage to Ukrainian power plants and other key infrastructure. The winged, jet-propelled cruise missiles have a range of up to 2,500 kilometers (1,550 miles), able to reach all of Ukraine.

Russia also used swarms of inexpensive, Iranian-designed drones that carry only about 50 kilograms (110 pounds) of explosives. The slow-flying drones are relatively easy to intercept, but Russia used dozens of them at a time to overwhelm Ukrainian defenses and divert attention from simultaneously launched cruise missiles.

For some priority targets, Russia has used faster and harder-hitting missiles, including the ground-launched Iskander short-range ballistic missile with a range of 500 kilometers (310 miles).

For particularly important targets, Moscow has used the hypersonic Kinzhal air-launched ballistic missile. Its high speed — able to briefly reach Mach 10 — and ability to maneuver in flight helps it evade air defenses, although Ukraine claims to have shot down a few of them.

Oreshnik is even more difficult to intercept than Kinzhal. It can inflict significantly heavier damage because of its multiple high-energy warheads.

What message is Putin sending with the Oreshnik?

Putin described the Oreshnik as a response to the U.S. and U.K. allowing Ukraine to use their longer-range weapons to strike Russian territory, a move he said gave "elements of a global character" to the conflict.

"We believe that we have the right to use our weapons against military facilities of the countries that allow to use their weapons against our facilities," he said.

Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Putin's Security Council, said Oreshnik could reach targets in Europe within minutes, inflicting "catastrophic" damage. "Bomb shelters will not save you," he posted on his messaging app channel.

Russian state media extolled the Oreshnik, claiming it will take just 11 minutes to reach an air base in Poland and 17 minutes to reach NATO's headquarters in Brussels. T-shirts have appeared with images of Putin and the Oreshnik, and he was told at a briefing that a couple planned to name their daughter after the missile.

Military expert Mathieu Boulègue of Chatham House in Britain said that while the Oreshnik isn't a game-changer on the battlefield, "in terms of psychological warfare, it works great" in serving the Kremlin's goal to scare a Western audience.

The Nov. 21 attack came two days after Putin signed a revised version of Russia's nuclear doctrine, which lowered the threshold for using nuclear weapons. The doctrine allows for a potential nuclear response by Moscow even to a conventional attack on Russia by any nation that is supported by a nuclear power.

The use of the Oreshnik was an expression of Moscow's anger at the use of longer-range Western missiles and a signal to Ukraine and President-elect Donald Trump that Russia was going to pursue its goals, regardless of the support for Kyiv, said James J. Townsend, senior fellow at the Center for New American Security.

"This is a very powerful message being sent," Townsend said. "It's showing Trump how serious Russia looks on what the Biden administration has been doing and how seriously they look on and how angry

they are about this type of assistance.”

Putin’s warning about potential strikes on NATO assets follows calls by Russian hawks for such attacks to force Ukraine’s allies to back down.

Unlike other Russian conventional weapons with a shorter range, Oreshnik offers the capability to launch a powerful, conventional strike anywhere in Europe, giving the Kremlin a new instrument of escalation without tapping its nuclear arsenal. There will be no way to know whether Oreshnik carries a nuclear or a conventional warhead before it hits the target.

“The enemy must understand that we are ready to take the most resolute steps and strike the territory of NATO members with conventional weapons first,” said Sergei Karaganov, a political expert who advises the Kremlin. “At the same time, we will warn them that if they respond to that attack in an escalatory way, a nuclear strike would come second, and a third wave will target American bases.”

## **South Korea’s Justice Ministry imposes a travel ban on President Yoon over martial law**

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea’s Justice Ministry on Monday imposed an overseas travel ban on President Yoon Suk Yeol as authorities investigate allegations of rebellion and other charges in connection with his short-lived declaration of martial law last week.

Yoon’s martial law decree last Tuesday, which brought special forces troops into Seoul streets, plunged South Korea into political turmoil and caused worry among its key diplomatic partners and neighbors. On Saturday, Yoon avoided an opposition-led bid to impeach him, with most governing party lawmakers boycotting a parliamentary vote. But the opposition parties vowed to submit a new impeachment motion against him this week.

Bae Sang-up, a Justice Ministry official, told a parliamentary hearing that it banned Yoon from leaving the country following requests by police, prosecutors and an anti-corruption agency as they expand their probes into the circumstances surrounding Yoon’s power grab.

On Monday, a senior National Police Agency officer told local reporters in a background briefing that police can also detain Yoon if conditions are met. The contents of the briefing were shared with The Associated Press.

While a sitting South Korean president has immunity from prosecution while in office, that does not extend to allegations of rebellion or treason. This means that Yoon can be questioned and detained by police over his martial law decree, but many observers doubt that police will forcefully detain him or search his office because of the potential for clashes with his presidential security service.

In the case of former President Park Geun-hye, who was thrown out of office in 2017 after being impeached by parliament over a corruption scandal, prosecutors failed to search her office and ended up receiving documents outside the compound because presidential officials turned them away.

After refusing to meet with prosecutors while in office, Park underwent questioning by them and was arrested after the Constitutional Court approved her impeachment and ruled to dismiss her as president in March 2017.

The main opposition 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 his former defense minister, over the rebellion allegations.

South Korean prosecutors on Sunday detained former Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun, who allegedly recommended that Yoon declare martial law. He became the first person detained in the martial law case.

The Defense Ministry last week separately suspended three top military commanders over their alleged involvement in imposing martial law. 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

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country's political turmoil, "including matters related to my term in office."

Since taking office in 2022 for a single five-year term, Yoon, a conservative, has been on a near-constant collision course with his liberal rivals who control parliament. The liberals have introduced a slew of motions seeking to impeach some of his top officials and launched a fierce political offensive against Yoon over a spate of scandals involving him 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."

Yoon's martial law decree lasted only six hours because the National Assembly voted it down, forcing Yoon's Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday. Some members of Yoon's governing People Power Party cast ballots against Yoon's decree, but the party later decided to oppose his impeachment.

Experts say Yoon's party fears losing the presidency to liberals in a by-election if he is impeached and ousted, as they did after Park was removed from office.

PPP leader Han Dong-hun said Sunday his party will push for Yoon's early and orderly exit from office in a way that minimizes social confusion, but he didn't say when that would happen. He also said Yoon will not be involved in state affairs, including foreign policy.

Critics say Han likely wants to buy time to help his party restore public confidence. His comments on sidelining Yoon from state affairs have also sparked widespread concern and criticism that it violates the constitution.

During a Monday briefing, the Defense Ministry said Yoon maintains control of the military, a power the constitution explicitly reserves for the president.

## **Kennedy Center pays tribute to Coppola, the Grateful Dead, Raitt, Sandoval and The Apollo**

By ASHRAF KHALIL and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — "Not Fade Away" closed out the Kennedy Center Honors ceremony on Sunday, just as honorees The Grateful Dead had used Buddy Holly's ode to enduring love to close out hundreds of concerts over the years.

The packed house danced in the aisles to the bouncy beat after a night of honoring the Dead and other recipients of the lifetime achievement award for artistic accomplishment: director Francis Ford Coppola, jazz trumpeter Arturo Sandoval and singer-songwriter Bonnie Raitt. The venerable Harlem theater The Apollo, which has launched generations of Black artists, also was recognized.

Longtime Deadheads, including actors Miles Teller and Chloe Sevigny and talk show host David Letterman, paid tribute to the band's blend of musical experimentation, longevity and community-building. "Their music fills the universe," Letterman proclaimed.

The choice to honor The Apollo was an unusual one: the first time the Kennedy Center has chosen to honor a specific performance venue.

"The Apollo means so much to so many of us," Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said while arriving on the red carpet. Moore pointed to iconic Apollo performances from Lauryn Hill and a young Michael Jackson as treasured memories of his youth.

The tribute to The Apollo highlighted the sheer diversity of art forms showcased at the 90-year-old theater. Savion Glover did a spirited tap dance routine; husband and wife duo The War and Treaty performed a medley of hits by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell; and comedian Dave Chappelle recounted his terrifying first Apollo performance at age 15.

"Everybody started booing. It was like I was outside my body watching," he said. Eventually Chappelle was rushed off the stage by the theater's infamous "Sandman," but he credited the experience with helping him overcome his fear of bombing.

The annual gala at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts always features personalized tributes with performances and testimonials from fellow artists. Medallions were presented during the traditional Saturday night ceremony at the State Department.



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In the first of the night's tributes, Emmylou Harris and Dave Matthews performed a cover of Raitt's duet with the late John Prine, "Angel from Montgomery."

Music star Sheryl Crow paid tribute to Raitt's trailblazing career as not just a singer or songwriter but as a widely respected blues guitarist in a male-dominated field.

"I would not be doing what I'm doing if I had not seen her perform as a 17-year old," said Crow, who bought her first guitar shortly after seeing Raitt in concert.

Raitt herself, on the pre-event red carpet, predicted an emotional evening.

"I've brought a massive box of Kleenex and my waterproof eye liner," she laughed.

Coppola received a tribute filled with previous Kennedy Center honorees, including Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, Al Pacino and George Lucas. All described an iconoclastic and driven auteur who loved to nurture and support younger filmmakers.

"What Francis does creatively is jump off cliffs," Lucas said. "When you spend enough time with Francis, you begin to believe you can jump off cliffs, too."

Sandoval's tribute featured multiple performances from an all-star band featuring Trombone Shorty and pianist Chucho Valdez from Sandoval's original band, plus a flamenco dance performance by Timo Nunez. It also included a bit of light roast comedy from actor Andy Garcia.

"Arturo spoke very little English when he first came to America from Cuba all those years ago," Garcia said. "But now his English ... is much worse."

The tribute performances are often kept secret from the recipients themselves, most notably in 2018 when Cyndi Lauper flat out lied to her longtime friend Cher about being unable to attend. Lauper appeared on stage to perform Cher's hit, "If I Could Turn Back Time."

At a ceremony at the White House before attending the awards event itself, President Joe Biden praised each honoree. He also had De Niro, who was in the audience, stand before declaring, "If I get in trouble, I'm coming to you pal."

De Niro grinned and nodded and others in attendance, including the honorees, laughed at what appeared to be a reference to De Niro sometimes playing hardnosed enforcers in movies like "The Godfather." But Biden actually meant he might seek the actor's help for post-presidency career advice.

"Things are not looking good for February," Biden joked.

Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris received an extended standing ovation from the audience when introduced at Kennedy Center. But this could be the last honors ceremony without political intrigue for a while.

During Donald Trump's first four years in office, Kennedy Center officials were forced to walk a public tightrope between the tradition of the president attending the ceremony and the open antipathy toward Trump from multiple honorees. In 2017, recipient Norman Lear threatened to boycott his own ceremony if Trump attended. Trump, who takes office in January, skipped the ceremony for the entirety of his first term.

On the red carpet Sunday night, multiple Democratic political figures seemed to offer an olive branch.

"I hope he does come," Moore said. "This is a wonderful celebration of genius in all its forms."

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi added, "I think he would really enjoy it."

The awards show will air on CBS on Dec. 22.

## **Netanyahu is set to take the witness stand for the first time in his corruption trial in Israel**

By TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is set to take to the witness stand Tuesday for the first time in his trial on corruption allegations, a pivotal point in the drawn-out proceedings that comes as the leader wages war in Gaza and faces an international arrest warrant for war crimes charges.

