

# Groton Daily Independent

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**PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW ME  
THINK I'M QUIET**



**PEOPLE THAT DO KNOW ME  
WISH I WAS**

## Monday, Dec. 23

Senior Menu: Spanish rice, green beans, vanilla pudding with oranges, whole wheat bread.

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

Groton Senior Citizens meet at the Groton Community Center with a noon potluck.

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

## Tuesday, Dec. 24

Senior Menu: Creamed chicken, mixed vegetables, biscuit, fruit.

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 4 p.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 7 p.m.

Common Cents Thrift Store, 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., 209 N Main.

Pantry is closed.

United Methodist: Groton Service at 5 p.m. Conde Service at 7 p.m.

## Wednesday, Dec. 25

St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Day Service at Zion, 9 a.m.

## Thursday, Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Tuna noodle hot dish with peas, California blend, peaches, whole wheat bread.

## Friday, Dec. 27

Senior Menu: Ranch chicken breast, rice, Normandy blend, apple crisp, whole wheat bread.

## Saturday, Dec. 28

The Doubleheader with Dakota Valley will now just be a Boys Basketball game at Dakota Valley on Saturday, January 18th

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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

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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.**

## **German Christmas Market Attack**

An assailant rammed a car into a crowded Christmas market in Germany on Friday, killing at least five people and wounding at least 200 others. The detained suspect—a 50-year-old Saudi doctor—was known to accuse the German government of prioritizing Muslim immigrants over secular ones; police have not identified a motive.

The attack occurred in the central German city of Magdeburg, nearly 80 miles west of Berlin. Shortly after 7 pm local time, the driver maneuvered a rented car through a gap in the security barriers before accelerating through the crowded market. The assault lasted three minutes. Police arrested the driver at a streetcar stop as he tried to drive away from the square.

The Magdeburg attack is the latest in a string of deadly car-ramming assaults over the past decade.

## **'Man of Steal' Dies**

Major League Baseball legend Rickey Henderson died Friday at age 65. Known as the "Man of Steal," the Hall of Famer holds the all-time stolen base record with 1,406 and runs scored with 2,295, and was widely considered the greatest leadoff hitter in baseball history.

Henderson ended his 25-season career in 2003 after playing for nine teams—the longest tenure with his hometown team, the Oakland A's. In that time, Henderson won two World Series titles: his first with the A's in 1989 and his second with the Toronto Blue Jays in 1993. Henderson also held the all-time record for walks (2,190) before Barry Bonds surpassed him in 2004. He was a 10-time All-Star and became a first-ballot Hall of Famer in 2009.

Henderson was also known for his style and eccentricity, often celebrating home runs with a signature jersey tug or finger dance.

## **First Sleep Apnea Treatment**

The Food and Drug Administration has approved obesity medication Zepbound to treat moderate to severe obstructive sleep apnea for obese adults. The announcement makes the Eli Lilly medication the first drug in the US approved to treat sleep apnea.

An estimated 39 million US adults suffer from the disorder, in which the upper airway becomes blocked, jolting people awake and causing them to gasp for air. While anyone can suffer from sleep apnea, obesity is a leading risk factor. Left untreated, the disorder can lead to memory loss, cognitive impairment, heart failure, stroke, and diabetes. The most prescribed treatment involves the use of a continuous positive airway pressure machine.

A study found obese adults with the disorder lost an average of 20% of their body weight on Zepbound—and experienced 25 fewer breathing interruptions per hour of sleep. The FDA's approval could spur Medicare—and other insurers not currently covering the drugs for weight loss—to expand coverage.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Notre Dame, Penn State, Texas, and Ohio State advance to quarterfinals of first-ever 12-team College Football Playoff.

Penn State tops Louisville 3-1 to win their 8th NCAA women's volleyball national title.

Actress Blake Lively files sexual harassment lawsuit against her "It Ends With Us" director and co-star Justin Baldoni, accusing Baldoni of sexual harassment and misconduct on the set of the film.

Netflix secures exclusive US broadcasting rights to 2027 and 2031 FIFA Women's World Cup.

Oleksandr Usyk wins rematch against Tyson Fury by unanimous decision to retain boxing's WBO, WBA, and WBC world heavyweight titles.

## Science & Technology

OpenAI reveals its next-generation family of reasoning models, o3; company says in some areas the models approach artificial general intelligence, or capabilities rivaling a human.

NASA's Parker Solar Probe set to get within 3.8 million miles of the sun's surface tomorrow, the closest a human-made object has ever reached; heat shields to reach temperatures of 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

Researchers make first demonstration of quantum teleportation over busy internet cables; experiment suggests quantum communications may be possible without specialized infrastructure.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher Friday (S&P 500 +1.1%, Dow +1.2%, Nasdaq +1.0%) following data showing annual inflation in November came in below expectations.

Federal jury clears chipmaker Qualcomm to keep selling Nuvia-designed chips; case, brought by rival chipmaker Arm, could be retried with focus on whether Nuvia violated its contract with Arm by being acquired by Qualcomm for \$1.4B in 2021.

Smart ring maker Oura raises \$200M in Series D funding, raising valuation to \$5.2B.

## Politics & World Affairs

President-elect Donald Trump suggests the US may retake control of the Panama Canal if the country does not reduce tariffs; the US is the waterway's leading user, with vessels charged between \$0.50 to \$300K.

House Ethics Committee to release report on former Rep. Matt Gaetz (R, FL-1) as soon as today after secret Dec. 5 vote.

Senate Judiciary Committee report finds two previously undisclosed yacht, jet trips by Justice Clarence Thomas.

US Navy accidentally shoots down its own fighter jet over the Red Sea; two pilots safely eject.

Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen launch rocket attack, hitting a playground in Tel Aviv, Israel, and wounding 16 people.

## Weekly Vikings Roundup

By Jordan Wright

The Minnesota Vikings traveled to Seattle to clash with the Seahawks on a rainy Sunday afternoon. Despite being up by 10 points in the first half, the Vikings found themselves down by three points with less than five minutes to go in the game. A masterful drive by Sam Darnold, combined with a game-sealing interception by Theo Jackson (who was filling in for an injured Harrison Smith), gave Minnesota the win. At 13-2, the Vikings are tied with the Lions for the top spot in the NFC, adding even more intrigue to their week 18 matchup in Detroit.

The Vikings got the ball to begin the game and marched 70 yards down the field on a 12-play drive that took nearly seven minutes off the clock and culminated in a Jordan Addison TD reception. Minnesota's defense was also locked in on their first drive, forcing the Seahawks to punt after a three-and-out.

A minute and a half into the second quarter, however, the Seahawks found the endzone to tie the score at 7-7. The two teams traded three-and-outs on the next two possessions, then the Vikings found their groove (and the endzone) again, with Darnold hitting Justin Jefferson for a 14-yard TD. On the first play of Seattle's next drive, Dallas Turner intercepted a Geno Smith pass giving the Vikings great field position which they turned into three points, making the score 17-7. After both teams traded punts again, Seattle put together a five-play, 88-yard TD drive, cutting the lead to three points going into halftime.

The Seahawks got the ball to start the second half and had an eight-play, 40-yard drive which ended with a field goal to tie the game. The Vikings responded with their own eight-play, 40-yard drive for a field goal to take back the lead. The rest of the third quarter was a snooze-fest, with four consecutive punts.

Down by three points in the fourth quarter, Seattle put together a great drive – going 68 yards on 11 plays that took 6:16 off the clock and found the endzone to give them a four-point lead. The Vikings wasted little time responding, going 70 yards in thirty seconds to score a TD and retake the lead. Seattle's ensuing drive stalled at the Vikings' 42-yard line and their 60-yard field goal attempt was short. The Vikings got the ball back at midfield with under two minutes left in the game, but couldn't sustain a drive and had to punt the ball back to the Seahawks. The Vikings needed a stand by the defense, and they got it, as Theo Jackson intercepted a Geno Smith pass and sealed the game.

Sam Darnold completed 22 of 35 passes for 246 yards and three touchdowns.

Aaron Jones carried the ball 18 times for 67 yards and added another 26 yards on three catches.

Justin Jefferson had 10 receptions for 144 yards and two touchdowns, Jordan Addison had five receptions for 35 yards and a touchdown, and T.J. Hockenson only had two catches for 27 yards but they were both crucial for sustaining drives.

Blake Cashman led the defense with 12 tackles, Andrew Van Ginkel had both of Minnesota's sacks, and Dallas Turner and Theo Jackson each had an interception.

Looking ahead, the Vikings return home to battle a familiar foe when the Green Bay Packers come to town. The two teams met in week four, with the Vikings winning a close contest. This time the game is in Minnesota, which should give the Vikings an edge, but these divisional matchups are always unpredictable. If the Vikings bring their cheese graters and shred the Packers, it will set up a division-deciding week 18 matchup against the Lions. Skoll!

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## Tuff Tigers

### Friday in Madison:

Braxten Sombke - 1st Place

Brooks Sombke - 5th Place

### Sunday in Volga:

Watson Herron - 1st Place

Roman Bahr - 1st Place

Ryker Herron - 4th Place

Brooks Vedvei - 4th Place



Opening Groton Ice Rink weekend was enjoyed by all!!! L-R Hazel Hill. Haley Erickson. Ellie Lassel. Sisters - Mya Fliehs. Emme Fliehs.

Sisters - Brielle Dunbar. Collyns Dunbar. Maci Dunbar (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



Rayna Loeschke and Emery Blackwood enjoy the sunshine on the rink Sunday. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



The local girls enjoying a fun hockey game! (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

## "FDA Approval"

Most of my family dreads the thought of going to a museum with me. It really doesn't matter what the museum is, or how interested they might be in the subject, they'd prefer to do something, perhaps anything, else.

I recognize that I am the problem. I love museums. One of my early memories is of exploring the King Tut exhibition at the Chicago Field Museum, and being drug out by my exasperated parents long before I was ready to leave. I wasn't done reading all that fascinating information.

Perhaps this explains why my Apple News Feed often presents me with historical trivia. Recently, I encountered a description of a patent medication marketed well into the 20th century that almost stopped my doctor heart. This particular product was targeted to parents, promising a myriad of benefits from soothing their fussy infant to freshening his breath. I have no doubt those fussy babies stopped crying. The combination of alcohol and opioids is generally pretty sedating. It is also pretty dangerous, and some of those babies never woke up.

It wasn't until the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 that companies were required to specifically identify the presence and amount of certain ingredients, at least in products sold across state lines. Importantly, this law did not prohibit the sale of ingredients like cocaine, chloroform, or formaldehyde in over the counter medications. It simply said that if those ingredients were present, and the product wasn't being sold in the same state where it was manufactured, the label had to say so. At least now those parents knew they were giving morphine to their children!

This same act prohibited "filthy, decomposed, or putrid animal or vegetable" material in food products. Admittedly, this applied only to items transported from out of state. If your groceries came from your own state, you were on your own.