At home, Netanyahu is on trial for accusations of fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes in three separate affairs. Netanyahu denies wrongdoing, but his appearance on the witness stand will be a low

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point in his decades-long political career, standing in contrast to the image of a sophisticated, respected leader he has tried to cultivate.

The trial will take up a chunk of Netanyahu's time at a crucial point for Israel. While he makes his case for weeks from the stand, he will still be tasked with managing the war in Gaza, maintaining a fragile ceasefire with the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and keeping tabs on threats from the wider Middle East, including Iran.

It will be the first time an Israeli prime minister has taken the stand as a criminal defendant, and Netanyahu has repeatedly sought to delay the proceedings, citing the ongoing Gaza war and security concerns. The judges ordered the trial to resume Tuesday, moving the proceedings to an underground chamber in a Tel Aviv court as a security precaution.

Netanyahu's appearance in the courtroom will also draw attention to other legal issues in the Israeli leader's orbit. Close advisers in his office are embroiled in a separate series of scandals surrounding leaked classified information and doctored documents. While Netanyahu is not suspected of direct involvement in those, they could weaken his public image.

Here is a look at the ongoing trial.

Where does Netanyahu's trial stand?

The trial, which began in 2020, involves three separate cases in which prosecutors say Netanyahu exchanged regulatory favors with media titans for favorable press coverage and advanced the personal interests of a billionaire Hollywood producer in exchange for lavish gifts.

Prosecutors have called roughly 140 witnesses to the stand — fewer than the 300 initially expected to testify.

Those witnesses have included some of Netanyahu's closest former confidants who turned against him, as well as a former prime minister, former security chiefs and media personalities. Lawyers have submitted thousands of items of evidence -- recordings, police documents, text messages.

A new documentary, "The Bibi Files," has shined new light on the cases by obtaining footage of Netanyahu being questioned by police, as well as interrogations of his wife and some key witnesses. In a glimpse of what can be expected in the courtroom, Netanyahu appears both combative and anxious at times, accusing police of unfairly picking on him and denigrating other witnesses as liars.

The prosecution called to the stand its final witness over the summer, bringing to an end three years of testimony and setting the stage for the defense to lay out its case, with Netanyahu its first witness. Netanyahu's appearance will give Israelis a chance to see the long-serving Israeli leader answer to the charges before the three-judge panel.

What are some notable moments from Netanyahu's trial?

The prosecution has sought to portray Netanyahu as media-obsessed, to push its narrative that he would break the law for favorable coverage.

Witness accounts have shed light not only on the three cases but also on sensational details about Netanyahu's character and his family's reputation for living lavishly on the backs of taxpayers and wealthy supporters.

One former aide and a key prosecution witness called him a "control freak" over his image. Another witness described expensive gifts for Netanyahu and his wife.

Arnon Milchan, an Israeli producer of Hollywood blockbuster films such as "Pretty Woman," took the stand last year by videoconference, describing how he routinely delivered tens of thousands of dollars of champagne, cigars and other gifts requested by the Israeli leader.

One key witness, a former top aide to Netanyahu, stunned prosecutors by backtracking from his earlier claims against the prime minister, opening the door for the defense to erode his credibility as a witness. The trial was jolted by Israeli media reports that police used sophisticated phone-hacking software to spy on this witness.

What happens next in Netanyahu's trial?

The prosecution formally rested its case in July, and the court recessed for the summer and fall. The defense has repeatedly asked for delays in Netanyahu's testimony, which have mostly been denied.

Like other witnesses, Netanyahu will testify three days a week, for hours at a time, and his testimony is expected to last weeks. The defense will seek to depict Netanyahu as a law-abiding leader who was a victim of careless and biased police investigations.

Netanyahu's critics have sought to draw a clear line between the cases and the war in Gaza. They say the allegations led Netanyahu to promote a contentious judicial overhaul plan last year that bitterly divided the country and created an image of weakness that encouraged the Oct. 7 Hamas attack that triggered the war.

Netanyahu's critics, including families of hostages held by Hamas, now accuse him of dragging out the conflict — and risking the lives of their loved ones — to avoid an embarrassing investigation and new elections that could force him from power.

If he is eventually voted out of power, being away from the prime minister's seat would make it harder for Netanyahu to rail against the justice system and delegitimize the verdict in the eyes of the public.

A verdict isn't expected until 2026 — at least — and then Netanyahu can choose to appeal to the Supreme Court. Israel's courts are notoriously sluggish, and the case was further delayed last year when courts went on hiatus for two months after war broke out following Hamas' Oct. 7 attack.

Once the defense rests, each side will summarize their cases before judges convene to deliberate over Netanyahu's fate.

## **In promising to shake up Washington, Trump is in a class of his own**

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the history of American politics, there's no shortage of presidents who promised to shake up Washington once they got to the White House. But Donald Trump may prove to be in a class of his own, and he appears more interested in beating the federal government into submission than recalibrating it.

In staffing his administration, Trump has shown an inclination to select people who distrust or even disdain the agencies that they've been chosen to lead, setting up a potential war of attrition between the incoming Republican president and American institutions.

"There's been nothing like what Trump is suggesting to do," said Doug Brinkley, a presidential historian. "We're talking about dismantling the federal government."

Trump's approach will become even clearer this week as Kash Patel, his choice for FBI director, heads to Capitol Hill for an initial round of meetings with senators who will decide whether to confirm him to the post. A former national security official who has branded himself as an eager acolyte of Trump, Patel has talked about shutting down the agency's headquarters, splitting up its responsibilities and targeting Trump's perceived enemies.

Greg Brower, a former U.S. attorney who served as the FBI's top congressional affairs official, said Trump seems to want to make the nation's law enforcement institutions "part of his political operation run out of the White House."

"That's a major course change that I'm just not sure a majority of senators are willing to endorse," Brower said.

Republican senators are already considering whether to support Pete Hegseth, whom Trump wants to lead the Pentagon, despite allegations of sexual misconduct, excessive drinking and financial mismanagement. Hegseth is an Army veteran and former Fox News commentator who has described the military as flooded with "woke" liberal ideology. He also wants to remove women from combat roles.

Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for Trump's transition team and the incoming White House press secretary, said the next administration wants to "shatter the Deep State," a term for entrenched civil servants who have frustrated Trump and his allies.

"President Trump was re-elected by a resounding mandate from the American people to change the sta-

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tus quo in Washington," she said in a statement. "That's why he has chosen brilliant and highly-respected outsiders to serve in his Administration, and he will continue to stand behind them as they fight against all those who seek to derail the MAGA Agenda."

Margaret Spelling, who served as education secretary under President George W. Bush, said it is "probably not a good management style" to treat government employees as adversaries.

"If you're going to turn the tide or redirect the ship of state, you've got to have help doing it," she said. "And that's people who work there already."

Spelling's former department could be outright eliminated if Trump has his way. His choice of education secretary, Linda McMahon, has never worked in the field. She served for one year on the Connecticut Board of Education and is a member of the board of trustees at a private university. McMahon led the Small Business Administration during Trump's first term, and she made a name for herself by running World Wrestling Entertainment, a cultural juggernaut that features musclebound men beating each other up in elaborately scripted fights.

Trump's plans for the federal government blend conservative ideology, which has long viewed Washington as too intrusive in Americans' daily lives, with his personal vendettas. After being plagued by investigations and contradicted by career officials during his first term, the returning president has no interest in a replay and he's more skeptical of insider views that clash with his own instincts.

Some of his personnel choices have alarmed political opponents, but Trump's approach could prove appealing to voters whose faith in government has sunk to record lows in recent years. Only about 2 in 10 Americans trust the government to do the right thing always or most of the time, according to the Pew Research Center, down from around 4 in 10 who said this in 2000 — before the upheaval of a global financial crisis, an inconclusive war on terrorism and a worldwide pandemic.

Kay Schlozman, a Boston College political science professor, said Trump's nominees could be viewed as "an extension of his capacity to question the received wisdom and question the supposed elites who always run everything."

Some of the largest gaps between expertise and personnel have been evident in public health. Trump chose Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services despite his reputation as one of the most prolific spreaders of unfounded theories about the supposed danger of vaccines.

Trump also picked Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, a critic of public health measures like lockdowns and vaccine mandates that were used during the coronavirus outbreak, to run the National Institutes of Health, the country's top medical research agency.

In other areas of government, loyalty has often been prized over expertise. Lee Zeldin, a former New York congressman, never served on any committees dealing with the environment during nearly a decade on Capitol Hill. Now he's on deck to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

Brinkley said it's not uncommon to have presidents attempt to change how Washington works. Richard Nixon tried to circumvent government agencies by centralizing decision-making in the White House, and Warren Harding stocked his Cabinet with business leaders.

But Brinkley said Trump's approach is more venomous, and he seems to be setting up his staff to compete to be the most zealous.

"It's got a gladiator feel," he said. "They each want to show that they've got a scalp to punish the so-called deep state, the legacy media or the Democratic Party."

Another way that Trump is taking on Washington is the Department of Government Efficiency, an independent advisory organization that will be run by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy.

Musk, the world's richest man, and Ramaswamy, an entrepreneur, plan to provide ideas on dramatically reducing federal spending and cutting the government workforce. They also said Trump should sidestep Congress whenever possible, setting up a potential constitutional clash.

Theda Skocpol, a Harvard University professor of government and sociology, agreed that Americans are often doubtful about Washington's effectiveness.

"But it doesn't mean there's going to be an easy path to eliminating entire departments or functions of government because people will realize they have the stakes in those things," she said.

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However, Skocpol said, chaos might be the actual goal.

"Parts of American conservatism have been trying to make government a mess when they control it, and then use it as an argument for less government," she said.

## 'Polarization' is Merriam-Webster's 2024 word of the year

By ANNA FURMAN Associated Press

The results of the 2024 U.S. presidential election rattled the country and sent shockwaves across the world — or were cause for celebration, depending on who you ask. Is it any surprise then that the Merriam-Webster word of the year is "polarization"?

"Polarization means division, but it's a very specific kind of division," said Peter Sokolowski, Merriam-Webster's editor at large, in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press ahead of Monday's announcement. "Polarization means that we are tending toward the extremes rather than toward the center."

The election was so divisive, many American voters went to the polls with a feeling that the opposing candidate was an existential threat to the nation. According to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters, about 8 in 10 Kamala Harris voters were very or somewhat concerned that Donald Trump's views — but not Harris' — were too extreme, while about 7 in 10 Trump voters felt the same way about Harris — but not Trump.

The Merriam-Webster entry for "polarization" reflects scientific and metaphorical definitions. It's most commonly used to mean "causing strong disagreement between opposing factions or groupings." Merriam-Webster, which logs 100 million pageviews a month on its site, chooses its word of the year based on data, tracking a rise in search and usage.

Last year's pick was "authentic." This year's comes as large swaths of the U.S. struggle to reach consensus on what is real.

"It's always been important to me that the dictionary serve as a kind of neutral and objective arbiter of meaning for everybody," Sokolowski said. "It's a kind of backstop for meaning in an era of fake news, alternative facts, whatever you want to say about the value of a word's meaning in the culture."

It's notable that "polarization" originated in the early 1800s — and not during the Renaissance, as did most words with Latin roots about science, Sokolowski said. He called it a "pretty young word," in the scheme of the English language. "Polarized is a term that brings intensity to another word," he continued, most frequently used in the U.S. to describe race relations, politics and ideology.

"The basic job of the dictionary is to tell the truth about words," the Merriam-Webster editor continued. "We've had dictionaries of English for 420 years and it's only been in the last 20 years or so that we've actually known which words people look up."

"Polarization" extends beyond political connotations. It's used to highlight fresh cracks and deep rifts alike in pop culture, tech trends and other industries.

All the scrutiny over Taylor Swift's private jet usage? Polarizing. Beef between rappers Kendrick Lamar and Drake? Polarizing. The International Olympic Committee's decision to strip American gymnast Jordan Chiles of her bronze medal after the Paris Games? You guessed it: polarizing.

Even lighthearted memes — like those making fun of Australian breakdancer Rachael "Raygun" Gunn's performance — or the proliferation of look-alike contests, or who counts as a nepo baby proved polarizing.

Paradoxically though, people tend to see eye to eye on the word itself. Sokolowski cited its frequent use among people across the political spectrum, including commentators on Fox News, MSNBC and CNN.

"It's used by both sides," he said, "and in a little bit ironic twist to the word, it's something that actually everyone agrees on."

Rounding out Merriam-Webster's top 10 words of 2024:

Demure

TikToker Jools Lebron's 38-second video describing her workday makeup routine as "very demure, very mindful" lit up the summer with memes. The video has been viewed more than 50 million times, yielding "huge spikes" in lookups, Sokolowski said, and prompting many to learn it means reserved or modest.

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## Fortnight

Taylor Swift's song "Fortnight," featuring rapper Post Malone, undoubtedly spurred many searches for this word, which means two weeks. "Music can still send people to the dictionary," Sokolowski said.

## Totality

The solar eclipse in April inspired awe and much travel. There are tens of millions of people who live along a narrow stretch from Mexico's Pacific coast to eastern Canada, otherwise known as the path of totality, where locals and travelers gazed skyward to see the moon fully blot out the sun. Generally, the word refers to a sum or aggregate amount — or wholeness.

## Resonate

"Texts developed by AI have a disproportionate percentage of use of the word 'resonate,'" Sokolowski said. This may be because the word, which means to affect or appeal to someone in a personal or emotional way, can add gravitas to writing. But, paradoxically, artificial intelligence "also betrays itself to be a robot because it's using that word too much."

## Allision

The word was looked up 60 times more often than usual when, in March, a ship crashed into the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore. "When you have one moving object into a fixed object, that's an allision, not a collision. You're showing that one of the two objects struck was not, in fact, in motion," Sokolowski said.

## Weird

This summer on the TV news show "Morning Joe," Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz called Republican leaders "weird." It may have been what launched his national career, landing him as the Democratic vice presidential nominee. Though it's a word that people typically misspell — is it "ei" or "ie"? — and search for that reason, its rise in use was notable, Sokolowski said.

## Cognitive

Whether the word was used to raise questions about President Joe Biden's debate performance or Trump's own age, it cropped up often. It refers to conscious intellectual activity — such as thinking, reasoning, or remembering.

## Pander

Pander was used widely in political commentary, Sokolowski said. "Conservative news outlets accused Kamala Harris of pandering to different groups, especially young voters, Black voters, gun rights supporters." Whereas Walz said Trump's visit to a McDonald's kitchen pandered to hourly wage workers. It means to say, do, or provide what someone — such as an audience — wants or demands even though it is not "good, proper, reasonable, etc."

## Democracy

In 2003, Merriam-Webster decided to make "democracy" its first word of the year. Since then, the word — which, of course, means a form of government in which the people elect representatives to make decisions, policies and laws — is consistently one of the dictionary's most looked up. "There's a poignancy to that, that people are checking up on it," Sokolowski said. "Maybe the most hopeful thing that the curiosity of the public shows, is that they're paying attention."

## Syrian rebels free prisoners from Assad's notorious dungeons who celebrate in Damascus streets

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB and ABDULRAHMAN SHAHEEN Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Bashar Barhoum woke in his dungeon prison cell in Damascus at dawn Sunday, thinking it would be the last day of his life.

The 63-year-old writer was supposed to have been executed after being imprisoned for seven months. But he soon realized the men at the door weren't from former Syrian President Bashar Assad's notorious security forces, ready to take him to his death. Instead, they were rebels coming to set him free.

As the insurgents swept across Syria in just 10 days to bring an end to the Assad family's 50-year rule,

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they broke into prisons and security facilities to free political prisoners and many of the tens of thousands of people who disappeared since the conflict began back in 2011.

Barhoum was one of those freed who were celebrating in Damascus.

"I haven't seen the sun until today," Barhoum told The Associated Press after walking in disbelief through the streets of Damascus. "Instead of being dead tomorrow, thank God, he gave me a new lease of life."

Barhoum couldn't find his cellphone and belongings in the prison so set off to find a way to tell his wife and daughters that he's alive and well.

Videos shared widely across social media showed dozens of prisoners running in celebration after the insurgents released them, some barefoot and others wearing little clothing. One of them screams in celebration after he finds out that the government has fallen.

Torture, executions and starvation in Syria's prisons

Syria's prisons have been infamous for their harsh conditions. Torture is systematic, say human rights groups, whistleblowers, and former detainees. Secret executions have been reported at more than two dozen facilities run by Syrian intelligence, as well as at other sites.

In 2013, a Syrian military defector, known as "Caesar," smuggled out over 53,000 photographs that human rights groups say showed clear evidence of rampant torture, but also disease and starvation in Syria's prison facilities.

Syria's feared security apparatus and prisons did not only serve to isolate Assad's opponents, but also to instill fear among his own people said Lina Khatib, Associate Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa program at the London think tank Chatham House.

"Anxiety about being thrown in one of Assad's notorious prisons created wide mistrust among Syrians," Khatib said. "Assad nurtured this culture of fear to maintain control and crush political opposition."

Just north of Damascus in the Saydnaya military prison, known as the "human slaughterhouse," women detainees, some with their children, screamed as men broke the locks off their cell doors. Amnesty International and other groups say that dozens of people were secretly executed every week in Saydnaya, estimating that up to 13,000 Syrians were killed between 2011 and 2016.

"Don't be afraid ... Bashar Assad has fallen! Why are you afraid?" said one of the rebels as he tried to rush streams of women out of their jam-packed tiny cells.

Tens of thousands of detainees have so far been freed, said Rami Abdurrahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based pro-opposition war monitor.

Over the past 10 days, insurgents freed prisoners in cities including Aleppo, Homs, Hama as well as Damascus.

Families seek loved ones who have been missing for years

Omar Alshogre, who was detained for three years and survived relentless torture, watched in awe from his home far from Syria as videos showed dozens of detainees fleeing.

"A hundred democracies in the world had done nothing to help them, and now a few military groups came down and broke open prison after prison," Alshogre, a human rights advocate who now resides in Sweden and the U.S., told The Associated Press.

Meanwhile, families of detainees and the disappeared skipped celebrations of the downfall of the Assad dynasty. Instead, they waited outside prisons and security branch centers, hoping their loved ones would be there. They had high expectations for the newcomers who will now run the battered country.

"This happiness will not be completed until I can see my son out of prison and know where he is," said Bassam Masri. "I have been searching for him for two hours. He has been detained for 13 years," since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011.

Rebels struggled to control the chaos as crowds gathered by the Court of Justice in Damascus.

Heba, who only gave her first name while speaking to the AP, said she was looking for her brother and brother-in-law who were detained while reporting a stolen car in 2011 and hadn't been seen since.

"They took away so many of us," said Heba, whose mother's cousin also disappeared. "We know nothing about them ... They (the Assad government) burned our hearts."

## Juan Soto agrees to record \$765 million, 15-year contract with Mets, AP source says

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

DALLAS (AP) — Star outfielder Juan Soto and the New York Mets agreed Sunday to a record \$765 million, 15-year contract, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press, a deal that could escalate to \$805 million and is believed to be the largest pact in team sports history.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the agreement, first reported by the New York Post, was subject to a successful physical.

While there are no definitive records in sports beyond the United States, Soto's deal is thought to eclipse those in all other team sports. The deal, spurning the New York Yankees' attempt to retain the star who helped them reach the World Series, was reached on the eve of the first full day of baseball's annual winter meetings.

He would have the right to opt out of the contract after the 2029 season if the Mets don't at that time increase the average annual value by \$4 million annually. Soto will get a \$75 million signing bonus, payable upon the deal's approval by the commissioner's office.

Soto's agreement is the largest and longest in Major League Baseball history, topping Shohei Ohtani's \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers, a deal signed last December. That agreement included \$680 million in deferred payments and is valued at just under \$46.1 million annually for baseball's luxury tax.

Soto's agreement does not include deferred money, the person said, leaving its average annual value at \$51 million. Its length tops Fernando Tatis Jr.'s \$340 million, 14-year contract with San Diego that runs through 2034.

The Yankees' final offer to Soto was for \$760 million over 16 years, a second person familiar with the talks said, also on condition of anonymity because that detail was not announced. That offer had a \$47.5 million average annual value.

A four-time All-Star at age 26, Soto is the most accomplished free agent at that age since shortstop Alex Rodriguez agreed to a record \$252 million, 10-year contract with Texas in December 2000 at age 25.

Soto was 19 when he made his major league debut with Washington in 2018 and helped the Nationals win the World Series the following year, when he hit .282 with 34 homers and 110 RBIs.

He turned down Washington's \$440 million, 15-year offer in 2022 and was traded that August to San Diego. Following the death of Padres owner Peter Seidler, Soto was dealt to the Yankees in December 2023 and helped New York reach the World Series for the first time since 2009.

Soto batted .288 with 41 homers, 109 RBIs and 129 walks, hitting second in the batting order ahead of Aaron Judge to power an offense that led the major leagues with 237 homers. He hit a go-ahead homer in the AL Championship Series opener against Cleveland and a tiebreaking, three-run homer in the 10th inning that won the pennant against the Guardians in Game 5.

Soto has a .285 batting average with 201 homers, 592 RBIs and 769 walks over seven major league seasons.

## Who is Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the leader of the insurgency that toppled Syria's Assad?

By KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Abu Mohammed al-Golani, the militant leader whose stunning insurgency toppled Syria's President Bashar Assad, has spent years working to remake his public image, renouncing longtime ties to al-Qaida and depicting himself as a champion of pluralism and tolerance. As he entered Damascus behind his victorious fighters Sunday, he even dropped his nom de guerre and referred to himself with his real name, Ahmad al-Sharaa.

The extent of that transformation from jihadi extremist to would-be state builder is now put to the test.



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Insurgents control Damascus, Assad has fled into hiding, and for the first time after 50 years of his family's iron hand, it is an open question how Syria will be governed.

Syria is home to multiple ethnic and religious communities, often pitted against each other by Assad's state and years of war. Many of them fear the possibility that Sunni Islamist extremists will take over. The country is also fragmented among disparate armed factions, and foreign powers from Russia and Iran to the United States, Turkey and Israel all have their hands in the mix.

Hours after Damascus' capture, the 42-year-old al-Sharaa made his first appearance in the city's landmark Umayyad Mosque, declaring Assad's fall "a victory for the Islamic nation." A senior rebel commander, Anas Salkhadi, appeared on state TV to declare, "Our message to all the sects of Syria, is that we tell them that Syria is for everyone,"

Al-Sharaa, who has been labeled a terrorist by the United States, and his insurgent force, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS -- many of whose fighters are jihadis -- now stand to be a major player.