Over time, amendments to that original law, court decisions, and new laws brought us to the expectations we as consumers have today:

- That manufacturer claims about food and medication are true
- That medications and medical devices are safe and effective
- That we can find information about the potential risks and side effects of a treatment
- That product labels are accurate
- That common allergens are identified
- That imported foods and medicines are held to the same standards as domestically produced products
- That ongoing monitoring of products occurs

Still, the system is imperfect. There aren't enough inspectors, and there isn't enough post-market testing. Changes in drug manufacturing processes have introduced risky chemicals that go undetected for years. Contaminated foods sicken and kill before they are identified and pulled out of the food chain.

Concerningly, people are often unaware that many products aren't regulated even to these imperfect standards. Herbal and nutritional supplements aren't reviewed even for safety prior to sale. Most skin and hair care products are classified as cosmetics and can also be marketed without any FDA approval (sunscreen is an exception).

History has important lessons to teach us. Maybe I should be dragging my family along to those museums after all.



Debra Johnston, MD

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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!



Gift  
Certificates  
Available!

Daily Pass Available for \$5

Age 65 or older  
Physical Therapy  
\$20 per month

Annual Memberships:

Student: \$255.60

Single: \$319.50

Couple: \$575.10

Family: \$702.26



15 N Main St. - Ste. 101

Downtown Groton

Call/Text Paul: 605-397-7460

Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



**Living Heart Fitness Center**

Open 24/7

## Names Released in Meade County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: Interstate 90, Mile marker 36, four miles east of Sturgis, SD

When: 8:30 a.m., December 10, 2024

Driver 1: Lee Robert Smith, 77-year-old male from Custer, SD, serious, non-life-threatening injuries

Vehicle 1: 2003 Toyota Tacoma

Seat belt Used: Yes

Passenger 1a: Marjorie B. Smith, 80-year-old female from Custer, SD, fatal injuries

Seat belt Used: Yes

Meade County, S.D.- The passenger in a December 10 crash near Sturgis, SD, passed away Monday evening from her injuries.

Preliminary crash information indicates Lee Robert Smith, the driver of a 2003 Toyota Tacoma, was traveling west bound on Interstate 90 near mile marker 36 and lost control of the vehicle, entering the center median where the vehicle rolled.

The driver and a passenger, Marjorie B. Smith, were taken to a nearby hospital. Robert Smith sustained serious, non-life-threatening injuries. Marjorie Smith passed away from her injuries on December 16th.

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.





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Noem's budget cut would raise dual credit costs for students

**Educators worry increase would affect enrollment**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 22, 2024 11:05 AM**

South Dakota high school students will pay 50% more to take dual credit courses if legislators adopt a budget proposal by Republican Gov. Kristi Noem.

Currently, students pay one-third of the cost per credit hour, \$50.84, while the state pays the rest. Noem's proposal would split the cost in half, with the student and state each paying about \$76 per credit hour. The state would spend around \$1 million less on the program annually.

Noem is proposing the policy change in her budget for the next fiscal year. It's one of numerous budget cuts she's requesting as sales tax revenues decline.

Yet, in the education portion of her budget, she's also proposing \$4 million in new spending to create education savings accounts that would provide public funds for families to pay for private school tuition or for the costs of alternative instruction such as homeschooling.

The state Department of Education responded with a statement to South Dakota Searchlight questions about the proposed dual credit rate increase.

"The governor's proposed budget will continue to allow motivated students the privilege to earn college credits at a reduced rate," the statement said.

Education professionals worry that the increase would burden families and hamper their ability to enroll students. The program benefits not only them but the state as well, introducing students to higher education options at public universities and technical colleges.

There were 4,213 students enrolled in the public university portion of the program during fiscal year 2024, according to the governor's budget proposal. There were 1,849 students enrolled in the technical college program. Classes are offered through all six public universities and four technical colleges throughout the state. Students can attend on-campus or online.

The program not only allows students to get a head start on their degree, but increases their confidence to succeed in higher education, said Ashley Seeklander, government relations chair for the South Dakota School Counseling Association and a counselor in the Aberdeen school district, in an emailed statement. Dual credit students have higher GPAs and retention rates once they enter college, according to an annual report on the program.

"As school counselors, we see firsthand the positive impact that the dual credit program has on student success," Seeklander said.

If students forgo the dual credit program because of cost but still go on to attend a South Dakota university, they'll pay even more. The average credit hour cost is \$300 for a typical college student.

The South Dakota Board of Regents oversees the state's public universities. Executive Director Nathan Lukkes said connecting with high school students before they apply to out-of-state colleges is an advantage for those institutions. About 60% of dual credit students enroll at South Dakota public universities upon graduation.

He hopes Noem's proposed fee increase for students doesn't hinder their ability to take the classes.

"The last thing we want is finances standing in the way of education," Lukkes said.

He added that he expects enrollment in the program to level off in the coming years as high school enrollment decreases.

System director talks other proposed cuts

Noem also proposed another \$2 million "operational" cut to the regents' budget and a \$9 million cut to

the system's building maintenance and repair fund.

The system has not decided how a \$2 million cut would be implemented.

"Our goal is to minimize the impact to students — we want to continue to provide quality education at an affordable price," Lukkes said. "We don't want any cuts to hinder or alter that going forward."

Regent Pam Roberts, a former South Dakota Republican Party chairwoman and former secretary of the South Dakota Department of Labor and Regulation, called the maintenance cut "shortsighted" at the board's December meeting.