For years, al-Sharaa worked to consolidate power, while bottled up in the province of Idlib in Syria's northwest corner as Assad's Iranian- and Russian-backed rule over much of the country appeared solid.

He maneuvered among extremist organizations while eliminating competitors and former allies. He sought to polish the image of his de-facto "salvation government" that has been running Idlib to win over international governments and reassure Syria's religious and ethnic minorities. And he built ties with various tribes and other groups.

Along the way, he shed his garb as a hard-line Islamist guerrilla and put on suits for press interviews, talking of building state institutions and decentralizing power to reflect Syria's diversity.

"Syria deserves a governing system that is institutional, no one where a single ruler makes arbitrary decisions," he said in an interview with CNN last week, offering the possibility HTS would eventually be dissolved after Assad falls.

"Don't judge by words, but by actions," he said.

Al-Golani's beginnings in Iraq

Throughout his rise through extremist ranks, al-Sharaa was only known by the jihadi nickname he adopted, Abu Mohammed al-Golani. His ties to al-Qaida stretch back to 2003, when he joined insurgents battling U.S. troops in Iraq. The Syrian native was detained by the U.S. military but remained in Iraq. During that time, al-Qaida usurped like-minded groups and formed the extremist Islamic State of Iraq, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In 2011, a popular uprising in Syria against Assad triggered a brutal government crackdown and led to all-out war. Al-Golani's prominence grew when al-Baghdadi sent him to Syria to establish a branch of al-Qaida called the Nusra Front. The United States labeled the new group as a terrorist organization. That designation still remains in place and the U.S. government has put a \$10 million bounty on him.

The Nusra Front and the Syrian conflict

As Syria's civil war intensified in 2013, so did al-Golani's ambitions. He defied al-Baghdadi's calls to dissolve the Nusra Front and merge it with al-Qaida's operation in Iraq, to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Al-Golani nonetheless pledged his allegiance to al-Qaida, which later disassociated itself from ISIS. The Nusra Front battled ISIS and eliminated much of its competition among the Syrian armed opposition to Assad.

In his first interview in 2014, al-Golani kept his face covered, telling a reporter for Qatari network Al-Jazeera that he rejected political talks in Geneva to end the conflict. He said his goal was to see Syria ruled under Islamic law and made clear that there was no room for the country's Alawite, Shiite, Druze and Christian minorities.

Consolidating power and rebranding

In 2016, al-Golani revealed his face to the public for the first time in a video message that announced his group was renaming itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham -- the Syria Conquest Front -- and cutting its ties to al-Qaida.

"This new organization has no affiliation to any external entity," he said in the video, filmed wearing military garb and a turban.

The move paved the way for al-Golani to assert full control over fracturing militant groups. A year later, his alliance rebranded again as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham -- meaning Organization for Liberating Syria -- as the groups merged, consolidating al-Golani's power in northwest Syria's Idlib province.

HTS later clashed with independent Islamist militants who opposed the merger, further emboldening al-Golani and his group as the leading power in northwestern Syria, able to rule with an iron fist.

With his power consolidated, al-Golani set in motion a transformation that few could have imagined. Replacing his military garb with shirt and trousers, he began calling for religious tolerance and pluralism.

He appealed to the Druze community in Idlib, which the Nusra Front had previously targeted, and visited the families of Kurds who were killed by Turkish-backed militias.

In 2021, he had his first interview with an American journalist on PBS. Wearing a blazer, with his short hair gelled back, the now more soft-spoken HTS leader said that his group posed no threat to the West and that sanctions imposed against it were unjust.

"Yes, we have criticized Western policies," he said. "But to wage a war against the United States or Europe from Syria, that's not true. We didn't say we wanted to fight."

## **Lara Trump steps down as RNC co-chair and addresses speculation about Florida Senate seat**

By JULIET LINDERMAN and MARTHA MENDOZA Associated Press

Lara Trump will step down as co-chair of the Republican National Committee as she considers a number of potential options with her father-in-law, President-elect Donald Trump, set to return to the White House.

Among those possibilities is replacing Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, whom Trump tapped to be the next secretary of state. If Rubio is confirmed, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis will choose who takes the seat through the remainder of Rubio's term, which expires in 2026.

"It is something I would seriously consider," she told The Associated Press in an interview. "If I'm being completely transparent, I don't know exactly what that would look like. And I certainly want to get all of the information possible if that is something that's real for me. But yeah, I would 100% consider it."

Elected as RNC co-chair in March, Lara Trump was a key player in the Republicans retaking the White House and control of the Senate while maintaining a narrow House majority. What she does next could shape Republican politics, given her elevated political profile and her ties to the incoming president.

The idea of placing a Trump family member in the Senate has been lauded in some Republican circles. Among the people pushing for her to replace Rubio is Maye Musk, mother of Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk.

"The Senate is an old man's club. We desperately need a smart, young, outspoken woman who will reveal their secrets," she posted on X. Lara Trump is 42.

Elon Musk, who was with Lara Trump on election night at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, responded to his mother's post: "Lara Trump is genuinely great."

Led by chairman Michael Whatley and Lara Trump, the RNC invested heavily in recruiting roughly 230,000 volunteers and an army of lawyers for what it called its "election integrity" effort, four years after Donald Trump lost his reelection bid to Democrat Joe Biden, citing false or unproven theories about voter fraud. Outside groups such as Turning Point Action and Musk's America PAC took a greater responsibility for advertising and get-out-the-vote efforts.

While Whatley will remain RNC chairman, Lara Trump said she felt she had accomplished her goals in the co-chair role.

"With that big win, I kind of feel like my time is up," she said. "What I intended to do has been done."

Lara Trump praised Musk's new endeavor, the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a non-governmental task force headed by Musk and fellow entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy. They've been tapped to fire federal workers, cut programs and slash federal regulations as part of Trump's "Save America"

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agenda for his second term.

"I really don't think we've seen movement like this in our federal government since our country's founding in many ways," she said. "And I think if they are successful in what they plan to do, I think it is going to be transformative to America in a great way."

She said she expects a different presidency this time, beginning with the structure of the administration: While Trump's daughter Ivanka and son-in-law Jared Kushner served as White House advisers in his last administration, Lara Trump said she doesn't see any family member taking any position in the White House this time around with her father-in-law.

"He really wants to get in there and do a good job for the four years, and that's all he wants to serve," she said. "Four years, and he's out."

Lara Trump also says she expects the Republican Party to be more unified than it has ever been. When she became co-chair in May, the Trump campaign and the RNC merged, with staffers fired and positions restructured. She said the result could spell trouble for GOP lawmakers who do not agree with Trump's agenda.

"The whole party has totally shifted and totally changed," she said. "I think people are feeling a little more bold in coming out with their political views."

## Dave Parker and Dick Allen elected to baseball's Hall of Fame

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

DALLAS (AP) — Having waited for the call from Cooperstown for nearly three decades, Dave Parker burst into tears Sunday when he was elected to baseball's Hall of Fame along with the late Dick Allen.

"Yeah, I cried," Parker said after receiving the news from Hall chair Jane Forbes Clark. "It only took a few minutes, because I don't cry."

Parker received 14 of 16 votes from the classic era committee at the winter meetings, and Allen got 13. A vote of 75% or more was needed for election.

They will be inducted into the Hall in Cooperstown, New York, on July 27 along with players voted in by the Baseball Writers' Association of America, whose balloting will be announced on Jan. 21.

Tommy John was third with seven votes on a committee that considered candidates whose primary impact was before 1980. Ken Boyer, Steve Garvey and Luis Tiant each received less than five votes, as did Negro Leaguers John Donaldson and Vic Harris.

Parker, who turned 73 in June, never got more than 24.5% during 15 appearances on the BBWAA ballot from 1997-2011. Allen, who died in 2020 at age 78, received a high of 18.9% on the BBWAA ballot from 1983-97. Both also had fallen short in a series of prior committee votes.

His body shaking during a Zoom news conference from Parkinson's disease that was diagnosed in 2012, Parker flashed the quick wit he became known for during a 19-year career that ended in 1991 and included a pair of World Series titles. Asked whether he had thought of himself as a Hall of Famer, Parker responded with one of his often-said remarks.

"Without a doubt. When the leaves turned brown, I'd be wearing the batting crown," he said. "That was one of my sayings, so I always thought that I was going to be a major leaguer. I told my mother at 8 years old that I would be a baseball star and one day buy her a house. Well, I did that in '78. I got that done."

Nicknamed The Cobra, Parker hit .290 with 339 homers and 1,493 RBIs for Pittsburgh (1973-83), Cincinnati (1984-87), Oakland (1988-89), Milwaukee (1990), California (1991) and Toronto (1991).

Since 2002, the Hall has made the decision on what team logo is used on a player's cap.

"I might have to split it up three ways," Parker said.

He won World Series titles in 1979 and '89. He was the 1978 NL MVP, won the 1977 and '78 NL batting titles, and was a seven-time All-Star and three-time Gold Glove right fielder.

"I was a five-tool player. I could do them all," he said. "I never trotted to first base. I don't know if people noticed that, but I ran hard on every play."

He had the Pirates wear T-shirts that read: "If you hear any noise, it's just me and the boys boppin'," an idea sparked when Pittsburgh lost three of four after a 5-0 start in 1976.

"Don't go out and try to copyright it because it's mine," he recalled telling his teammates.

Parker homered for the A's in the 1989 World Series opener and took credit for helping the Bash Brothers of Jose Canseco and Mark McGwire take the title.

"I taught them how to win," Parker said. "They didn't know how to win. They had all that thunder and didn't know how to win."

Parker led major league outfielders with 26 assists in 1977 and finished with 143.

"I enjoyed throwing out players," he said. "And if they kept running, I would hit them in the back of the head with the ball."

Allen, who died in 2020 at age 78, was born in Wampum, Pennsylvania, and he was nicknamed The Wampum Whammer along with Crash — shortened from Crash Helmet, which started when wore his helmet in the field to protect himself from demanding Philadelphia Phillies fans.

He hit .292 with 351 homers and 1,119 RBIs from 1963-77 for Philadelphia (1963-69, 1975-76), St. Louis (1970), the Los Angeles Dodgers (1971), Chicago White Sox (1972-74) and Oakland (1977).

Known as Richie Allen with the Phillies before asking to be referred to as Dick for the rest of his career, Allen was seven-time All-Star who was voted the 1964 NL Rookie of the Year and the 1972 AL MVP.

Ichiro Suzuki, CC Sabathia and Félix Hernández are among the 14 players eligible for the BBWAA ballot for the first time in the upcoming vote. Holdovers include Billy Wagner, who was five votes shy last January.

## **Analysis: Collapse of Syria's Assad is a blow to Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

MANAMA, Bahrain (AP) — For Iran's theocratic government, it keeps getting worse.

Its decadeslong strategy of building an "Axis of Resistance" supporting militant groups and proxies around the region is falling apart. First came the crushing Israeli campaign in Gaza triggered by the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel by Iranian-backed Hamas.

That war spawned another in Lebanon, where Israel has mauled Iran's most powerful ally, Hezbollah, even as Israel has launched successful airstrikes openly inside of Iran for the first time.

And now Iran's longtime stalwart ally and client in Syria, President Bashar Assad, is gone. As dawn broke Sunday, rebel forces completed a lightning offensive by seizing the ancient capital of Damascus and tearing down symbols of more than 50 years of Assad's rule over the Mideast crossroads.

Ali Akbar Velayati, a key adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, once called Assad and Syria "the golden ring of the resistance chain in the region."

"Without the Syrian government, this chain will break and the resistance against Israel and its supporters will be weakened."

That break in the chain is literal. Syria was an important geographical link that allowed Iran to move weapons and other supplies to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Its loss now further weakens Hezbollah, whose powerful arsenal in southern Lebanon had put Iranian influence directly on the border of its nemesis Israel.

"Iran's deterrence thinking is really shattered by events in Gaza, by events in Lebanon and definitely by developments in Syria," a senior diplomat from the United Arab Emirates, Anwar Gargash, said at the International Institute for Strategic Studies' Manama Dialogue in Bahrain.

Iran still holds the card of its nuclear program. Though it denies that intention, it can use the potential for building a weapons capability to cast a shadow of influence in the region.

"Iran remains a critical regional player," Gargash said. "We should use this moment to connect and speak about what's next in my opinion."

It's a dramatic reversal in Iran's regional might

Only a few years ago, the Islamic Republic loomed ascendant across the wider Middle East. Its "Axis of Resistance" was at a zenith.

Hezbollah in Lebanon stood up against Israel. Assad appeared to have weathered an Arab Spring uprising-

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turned-civil war. Iraqi insurgents killed U.S. troops with Iranian-designed roadside bombs. Yemen's Houthi rebels fought a Saudi-led coalition to a stalemate.

Syria, at the crossroads, played a vital role.

Early in Syria's civil war, when it appeared Assad might be overthrown, Iran and its ally, Hezbollah, rushed fighters to support him — in the name of defending Shiite shrines in Syria. Russia later joined with a scorched earth campaign of airstrikes.

The campaign won back territory, even as Syria remained divided into zones of government and insurgent control.

But the speed of Assad's collapse the past week showed just how reliant he was on support from Iran and Russia — which at the crucial moment didn't come.

"What was surprising was the Syrian's army's failure to counter the offensive, and also the speed of the developments," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told state television late Sunday night. "That was unexpected."

Russia remains mired in Ukraine years after launching a full-scale invasion there in 2022. For Iran, international sanctions over its advancing nuclear program have ground down its economy.

For Israel, breaking Iran's regional network has been a major goal, though it is wary over jihadi fighters among the insurgents who toppled Assad. Israel on Sunday moved troops into a demilitarized buffer zone with Syria by the Israel-held Golan Heights in what it called a temporary security measure.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Assad's fall a "historic day," saying it was "the direct result of our forceful action against Hezbollah and Iran, Assad's main supporters."

Iran's theocratic rulers long touted their regional network to Iranians as a show of their country's strength, and its crumbling could raise repercussions at home — though there is no immediate sign of their hold weakening. Anger over the tens of billions of dollars Iran is believed to have spent propping up Assad was a rallying cry in rounds of nationwide anti-government protests that have broken out over recent years, most recently in 2022.

Iran could respond by revving up its nuclear program

The loss of Syria does not mean the end of Iran's ability to project power in the Mideast. The Houthi rebels continue to launch attacks on Israel and on ships moving through the Red Sea — though the tempo of their attacks has again fallen without a clear explanation from their leadership.

Iran also maintains its nuclear program. While insisting it enriches uranium for peaceful purposes, Western intelligence agencies and the International Atomic Energy Agency say Iran had an organized nuclear weapons program until 2003.

The head of the IAEA also warned Friday that Iran is poised to "quite dramatically" increase its stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium as it has started cascades of advanced centrifuges.

"If Iran would develop nuclear weapons, that would be a great blow to the international nonproliferation regime," said Thanos Dokos, Greece's national security adviser, in Bahrain.

There remains a risk of wider attacks in the region, particularly on oil infrastructure. An attack in 2019 initially claimed by the Houthis but later assessed by experts to have been carried out by Iran temporarily halved Saudi Arabia's production of oil.

"If, as a result of escalation, there are attacks against the energy infrastructure of Iran or Saudi Arabia, that would be bad news for the global oil supply," Dokos warned.

Whatever happens next, Iran will need to make the decision weighing the problems it faces at both home and abroad.

"Whereas stability is a difficult commodity to export, instability can travel very fast, which is why stability in the Middle East is very important for all of us," Dokos said.

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## Trump taps his attorney Alina Habba to serve as counselor to the president

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump has announced that he is appointing one of his defense attorneys in the New York hush money case as counselor to the president.

Alina Habba, 40, defended Trump earlier this year, also serving as his legal spokesperson. Habba has been spending time with the president-elect since the election at his Florida club Mar-a-Lago.

"She has been unwavering in her loyalty and unmatched in her resolve — standing with me through numerous 'trials,' battles and countless days in Court," Trump posted on his social network Truth Social. "Few understand the Weaponization of the 'Injustice' System better than Alina."

Trump became the first former American president to be convicted of felony crimes when a New York jury in May found him guilty of all 34 charges in a scheme to illegally influence the 2016 election through a hush money payment to a porn actor who said the two had sex.

In Trump's first term, the position of counselor was held by Republican strategist Kellyanne Conway. Habba has Iraqi ancestry and is Chaldean, which is Iraq's largest Christian denomination and one of the Catholic Church's Eastern rites.

Habba frequently accompanied Trump on the campaign trail and was one of the speakers at the late October rally in New York's Madison Square Garden.

On Sunday, Trump also announced he is bringing back former staffer Michael Anton to serve as director of policy planning at the State Department. Anton served as the National Security Council spokesman from 2017 to 2018.

Trump said he also will be appointing Michael Needham, a former chief of staff for Sen. Marco Rubio, as counselor of the State Department. The Florida senator was chosen by Trump to be his next secretary of state.

## College Football Playoff's first 12-team bracket is set with Oregon No. 1 and SMU in, Alabama out

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

The new, 12-team College Football Playoff brings with it a promise to be bigger, more exciting, more lucrative.

Perfect or 100% fair? Well, nobody ever believed that.

The first expanded playoff bracket unveiled Sunday left a presumably deserving Alabama team on the sideline in favor of an SMU squad that finished with a better record after playing a schedule that was not as difficult.

It ranked undefeated Oregon first but set up a possible rematch against Ohio State, the team that came closest to beating the Ducks this year.

It treated underdog Boise State like a favorite and banged-up Georgia like a world beater at No. 2.

It gave Ohio State home-field advantage against Tennessee for reasons it would take a supercomputer to figure out.

It gave the sport the multiweek tournament it has longed for, but also ensured there will be plenty to grouse about between now and when the trophy is handed out on Jan. 20 after what will easily be the longest college football season in history.

All of it, thankfully, will be sorted out on the field starting with first-round games on campuses Dec. 20 and 21, then over three succeeding rounds that will wind their way through traditional bowl sites.

Maybe Oregon coach Dan Lanning, whose undefeated Ducks are the favorite to win it all, put it best when he offered: "Winning a national championship is not supposed to be easy."

Neither, it turns out, is figuring out who should play for it.

Alabama comes up short in the bracket's biggest debate

The Big Ten will lead the way with four teams in the tournament, followed by the SEC with three and

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the ACC with two. The lasting memory from the inaugural bracket will involve the decision that handed the ACC that second bid.

Alabama of the SEC didn't play Saturday. SMU of the ACC did. The Mustangs fell behind by three touchdowns to Clemson before coming back to tie. But they ultimately lost 34-31 on a 56-yard field goal as time expired.

"We were on pins and needles," SMU coach Rhett Lashley said. "Until we saw the name 'SMU' up there, we were hanging on the edge. We're really, really happy and thankful to the committee for rewarding our guys for their total body of work."

The Mustangs only had two losses, compared to three for the Crimson Tide. Even though SMU's schedule wasn't nearly as tough, the committee was impressed by the way the Mustangs came back against Clemson.

"We just felt, in this particular case, SMU had the nod above Alabama," said Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel, the chairman of the selection committee. "But it's no disrespect to Alabama's strength of schedule. We looked at the entire body of work for both teams."

Crimson Tide AD gracious, but looking for answers

Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne was gracious, up to a point.

"Disappointed with the outcome and felt we were one of the 12 best teams in the country," he said on social media.

Even though all of Alabama's losses came against conference opponents this season, Byrne said "we will need to assess how many (Power Four) non-conference games make sense in the future to put us in the best position to participate in the CFP. That is not good for college football."

Georgia, Boise State and Arizona State join Oregon with first-round byes

Georgia, the SEC champion, was seeded second; Boise State, the Mountain West champion, earned the third seed; and Big 12 titlist Arizona State got the fourth seed and the fourth and final first-round bye.

All will play in quarterfinals at bowl games on Dec. 31-Jan. 1.

Clemson stole a bid and the 12th seed with its crazy win over SMU, the result that ultimately cost Alabama a spot in the field. The Tigers moved to No. 16 in the rankings, but got in as the fifth-best conference winner.

Automatic byes and bids made the bracket strange

The conference commissioners' idea to give conference champions preferable treatment in this first iteration of the 12-team playoff could be up for reconsideration after this season.

The committee actually ranked Boise State, the Mountain West Champion, at No. 9 and Big 12 champion Arizona State at No. 12, but both get to skip the first round.

Another CFP guideline: There's no reseeding of teams after each round, which means no break for Oregon. The top-seeded Ducks will face the winner of Tennessee-Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. Oregon beat Ohio State 32-31 earlier this year in one of the season's best games.

What the matchups look like

No. 12 Clemson at No. 5 Texas, Dec. 21. Clemson is riding high after the SMU upset, while Texas is 0-2 against Georgia and 11-0 vs. everyone else this season. The winner faces ... Arizona State in the Peach Bowl. Huh?

No. 11 SMU at No. 6 Penn State, Dec. 21. The biggest knock against the Mustangs was that they didn't play any big boys with that 60th-ranked strength of schedule. Well, now they get to. The winner faces ... Boise State in the Fiesta Bowl. Yes, SMU vs. Boise was the quarterfinal we all expected.

No. 10 Indiana at No. 7 Notre Dame, Dec. 20. Hoosiers coach Curt Cignetti thought his team deserved a home game. Well, not quite but close. The winner faces ... Georgia in the Sugar Bowl. The Bulldogs got the No. 2 seed despite a throwing-arm injury to QB Carson Beck. But what else was the committee supposed to do?

No. 9 Tennessee at No. 8 Ohio State, Dec. 21. The Buckeyes (losses to Oregon, Michigan) got home field over the Volunteers (losses to Arkansas, Georgia) in a matchup of programs with two of the biggest stadiums in football. The winner faces ... Oregon in the Rose Bowl. Feels like that matchup should come in the semifinals or later.

## A timeline of the fatal shooting of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson and search for his killer

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The search for UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's killer since Thompson was ambushed Wednesday outside a Midtown Manhattan hotel has stretched beyond New York City. While still looking to identify the suspect, the FBI has offered a \$50,000 reward for information leading to his arrest and conviction. That's on top of a \$10,000 reward offered by the NYPD.

The gunman used a fake ID and paid cash during the 10 days he was in the city, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny told reporters Friday. He also kept his face covered except while checking in at a hostel. He was captured on some of the thousands of surveillance cameras blanketing Manhattan, allowing police to build a timeline of his movements.

Here's what we know so far about what the NYPD describes as a planned attack.