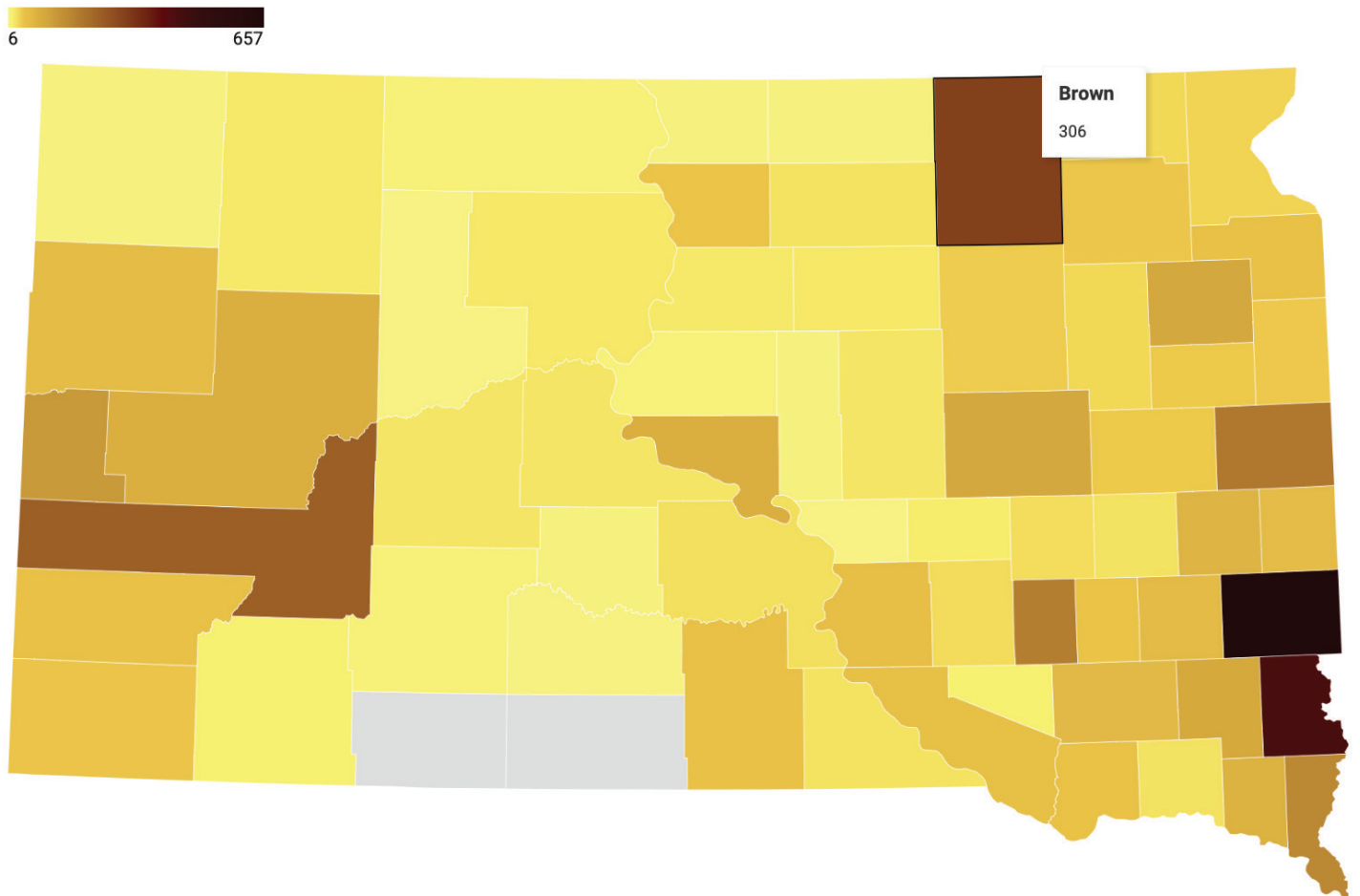
Lukkes added that it's common to budget 2-4% of a building's replacement value for maintenance and repair.

"We're well positioned at the moment," Lukkes said. "The challenge is if you take \$9 million a year out of the funding stream and it's not replaced very quickly, we're good for a year or two. Five, 10, 15, 20 years down the road, you risk your infrastructure failing, falling into a state of disrepair and ultimately costing you more money than if you maintained it."

*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.*

## University dual credit enrollment by county, 2024-25 school year

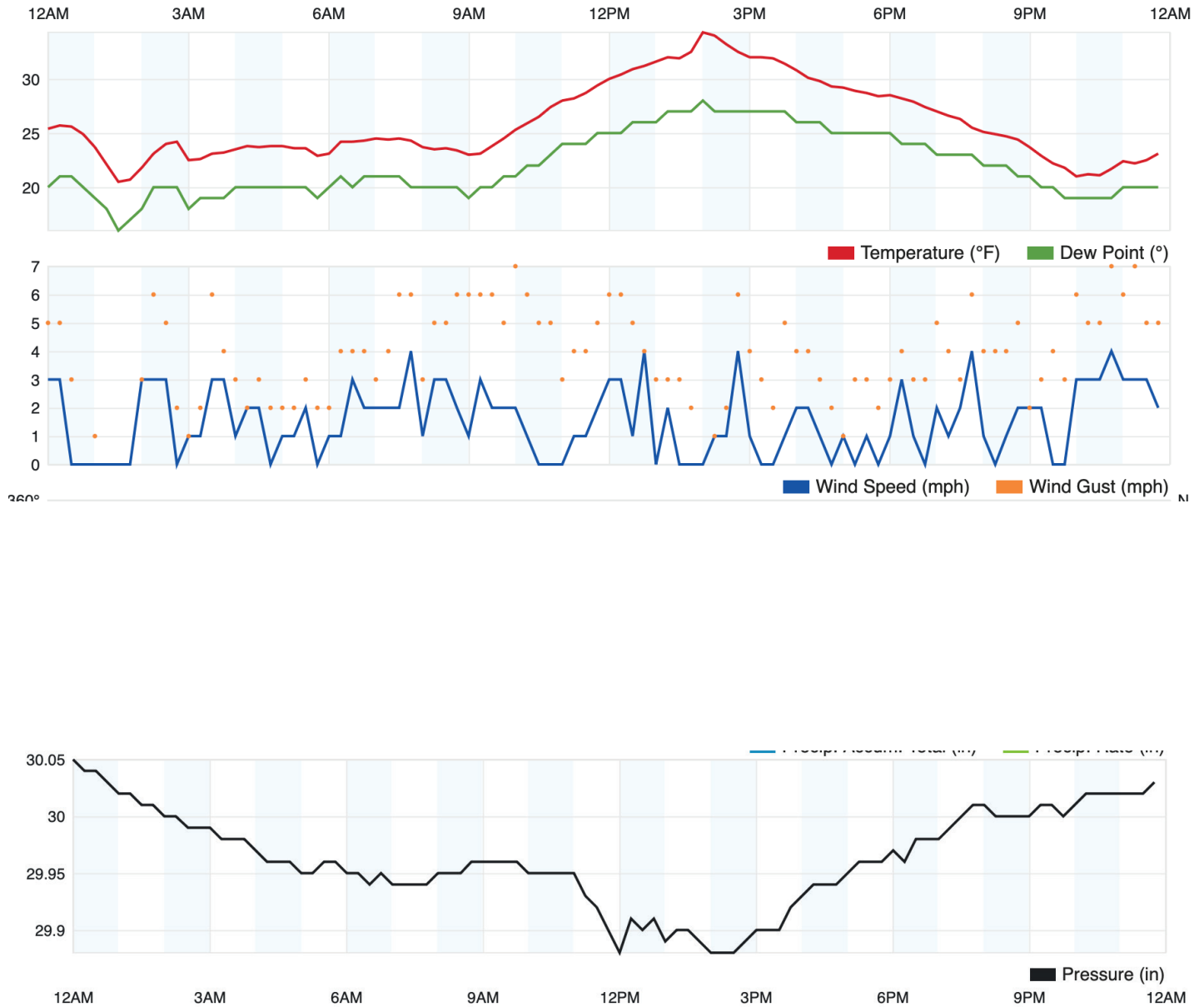
Counties with less than five students enrolled in dual credit programs are not included in the data.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Monday