Nov. 24

10:11 p.m. — The suspected shooter arrives in New York City on a Greyhound bus at the Port Authority terminal. The bus originated in Atlanta and made six or seven stops on the way to New York. Police could not immediately determine where he got on the bus.

The man then takes a taxi to the area of the New York Hilton Midtown and is there for about a half hour.

About 11 p.m. — The man takes a taxi to the HI New York City Hostel at 891 Amsterdam Ave., where he stays until the morning of the shooting. He presents an ID that police believe to be fake. Two roommates in a shared room that had bunkbeds never saw his face, police said, because he kept his mask on.

When speaking with an employee in the hostel lobby, he briefly pulled down his facemask and smiled — a moment captured on surveillance images that have been widely circulated by police.

Nov. 29

The man was checked out of the hostel, where guests are automatically checked out if they don't show at the desk by a certain time. Police don't believe he stayed someplace else and checked back into the same hostel the next day.

Dec. 4

About 5:30 a.m. — The suspected shooter leaves the hostel well before dawn.

5:41 a.m. — He appears on video at 54th Street and Sixth Avenue walking back and forth in the area of the Hilton hotel where United Healthcare's parent company, UnitedHealth Group, is holding its annual investor conference.

Police deduce that he rode a bicycle to the Hilton because it took him such a short time to get there. "Could he have stolen the bike? These are things we're still looking into," Kenny said.

At some point, he went to a nearby Starbucks and purchased a bottle of water and at least one energy bar before returning to the hotel.

6:44 a.m. — He shoots Thompson as the executive arrives alone, on foot, having walked from a hotel across the street. The man flees.

6:48 a.m. — The man enters Central Park by bicycle at the 60th Street and Center Drive entrance. It's in the park and away from security cameras that police believe he discards a gray backpack.

6:56 a.m. — He leaves the park at West 77th Street and Central Park West, still on the bicycle.

6:58 a.m. — He passes another camera on 85th Street and Columbus Avenue, still on the bicycle.

7 a.m. — He's at 86th Street, no longer with the bicycle.

7:04 a.m. — He enters a taxi northbound at 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

7:30 a.m. — He's near the George Washington Bridge and the bus terminal there. It offers commuter service to New Jersey and Greyhound routes to Philadelphia, Boston and Washington.

After the attack, investigators find the words "deny," "defend" and "depose," written in permanent marker on ammunition at the scene. The words mimic a phrase used by insurance industry critics.

Dec. 6

Kenny and Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch reveal that investigators believe the gunman left New York



City on a bus. Investigators say he entered the George Washington Bridge Bus Station but have not found video of him leaving or getting on a bus.

"It could possibly be a disgruntled employee, or a disgruntled client," Kenny says of a possible motive in a briefing.

Police find what they say is the man's backpack. Its contents are not disclosed.

Dec. 7

Police continue to search Central Park; scuba divers are seen scouring a pond. The NYPD releases additional photos showing the suspected shooter next to and in the back seat of a taxi. In both images he is seen wearing a blue, medical-style face mask.

Despite recovering a fingerprint from the Starbucks purchase and sending items for DNA testing, police have yet to publicly identify the suspect.

Dec. 8

Scuba divers are again seen at a Central Park pond. Police decline to comment on the investigation.

## Ousted Syrian leader Assad flees to Moscow after fall of Damascus, Russian state media say

By ABDULRAHMAN SHAHEEN, SARAH EL DEEB and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — Ousted Syrian leader Bashar Assad fled to Moscow and received asylum from his longtime ally, Russian media said Sunday, hours after a stunning rebel advance seized control of Damascus and ended his family's 50 years of iron rule.

Thousands of Syrians poured into streets echoing with celebratory gunfire and waved the revolutionary flag in scenes that recalled the early days of the Arab Spring uprising, before a brutal crackdown and the rise of an insurgency plunged the country into a nearly 14-year civil war.

The swiftly moving events raised questions about the future of the country and the wider region.

"Our approach has shifted the balance of power in the Middle East," President Joe Biden said, crediting action by the U.S. and its allies for weakening Syria's backers — Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. He called the fall of Assad a "fundamental act of justice" but also a "moment of risk and uncertainty," and said rebel groups are "saying the right things now" but the U.S. would assess their actions.

Russia requested an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council to discuss Syria, according to Dmitry Polyansky, its deputy ambassador to the U.N., in a post on Telegram.

The arrival of Assad and his family in Moscow was reported by Russian agencies Tass and RIA, citing an unidentified source at the Kremlin. A spokesman there didn't immediately respond to questions. RIA also said Syrian insurgents had guaranteed the security of Russian military bases and diplomatic posts in Syria.

Earlier, Russia said Assad left Syria after negotiations with rebel groups and that he had given instructions to transfer power peacefully.

The leader of Syria's biggest rebel faction, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, is poised to chart the country's future. The former al-Qaida commander cut ties with the group years ago and says he embraces pluralism and religious tolerance. His Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, or HTS, is considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the U.N.

In his first public appearance since fighters entered the Damascus suburbs Saturday, al-Golani visited the Umayyad Mosque and described Assad's fall as "a victory to the Islamic nation." Calling himself by his given name, Ahmad al-Sharaa, and not his nom de guerre, he said Assad had made Syria "a farm for Iran's greed."

The rebels face the daunting task of healing bitter divisions in a country ravaged by war and split among armed factions. Turkey-backed opposition fighters are battling U.S.-allied Kurdish forces in the north, and the Islamic State group is still active in remote areas.

Syrian state television broadcast a rebel statement saying Assad had been overthrown and all prisoners had been released. They urged people to preserve the institutions of "the free Syrian state," and announced a curfew in Damascus from 4 p.m. to 5 a.m.

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An online video purported to show rebels freeing dozens of women at the notorious Saydnaya prison, where rights groups say thousands were tortured and killed. At least one small child was seen among them.

"This happiness will not be completed until I can see my son out of prison and know where he is," said one relative, Bassam Masr. "I have been searching for him for two hours. He has been detained for 13 years."

Rebel commander Anas Salkhadi appeared on state TV and sought to reassure religious and ethnic minorities, saying: "Syria is for everyone, no exceptions. Syria is for Druze, Sunnis, Alawites, and all sects."

"We will not deal with people the way the Assad family did," he added.

Celebrations in the capital

Damascus residents prayed in mosques and celebrated in squares, calling, "God is great." People chanted anti-Assad slogans and honked car horns. Teenage boys picked up weapons apparently discarded by security forces and fired into the air.

Soldiers and police fled their posts and looters broke into the Defense Ministry. Families wandered the presidential palace, walking by damaged portraits of Assad. Other parts of the capital were empty and shops were closed.

"It's like a dream. I need someone to wake me up," said opposition fighter Abu Laith, adding the rebels were welcomed in Damascus with "love."

Rebels stood guard at the Justice Ministry, where Judge Khitam Haddad said he and colleagues were protecting documents. Outside, residents sought information about relatives who disappeared under Assad.

The rebels "have felt the pain of the people," said one woman, giving only her first name, Heba. She worried about possible revenge killings by the rebels, many of whom appeared to be underage.

Syria's historically pro-government newspaper al-Watan called it "a new page for Syria. We thank God for not shedding more blood." It added that media workers should not be blamed for publishing past government statements ordered from above.

A statement from the Alawite sect that formed the core of Assad's 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."

The rebels mainly come from the Sunni Muslim majority in Syria, which also has sizable Druze, Christian and Kurdish communities. In Qamishli in the northeast, a Kurdish man slapped a statue of the late leader Hafez Assad with his shoe.

Calls for an orderly transition

The rebel advances since Nov. 27 were the largest in recent years, and saw the cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs fall within days as the Syrian army melted away. The road to Damascus from the Lebanese border was littered with military uniforms and charred armored vehicles.

Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, which provided crucial support to Assad, abandoned him as they reeled from other conflicts.

The end of Assad's rule was a major blow to Iran and its proxies, already weakened by conflict with Israel. Iran said Syrians should decide their future "without destructive, coercive, foreign intervention." The Iranian Embassy in Damascus was ransacked after apparently having been abandoned.

Hossein Akbari, Iran's ambassador to Syria, said it was "effectively impossible" to help the Syrian government after it admitted the insurgents' military superiority. Speaking on Iranian state media from an undisclosed location, he said Syria's government decided Saturday night to hand over power peacefully.

"When the army and the people could not resist, it was a good decision to let go to prevent bloodshed and destruction," Akbari said, adding that some of his colleagues left Syria before sunrise.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking on state TV, said there were concerns about the "possibility of civil war, disintegration of Syria, total collapse and turning Syria into a shelter for terrorists."

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Ghazi Jalali has said the government was ready to "extend its hand" to the opposition and turn its functions over to a transitional government. A video on Syrian opposition media showed armed men escorting him from his office to a hotel.

The U.N.'s special envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, has called for urgent talks in Geneva to ensure an "orderly political transition."

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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, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia and Turkey.

Majed al-Ansari, Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesman, said 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."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israeli troops had seized a buffer zone in the Golan Heights established in 1974, saying it was to protect Israeli residents after Syrian troops abandoned positions. Israel's military later warned residents of five southern Syria communities to stay home for their safety, and didn't respond to questions.

Israel captured the Golan in the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed it. The international community, except for the U.S., views it as occupied, and the Arab League on Sunday condemned what it called Israel's efforts to take advantage of Assad's downfall to occupy more territory.

## Trump says he can't guarantee tariffs won't raise US prices and won't rule out revenge prosecutions

By BILL BARROW and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump said he can't guarantee that his promised tariffs on key U.S. foreign trade partners won't raise prices for American consumers and he suggested once more that some political rivals and federal officials who pursued legal cases against him should be imprisoned.

The president-elect, in a wide-ranging interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" that aired Sunday, also touched on monetary policy, immigration, abortion and health care, and U.S. involvement in Ukraine, Israel and elsewhere.

Trump often mixed declarative statements with caveats, at one point cautioning "things do change."

A look at some of the issues covered:

Trump hems on whether trade penalties could raise prices

Trump has threatened broad trade penalties, but said he didn't believe economists' predictions that added costs on those imported goods for American companies would lead to higher prices for U.S. consumers. He stopped short of a pledge that U.S. households won't be paying more as they shop.

"I can't guarantee anything. I can't guarantee tomorrow," Trump said, seeming to open the door to accepting the reality of how import levies typically work as goods reach the retail market.

That's a different approach from Trump's typical speeches throughout the 2024 campaign, when he framed his election as a sure way to curb inflation.

In the interview, Trump defended tariffs generally, saying they are "going to make us rich."

He has pledged that, on his first day in office in January, he would impose 25% tariffs on all goods imported from Mexico and Canada unless those countries satisfactorily stop illegal immigration and the flow of illegal drugs such as fentanyl into the United States. He also has threatened additional tariffs on China to help force that country to crack down on fentanyl production.

"All I want to do is I want to have a level, fast, but fair playing field," Trump said.

Trump suggests retribution for his opponents while claiming no interest in vengeance

He offered conflicting statements on how he would approach the justice system after winning election despite being convicted of 34 felonies in a New York state court and being indicted in other cases for his handling of national security secrets and efforts to overturn his 2020 loss to Democrat Joe Biden.

"Honestly, they should go to jail," Trump said of members of Congress who investigated the Capitol riot by his supporters who wanted him to remain in power.