High: 24 °F

Decreasing  
Clouds

Monday Night



Low: 16 °F

Mostly Cloudy  
then Patchy  
Fog

Tuesday



High: 31 °F

Patchy Fog

Tuesday Night



Low: 20 °F

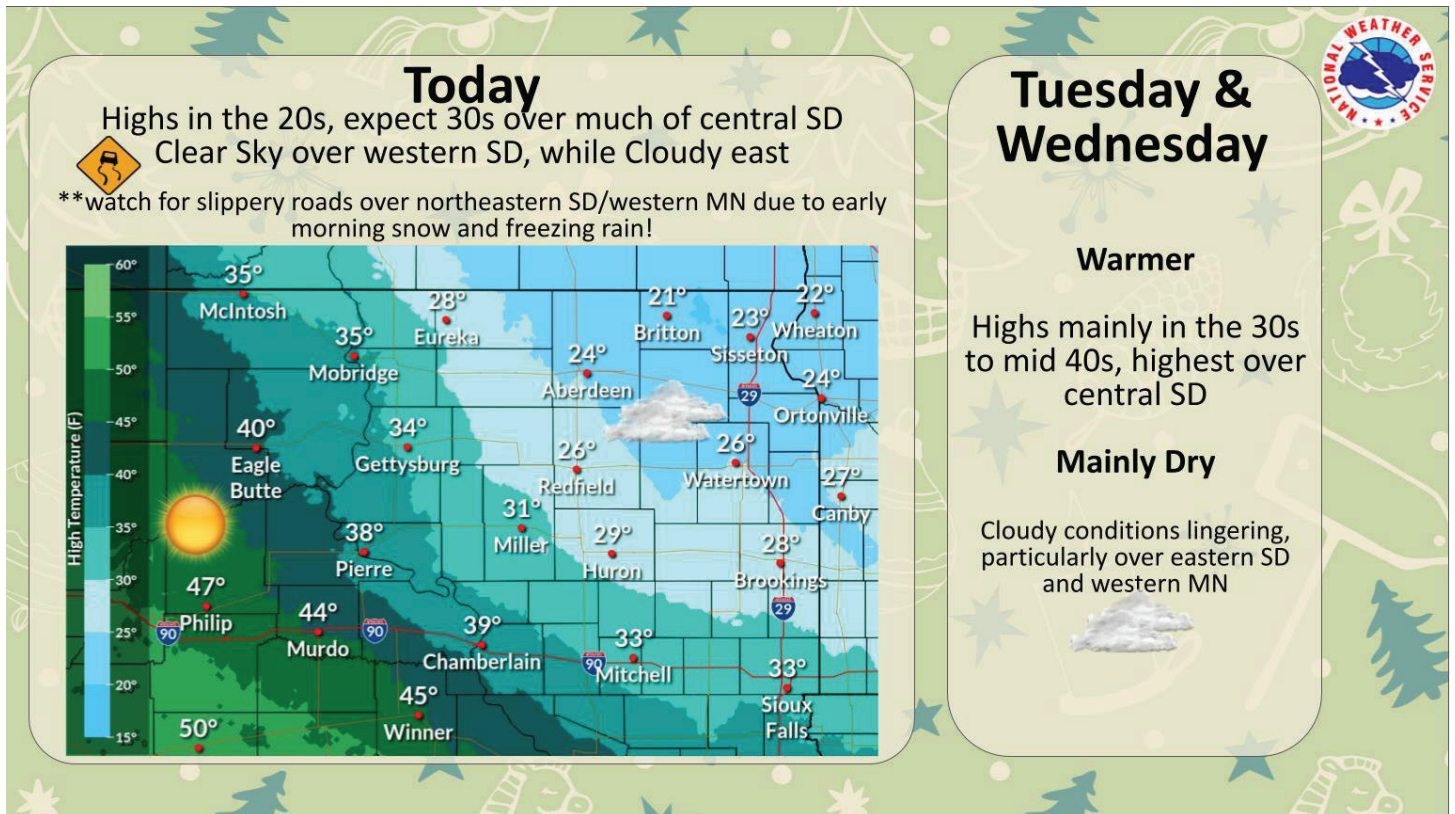
Partly Cloudy

Christmas Day



High: 36 °F

Mostly Cloudy



For today, watch for slippery roads over northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota due to the early morning light snow and freezing rain. Temperatures will rise into the 30s over central South Dakota under a sunny or mostly sunny sky. Over eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota, cloudy conditions will prevail with highs in the 20s. Although clouds will linger over much of eastern South Dakota, temperatures will be on the increase for Tuesday and Wednesday.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 35 °F at 2:04 PM

Low Temp: 20 °F at 1:36 AM

Wind: 7 mph at 9:49 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 2023

Record Low: -34 in 1983

Average High: 26

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.44

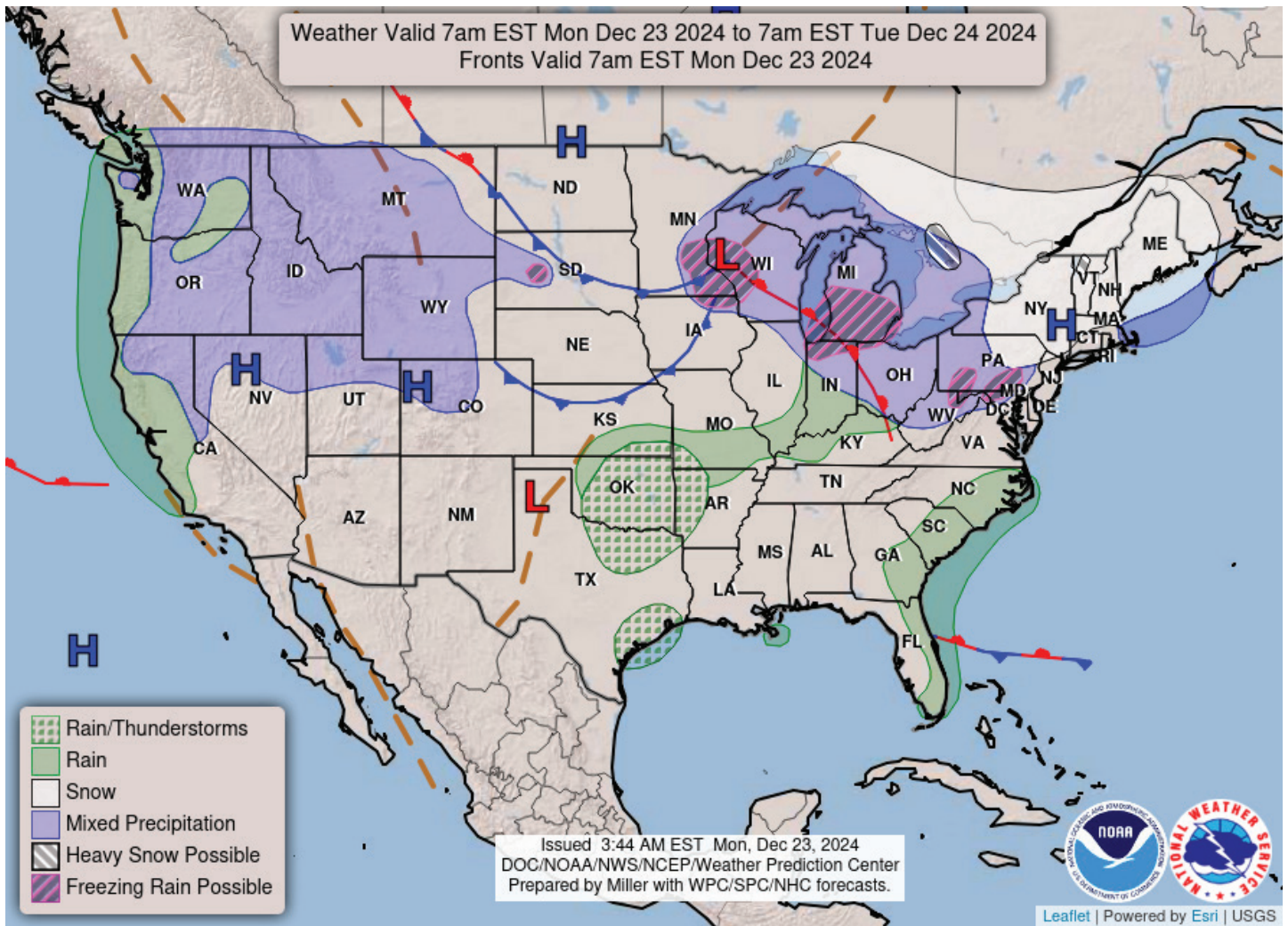
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.65

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:55:02 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:00 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 23, 1987: Five to sixteen inches of snow fell in 24 hours in east-central and southeast South Dakota from the morning of the 23rd through the morning of the 24th. Some of the more significant amounts measured were 9 inches at Huron, 10 inches at Mitchell, Platte and Brookings, twelve inches at Chamberlain, and sixteen inches at Alpena. Heavy snow also fell in southwestern Minnesota, with Big Stone and Traverse Counties in the west-central portion of the state missing out on the heaviest snow. Considerable blowing and drifting snow hampered removal, particularly in South Dakota, due to reduced visibilities. Snowfall amounts also included three inches at Castlewood, five inches at Clear Lake, and six inches at Bryant.