The president-elect underscored his contention that he can use the justice system against others, including special prosecutor Jack Smith, who led the case on Trump's role in the siege on Jan. 6, 2021. Trump confirmed his plan to pardon supporters who were convicted for their roles in the riot, saying he would take that action on his first day in office.

As for the idea of revenge driving potential prosecutions, Trump said: "I have the absolute right. I'm the

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chief law enforcement officer, you do know that. I'm the president. But I'm not interested in that."

At the same time, Trump singled out lawmakers on a special House committee who had investigated the insurrection, citing Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., and former Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo.

"Cheney was behind it ... so was Bennie Thompson and everybody on that committee," Trump said.

Asked specifically whether he would direct his administration to pursue cases, he said, "No," and suggested he did not expect the FBI to quickly undertake investigations into his political enemies.

But at another point, Trump said he would leave the matter up to Pam Bondi, his pick as attorney general. "I want her to do what she wants to do," he said.

Such threats, regardless of Trump's inconsistencies, have been taken seriously enough by many top Democrats that Biden is considering issuing blanket, preemptive pardons to protect key members of his outgoing administration.

Trump did seemingly back off his campaign rhetoric calling for Biden to be investigated, saying, "I'm not looking to go back into the past."

Swift action on immigration is coming

Trump repeatedly mentioned his promises to seal the U.S.-Mexico border and deport millions of people who are in the U.S. illegally through a mass deportation program.

"I think you have to do it," he said.

He suggested he would try to use executive action to end "birthright" citizenship under which people born in the U.S. are considered citizens — although such protections are spelled out in the Constitution.

Asked specifically about the future for people who were brought into the country illegally as children and have been shielded from deportation in recent years, Trump said, "I want to work something out," indicating he might seek a solution with Congress.

But Trump also said he does not "want to be breaking up families" of mixed legal status, "so the only way you don't break up the family is you keep them together and you have to send them all back."

Trump commits to NATO, with conditions, and waffles on Putin and Ukraine

Long a critic of NATO members for not spending more on their own defense, Trump said he "absolutely" would remain in the alliance "if they pay their bills."

Pressed on whether he would withdraw if he were dissatisfied with allies' commitments, Trump said he wants the U.S. treated "fairly" on trade and defense.

He waffled on a NATO priority of containing Russia and President Vladimir Putin.

Trump suggested Ukraine should prepare for less U.S. aid in its defense against Putin's invasion. "Possibly. Yeah, probably. Sure," Trump said of reducing Ukraine assistance from Washington. Separately, Trump has called for an immediate ceasefire.

Asked about Putin, Trump said initially that he has not talked to the Russian leader since Election Day last month, but then hedged: "I haven't spoken to him recently." Trump said when pressed, adding that he did not want to "impede the negotiation."

Trump says Powell is safe at the Fed, but not Wray at the FBI

The president-elect said he has no intention, at least for now, of asking Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell to step down before Powell's term ends in 2028. Trump said during the campaign that presidents should have more say in Fed policy, including interest rates.

Trump did not offer any job assurances for FBI Director Christopher Wray, whose term is to end in 2027.

Asked about Wray, Trump said: "Well, I mean, it would sort of seem pretty obvious" that if the Senate confirms Kash Patel as his pick for FBI chief, then "he's going to be taking somebody's place, right? Somebody is the man that you're talking about."

Trump is absolute about Social Security, not so much on abortion and health insurance

Trump promised that the government efficiency effort led by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy will not threaten Social Security. "We're not touching Social Security, other than we make it more efficient," he said. He added that "we're not raising ages or any of that stuff."

He was not so specific about abortion or his long-promised overhaul of the Affordable Care Act.

On abortion, Trump continued his inconsistencies and said he would "probably" not move to restrict

access to the abortion pills that now account for a majority of pregnancy terminations, according to the Guttmacher Institute, which supports abortion rights. But pressed on whether he would commit to that position, Trump replied, "Well, I commit. I mean, are -- things do -- things change. I think they change."

Reprising a line from his Sept. 10 debate against Vice President Kamala Harris, Trump again said he had "concepts" of a plan to substitute for the 2010 Affordable Care Act, which he called "lousy health care."

He added a promise that any Trump version would maintain insurance protections for Americans with preexisting health conditions. He did not explain how such a design would be different from the status quo or how he could deliver on his desire for "better health care for less money."

## '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 Iziium, 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 Izium 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 Achkasova says, adding that the reindeer volunteers aim to ensure that every child feels seen, heard and loved.

## South Korea's democracy held after a 6-hour power play.

### What does it say for democracies elsewhere?

By LAURIE KELLMAN and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — In an era of rising authoritarianism, at the heels of a six-hour martial law decree that unfolded while many South Koreans slept, something noteworthy happened: Democracy held.

The past week in Seoul, officials and academics warn, is what a threat to democracy looks like in 2024. It's a democratically-elected president declaring martial law over the nation he leads, asserting sweeping powers to prevent opposition demonstrations, ban political parties and control the media. It's members of the military attempting to block lawmakers from exercising their power to vote on cancelling the power grab.

And here's what it took to defeat President Yoon Suk Yeol's lurch toward government by force:

Unified popular support for democracy. Legislators storming the National Assembly past midnight, live-streaming themselves climbing over fences. A politician grabbing at a soldier's rifle and yelling "Aren't you ashamed?" until he retreated. And finally, decisively, Parliament assembling a quorum and voting unanimously to cancel martial law.

It was a victory for a hard-won democracy — and for the idea that checks and balances among branches of government must work to counteract each other's ambitions, as the American founders wrote in the Federalist Papers in 1788.

But as the drama played out in Seoul, the scaffolding of democracy rattled around the world.

It said something about the rule of law

In other countries, the grab for power might have worked. Other would-be authoritarians might have been better prepared than Yoon.

In deeply polarized societies — the United States, for example, where Republicans are staunchly loyal to president-elect Donald Trump — there might not have been decisive support from the public or the opposition. The military might have used force. And the members of the legislature might not have voted

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as one to snuff out the attempted takeover.

"President Yoon's attempt to declare martial law reveals the fragility of the rule of law in divided societies, especially those with governments in which the chief executive cannot be easily dismissed by the legislature," said Tom Pepinsky, a government professor at Cornell University who studies backsliding among democracies in Southeast Asia.

Notably, he said in an email, "No members of President Yoon's own party were willing to defend his actions in public."

Nevertheless, Yoon's surprise attempt to impose martial law revealed both the fragility and resilience of the country's democratic system.

Within three hours of his stunning announcement to impose military rule — claiming the opposition was "paralyzing" state affairs — 190 lawmakers voted to cancel his actions. In so doing, they demonstrated the strength of the country's democratic checks and balances.

Yoon's authoritarian push, carried out by hundreds of heavily armed troops with Blackhawk helicopters and armored vehicles sent to the National Assembly, harked back to an era of dictatorial presidents. The country's democratic transition in the late 1980s came after years of massive protests by millions that eventually overcame violent suppressions by military rulers.

Civilian presence was again crucial in shaping the events following Yoon's late night television announcement on Tuesday. Thousands of people flocked to the National Assembly, shouting slogans for martial law to be lifted and Yoon to step down from power. There were no reports of violent clashes as troops and police officers.

"We restored democracy without having a single casualty this time," said Seol Dong-hoon, a sociology professor at South Korea's Jeonbuk National University.

It's not that easy to become a dictator

It's virtually impossible for any leader of a democracy to pull off a transition toward martial law without a public willing to support it, or at least tolerate it.

Opposition leader Lee Jae-myung, who narrowly lost to Yoon in the 2022 presidential election, attracted millions of views as he began live-streaming his journey to the National Assembly, pleading for people to converge to the parliament to help lawmakers get inside. The shaky footage later shows him exiting his car climbing over a fence to get onto the grounds.

The vote at the National Assembly was also broadcast live on the YouTube channel of Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik, who also had to scale a fence to get in.

Yoon's sense of crisis clearly wasn't shared by the public, whose opinions, Seol said, were shaped predominantly by the shocking videos broadcast to their devices.

"Ultimately, democracy is all about moving public opinion," he said. "What was most crucial in this case was that everything was broadcast live on smartphones, YouTube and countless other media."

Opposition lawmakers are now pushing to remove Yoon from office, saying he failed to meet the constitutional requirement that martial law should only be considered in wartime or a comparable severe crisis — and that he unlawfully deployed troops to the National Assembly.

On Saturday, an opposition-led impeachment motion failed after most lawmakers from Yoon's party boycotted the vote. Yet the president's troubles persist: The vote's defeat is expected to intensify nationwide protests and deepen South Korea's political turmoil, with opposition parties preparing to introduce another impeachment motion when parliament reconvenes next Wednesday.

Han Sang-hie, a law professor at Seoul's Konkuk University, said the martial law debacle highlights what he sees as the most crucial flaw of South Korea's democracy: that it places too much power in the hands of the president, which is easily abused and often goes unchecked.

It's called a 'self-coup'

Political scientists call what happened in South Korea an "autogolpe" — a "self-coup" — defined as one led by incumbent leaders themselves, in which an executive takes or sponsors illegal actions against others in the government. Yoon qualifies because he used troops to try to shut down South Korea's legislature.

Self-coups are increasing, with a third of the 46 since 1945 occurring in the past decade, according to a

study by researchers from Carnegie Mellon University and Penn State University. About 80% of self-coups succeed, they reported.

In 2021, a power grab by Tunisian President Kais Saied raised similar concerns around the world after the country designed a democracy from scratch and won a Nobel Peace Prize after a largely bloodless revolution.

In the United States, some have expressed worry about similar situations arising during the second administration of Donald Trump. He has vowed, after all, to shake some of democracy's pillars. He's mused that he would be justified if he decided to pursue "the termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution." That's in contrast to the oath of office he took in 2017, and will again next year, to "preserve, protect and defend the Constitution" as best he can.

Nearly half of voters in the Nov. 5 election, which Trump won, said they were "very concerned" that another Trump presidency would bring the U.S. closer to authoritarianism, according to AP Votecast survey data.

Asked before a live audience on Fox News Channel in 2023 to assure Americans that he would not abuse power or use the presidency to seek retribution against anyone, Trump replied, "except for day one," when he'll close the border and "drill, drill, drill."

After that, Trump said, "I'm not a dictator."

## **Trump calls for immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and says a US withdrawal from NATO is possible**

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and JOANNA KOZLOWSKA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donald Trump on Sunday pushed Russian leader Vladimir Putin to act to reach an immediate ceasefire with Ukraine, describing it as part of his active efforts as president-elect to end the war despite being weeks from taking office.

"Zelenskyy and Ukraine would like to make a deal and stop the madness," Trump wrote on social media, referring to Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

In a television interview that aired Sunday, Trump also said he would be open to reducing military aid to Ukraine and pulling the United States out of NATO. Those are two threats that have alarmed Ukraine, NATO allies and many in the U.S. national security community.

Asked on NBC's "Meet the Press" if he were actively working to end the nearly 3-year-old Ukraine war, Trump said, "I am."

He refused to say if he had spoken to Putin since winning election in November. "I don't want to say anything about that, because I don't want to do anything that could impede the negotiation," Trump said.

Trump's call for an immediate ceasefire went beyond the public policy stands taken by the Biden administration and Ukraine and drew a cautious response from Zelenskyy. It also marks Trump wading unusually deeply into efforts before his Jan. 20 inauguration to resolve one of the major global crises facing the lame-duck Biden administration.

Trump made his proposal after a weekend meeting in Paris with French and Ukrainian leaders in Paris, where many world leaders gathered to celebrate the restoration of Notre Dame cathedral after a devastating fire. None of the advisers traveling with him appeared to have expertise on Ukraine.

Kyiv would like to close a deal, Trump wrote on his social media platform Truth Social. "There should be an immediate ceasefire and negotiations should begin."

"I know Vladimir well. This is his time to act. China can help. The World is waiting!" Trump added. He was referring to mediation efforts by China that many in the West have seen as favoring Russia.

Zelenskyy described his discussions Saturday with Trump, brought together by French President Emmanuel Macron, as "constructive" but has given no further details.

Zelenskyy cautioned that Ukraine needs a "just and robust peace, that Russians will not destroy within a few years."

"When we talk about an effective peace with Russia, we must talk first of all about effective peace guar-



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antees. Ukrainians want peace more than anyone else. Russia brought war to our land," he said Sunday in a post on the Telegram messaging app.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded to Trump's post by repeating Moscow's long-standing message that it is open to talks with Ukraine. Peskov referenced a decree by Zelenskyy from October 2022 that declared the prospect of any talks "impossible" as long as Putin was Russia's leader.

That decree came after Putin proclaimed four occupied regions of Ukraine to be part of Russia, in what Kyiv and the West said was a clear violation of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Trump's former national security adviser, retired Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, warned there was no such thing as a quick fix to ending Russia's war with Ukraine.

"What I'm worried about is this kind of flawed idea that Putin can be placated, right, that Putin will come to some kind of a deal," McMaster told "Fox News Sunday."

"I think it's really important for President Trump to adhere to his instinct in this connection ... peace through strength," McMaster said, adding, "How about give them what they need to defend themselves, and then saying to Putin, 'You're going to lose this war?'"

While Trump has said before that he would like to see a quick ceasefire in Ukraine, his proposal Sunday was framed as a direct appeal to Russia. The quick responses from Ukraine and Russia demonstrated the seriousness with which they regarded the idea from the incoming American president.

Both Trump and President Joe Biden pointed this weekend to Russia's disengagement in Syria, where the Russian military largely moved out of the way while Syrian rebels overthrew the country's Russian-allied president, as evidence of the extent to which the Ukraine war has sapped Russia's resources.

Biden said at the White House on Sunday that resistance from Ukraine had "left Russia unable to protect its main ally in the Middle East."

The Biden administration and other supporters of Ukraine have made a point of not being seen to press Ukraine for an immediate truce. Ukraine's allies fear a quick deal would be largely on the terms of its more powerful neighbor, potentially forcing damaging concessions on Ukraine and allowing Russia to resume the war again once it has built back up its military strength.

Trump portrays himself as up to making fast deals to resolve conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East that have frustrated many of the Biden administration's own mediation efforts.

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 affect current U.S. policy.

The Logan Act bars private citizens from trying to intervene in "disputes or controversies" between the United States and foreign powers without government approval. But the 1799 statute has produced just two criminal cases, none since the 1850s and neither resulting in a criminal conviction.

In the NBC interview taped Friday, Trump renewed his warning to NATO allies that he did not see continued U.S. participation in the Western military alliance as a given during his second term.

Trump has long complained that European and the Canadian governments in the mutual-defense bloc are freeloading on military spending by the U.S., by far the most powerful partner in NATO. NATO and its member governments say a majority of countries in the bloc are now hitting voluntary targets for military spending, due in part to pressure from Trump in his first term.

Asked whether he would consider the possibility of pulling out of NATO, Trump indicated that was an open question.

"If they're paying their bills, and if I think they're treating us fairly, the answer is absolutely I'd stay with NATO," he said.

But if not, he was asked if he would consider pulling the U.S. out of the alliance. Trump responded, "Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely."

Trump expressed the same openness when asked if Ukraine should brace for possible cuts in U.S. aid. "Possibly," he said.

U.S. arms and other military support are vital to Ukraine's efforts to fend off invading Russian forces,

and Biden has been surging assistance to Ukraine before leaving office.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Saturday announced nearly \$1 billion more in longer-term weapons support to Ukraine. Austin spoke to his Ukrainian counterpart Sunday about the status of the war and U.S. military backing, the Pentagon said.

Russian forces kept up their grinding advance in eastern Ukraine, taking the village of Blahodatne, according to a statement Sunday by Russia's defense ministry. If confirmed, that gain would bring Russian forces a step closer toward capturing the town of Velyka Novosilka and disrupting a key logistics route for the Ukrainian army, military analysts said.

## The hunt for UnitedHealthcare CEO's elusive killer yields new evidence, but few answers

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Police don't know who he is, where he is, or why he did it.

As the frustrating search for UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's killer got underway for a fifth day Sunday, investigators reckoned with a tantalizing contradiction: They have troves of evidence, but the shooter remains an enigma.

One conclusion they are confident of, however: It was a targeted attack, not a random one.

They know he ambushed Thompson at 6:44 a.m. Wednesday 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.

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, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said.

Over the weekend, 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 backpack there Friday. They didn't immediately reveal what, if anything, it contained but said it would be tested and analyzed.

Early Sunday afternoon, police declined to comment on the contents of the backpack, or on the results of the search in the pond, saying no updates were planned.

The bag's apparent manufacturer did not immediately respond to questions from The Associated Press.

Investigators have urged patience, saying the process of logging evidence that stands up in court isn't as quick as it looks like on TV.

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.

Investigators caught a break when they came across security camera images of an unguarded moment at the hostel in which he briefly showed his face.

Retracing the gunman's steps using surveillance video, police say, it appears he left the city by bus soon after the shooting outside the New York Hilton Midtown. He was seen on video at an uptown bus station about 45 minutes later, 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 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 allowed to use that technology, Kenny said.

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.

## **AP Top 25: Oregon, Georgia, Notre Dame, Texas top poll going into playoff; Tide ranked ahead of SMU**

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Georgia moved up to No. 2 behind Oregon in The Associated Press Top 25 on Sunday, Texas and Penn State remained in the top five after losing conference championship games, and Arizona State appeared in the top 10 for the first time in a decade.

Unbeaten Oregon, with its win over Penn State in the Big Ten title game, goes into the College Football Playoff as the No. 1 seed and the No. 1 team in the AP poll for the eighth straight week and the unanimous choice for the sixth in a row. Oregon's hold on No. 1 is the longest by a Big Ten team since Ohio State had an 11-week run in 2014.

Alabama and SMU were Nos. 11 and 12, respectively, in the AP Top 25, but the Mustangs edged out the Crimson Tide for the final playoff spot. The poll was released shortly before the CFP rankings.

Georgia's overtime win over Texas in the Southeastern Conference championship game earned the Bulldogs a three-spot promotion. The Bulldogs, like Oregon, locked up a first-round bye in the playoff.

Notre Dame rose one spot to No. 3 for its highest ranking since late in the 2020 season. Texas and Penn State each slipped two spots.

Ohio State, Tennessee, Boise State, Indiana and Arizona State — all playoff teams— rounded out the top 10.

Arizona State's win over Iowa State in the Big 12 title game gave the Sun Devils their first 11-win season since 1996 and their first top-10 ranking since they were No. 7 following an 8-1 start in 2014.

The final AP Top 25 will be released following the national championship game Jan. 20.

## **Gaza health officials say latest Israeli airstrikes kill at least 14 including children**

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

DEIR AL BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli airstrikes in central Gaza killed at least 14 people including children Sunday, Palestinian health officials said, while the bombing of a hospital in northern Gaza wounded a half-dozen patients.

Israel's military continues its latest offensive against Hamas militants in northern Gaza, whose remaining Palestinians have been almost completely cut off from the rest of the territory amid a growing humanitarian crisis.

One airstrike flattened a residential building in the urban Bureij refugee camp Sunday afternoon, according to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in the nearby city of Deir al-Balah, where the casualties were taken.

At least nine people were killed including six children and a woman. An Associated Press journalist saw the bodies at the hospital's morgue.

Earlier on Sunday, another Israeli strike hit a tent in the Nuseirat refugee camp, killing at least five people including two parents and their two children, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital said.

In northern Gaza, the Health Ministry said a bombing targeted the Indonesian Hospital wounding six patients, one of them seriously. It is the largest hospital north of Gaza City.

"We demand international protection for hospitals, patients and medical staff," the ministry said in a statement that also urged safe passage to and from hospitals, more medical supplies and fuel and safe evacuation of the wounded.

The Israeli military Sunday evening said it was unaware of any attack on the Indonesian Hospital "in the last three to four hours."

Meanwhile, the military said it briefly closed the key Kerem Shalom crossing after fighters launched mortar

shells several meters (feet) from the nearby humanitarian corridor toward its troops. It said Gaza's main cargo crossing was reopened after those who fired were "eliminated," though it added that the arrival and distribution of humanitarian aid was delayed.

Kerem Shalom is the only crossing between Israel and Gaza that is designed for cargo shipments and has been the main artery for aid since the Rafah crossing with Egypt was shut in May. Last month, nearly two-thirds of aid entering Gaza came through Kerem Shalom.

A second cold, rainy winter is beginning in Gaza, with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in squalid tent camps and reliant on international aid.

The war in Gaza began when Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting around 250 people. Some 100 hostages are still inside Gaza, at least a third believed to be dead.

Israel's retaliatory offensive has killed over 45,600 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many were combatants. The Israeli military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

## **The fall of Bashar Assad after 13 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.

The exit of the 59-year-old Assad 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. At age 34, the Western-educated ophthalmologist appeared as a geeky tech-savvy fan of computers with a gentle demeanor.

But when faced with protests of his rule that erupted in March 2011, Assad turned to the brutal tactics of his father 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 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.

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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 of 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 Makhlouf 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 Syria, 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 faced a popular revolt. He instead blamed "foreign-backed terrorists" trying to destabilize his regime.

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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 emailed a joke he had seen mocking the Egyptian leader's stubborn refusal to step down.

## Today in History: December 9, smallpox declared to be eradicated

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Monday, Dec. 9, the 344th day of 2024. There are 22 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 9, 1979, scientists certified the global eradication of smallpox, a disease which killed an estimated 300 million people in the 20th century.

Also on this date:

In 1965, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," the first animated TV special featuring characters from the "Peanuts" comic strip by Charles M. Schulz, premiered on CBS.

In 1990, Solidarity founder Lech Wałęsa (lek vah-WEN'-sah) won Poland's first free presidential election since 1926.

In 1992, the first U.S. Marines made a pre-dawn beach landing in Somalia in support of Operation Restore Hope; they were met by hundreds of reporters awaiting their arrival.

In 2008, Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich was arrested on corruption charges, including attempting to profit from filling the U.S. Senate seat vacated by President-elect Barack Obama.

In 2013, scientists revealed that NASA's Curiosity rover had uncovered signs of an ancient freshwater lake on Mars.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Judi Dench is 90. Actor Beau Bridges is 83. World Golf Hall of Famer Tom Kite is 75. Actor John Malkovich is 71. Singer Donny Osmond is 67. Actor Felicity Huffman is 62. Empress Masako of Japan is 61. U.S. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., is 58. Rock singer-musician Jakob Dylan (Wallflowers) is 55. Actor Simon Helberg is 44. Olympic gymnastics gold medalist McKayla Maroney is 29.