December 23, 1996: Blizzard conditions developed across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota in the late afternoon of the 23rd and continued into the late evening. Visibilities were frequently below one-quarter of a mile. Two to six inches of new snowfall combined with the already significant snow cover and north winds of 20 to 40 mph to cause widespread blizzard conditions and heavy drifting on area roads. Travel was significantly impacted if not impossible, and one fatality resulted from a head-on collision. Some snowfall amounts in Minnesota included 5 inches at Artichoke Lake and 6 inches at Wheaton and Browns Valley. In South Dakota, 7 inches fell at Britton, Webster, and Clear Lake, with 6 inches at Sisseton and 5 inches at Summit.

1811 - A cold storm hit Long Island sound with a foot of snow, gale force winds, and temperatures near zero. During the storm many ships were wrecked, and in some cases entire crews perished. (David Ludlum)

1921: An estimated F3 tornado struck the town of Clarkedale, Arkansas, killing six and injuring 60 others. Four people died in the destruction of the Banks and Danner store, where 50 people were doing their Christmas shopping.

1924: A storm producing winds of 70 mph caused extensive damage to Sydney, Australia during the evening hours.

1955 - The barometric pressure dipped to 28.97 inches (981 millibars) at Boise ID, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - A major winter storm struck Colorado producing heavy snow and blizzard conditions. A record two feet of snow was reported at Stapleton Airport in Denver, which was shut down for 33 hours. Up to 44 inches of snow fell in the foothills surrounding Denver. The storm hurt the ski industry as skiers were unable to make it out of Denver to the slopes, and the closed airport became a campground for vacationers. (23rd-25th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1983 - The temperature plunged to 50 degrees below zero at Williston ND to equal their all-time record. Minneapolis MN reported an afternoon high of 17 degrees below zero, and that evening strong northerly winds produced wind chill readings of 100 degrees below zero in North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - A winter storm brought heavy snow to the Central Rockies, and also spread a blanket of snow across the Middle Missouri Valley in time for Christmas. Snow and high winds created near blizzard conditions in Wyoming. Snowfall totals in Wyoming ranged up to 25 inches at Casper, with four feet of snow reported at the Hogadon Ski Resort on Casper Mountain. The Wolf Creek Ski Resort in Colorado received 26 inches of snow. Totals in the Middle Missouri Valley ranged up to 16 inches at Alpena SD, with 14 inches at Harrison NE. Strong winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern U.S. Canyon winds gusting to 100 mph created ground blizzards in Utah. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Low pressure in the Upper Midwest produced strong and gusty winds across the Great Lakes Region and the Ohio Valley. Winds in Ohio gusted to 47 mph at Cincinnati, and reached 51 mph at Cleveland. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - An historic arctic outbreak spread to the Gulf Coast Region, and a total of 122 cities across the central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Forty-one of those cities reported record lows for the month of December, with some cities breaking December records established the previous morning. Morning lows of 11 degrees at New Orleans LA and Lake Charles LA, 4 degrees below

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zero at San Angelo TX, and 26 degrees below zero at Topeka KS, established all-time records for those four locations. Yankton SD was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 31 degrees below zero. A storm system moving across the Florida peninsula and along the Southern Atlantic Coast produced high winds and record snows along the Carolina coast. Snowfall totals of 15 inches at Wilmington NC and 13.3 inches at Cape Hatteras NC were all-time records for those two locations.

1998: A major ice storm struck central and southeast Virginia and much of North Carolina beginning on Wednesday, December 23, and lasting until Christmas Day morning. Icy conditions caused injuries from slips and falls and numerous vehicle accidents. Ice accumulations of up to an inch brought down trees and power lines. Outages were so widespread with 400,000 customers were without power on Christmas Eve. Some people were without power for up to ten days.

2009 - Severe storms and heavy rainfall were associated with the same storm that brought blizzard conditions to the central parts of the U.S. on December 23rd and 24th. At least one death in Louisiana was blamed on the heavy rainfall and storms. There were 35 preliminary tornado reports and 34 hail and wind reports along the Gulf Coast over the 2-day period. The 10-year average number of tornadoes across the country in December is 36. (NCDC)



## Prophecies From Isaiah

"Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel – God with us!

"The people who walk in darkness  
Will see a great light;  
Those who live in a dark land,  
The light will come to them.  
For a child will be born to us, a  
son given to us;  
And the government will rest on  
His shoulders!  
And His name will be called:  
Wonderful!  
Counselor!  
Mighty God!  
Eternal Father!  
Prince of Peace!  
There will be no end to the increase  
of His government or of His peace.  
"The spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,  
The spirit of wisdom and understanding.  
The spirit of counsel and strength,  
The spirit of knowledge and  
the fear of the Lord."

Prayer: Thank You, God, for keeping Your word! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:2-3

*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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- 3 Months ..... \$26.63
- 6 Months ..... \$31.95
- 9 Months ..... \$42.60
- 12 Months ..... \$53.25

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Password \_\_\_\_\_

Pay with Paypal. Type the following into your browser window:

[paypal.me/paperpaul](https://paypal.me/paperpaul)

Pay with Venmo: [@paperpaul](https://venmo.com/paperpaul) Phone Number to Confirm: 7460

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.20.24

2 20 51 56 67 19

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$944,000,000**

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 16  
DRAW: Mins 45 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.21.24

9 19 30 39 44 4

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$18,510,000**

NEXT 16 Hrs 31 Mins  
DRAW: 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.22.24

4 7 37 43 47 8

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT 16 Hrs 46 Mins  
DRAW: 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.21.24

9 22 28 30 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$172,000**

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 36  
DRAW: Mins 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.21.24

29 45 46 51 59 3

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

NEXT 17 Hrs 15 Mins  
DRAW: 44 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.21.24

1 12 17 21 58 1

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$103,000,000**

NEXT 17 Hrs 15 Mins  
DRAW: 44 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

### **No. 6 Texas routs South Dakota State 103-57 with another defensive showing**

By MARK ROSNER Associated Press  
AUSTIN, Texas (AP) —

Freshman Justice Carlton had 19 points and nine rebounds, and No. 6 Texas routed South Dakota State 103-57 Sunday.

Carlton went 8 of 12 from the field in 25 minutes as a substitute. Taylor Jones had 15 points, 11 rebounds and four blocks, and Rori Harmon added 13 points, seven assists and six steals for Texas (12-1).

Another freshman, Jordan Lee, made her second start for Texas this season and scored 14 points.

Brooklyn Meyer led South Dakota State (10-3) with 13 points in just 18 minutes because of foul trouble. Emilee Fox scored 11.

Texas took command of the game with a 19-2 push during the first and second quarters. South Dakota State went scoreless for more than six minutes.

Takeaways

South Dakota State: Though they did not look the part, the Jackrabbits are having a good season. They beat Oregon and Creighton when each was ranked in The AP Top 25 and lost to No. 9 Duke by four points.

Texas: Laila Phelia missed her third straight game recovering from a detached retina she suffered before the season, coach Vic Schaefer said. Phelia, an all-Big Ten guard for Michigan last season, has appeared in eight games and could apply for a medical redshirt.

Key moment

That 19-2 Texas run in the first half included nine points by Lee, Carlton and Bryanna Preston, who are all freshmen.

Key stat

South Dakota State averages 13 turnovers a game, but Texas opponents commit 25. The Longhorns won that competition Sunday by forcing 21 turnovers, which Texas turned into 31 points.

Up next

South Dakota State is at Oral Roberts on Jan. 2, and Texas hosts Texas-Rio Grande Valley on Dec. 29.

### **Middle East latest: Israeli airstrikes on Gaza kill at least 20 people, Palestinian medics say**

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip overnight killed at least 20 people, Palestinian medics said Monday.

One of the strikes hit a tent camp in the Muwasi area, an Israel-declared humanitarian zone, killing eight people, including two children, according to Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis, which received the bodies.

The Israeli military says it only strikes militants, accusing them of hiding among civilians. It said late Sunday that it had targeted a Hamas militant in the humanitarian zone.

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

Israel's air and ground offensive has killed over 45,200 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The ministry says women and children make up more than half the dead but does not distinguish between civilians and combatants in its tally. The military says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Here's the latest:

Palestinians in Jenin observe a general strike

JENIN, West Bank — Palestinians in the volatile northern West Bank town of Jenin are observing a general strike called by militant groups to protest a rare crackdown by Palestinian security forces.

An Associated Press reporter in Jenin heard gunfire and explosions, apparently from clashes between militants and Palestinian security forces. It was not immediately clear if anyone was killed or wounded. There was no sign of Israeli troops in the area.

Shops were closed in the city on Monday, the day after militants killed a member of the Palestinian security forces and wounded two others.

Militant groups called for a general strike across the territory, accusing the security forces of trying to disarm them in support of Israel's half-century occupation of the territory.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority is internationally recognized but deeply unpopular among Palestinians, in part because it cooperates with Israel on security matters. Israel accuses the authority of incitement and of failing to act against armed groups.

The Palestinian Authority blamed Sunday's attack on "outlaws." It says it is committed to maintaining law and order but will not police the occupation.

The Palestinian Authority exercises limited authority in population centers in the West Bank. Israel captured the territory in the 1967 Mideast War, and the Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state.

Israel's current government is opposed to Palestinian statehood and says it will maintain open-ended security control over the territory. Violence has soared in the West Bank following Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack out of Gaza, which ignited the war there.

Lebanon's caretaker prime minister visits military positions in the country's south

BEIRUT — Lebanon's caretaker prime minister has begun a tour of military positions in the country's south, almost a month after a ceasefire deal that ended the war between Israel and the Hezbollah group that battered the country.

Najib Mikati on Monday was on his first visit to the southern frontlines, where Lebanese soldiers under the U.S.-brokered deal are expected to gradually deploy, with Hezbollah militants and Israeli troops both expected to withdraw by the end of next month.

Mikati's tour comes after the Lebanese government expressed its frustration over ongoing Israeli strikes and overflights in the country.

"We have many tasks ahead of us, the most important being the enemy's (Israel's) withdrawal from all the lands it encroached on during its recent aggression," he said after meeting with army chief Joseph Aoun in a Lebanese military barracks in the southeastern town of Marjayoun. "Then the army can carry out its tasks in full."

The Lebanese military for years has relied on financial aid to stay functional, primarily from the United States and other Western countries. Lebanon's cash-strapped government is hoping that the war's end and ceasefire deal will bring about more funding to increase the military's capacity to deploy in the south, where Hezbollah's armed units were notably present.

Though they were not active combatants, the Lebanese military said that dozens of its soldiers were killed in Israeli strikes on their premises or patrolling convoys in the south. The Israeli army acknowledged some of these attacks.

## Magdeburg mourns Christmas market attack victims as fears swirl of deeper social divisions

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — Mourners laid flowers near the scene of the deadly Christmas market attack on Monday as investigators puzzled over the motive of the suspect and fears swirled that the rampage could deepen divisions in German society.

The Johanniskirche, a church a short walk from the scene of the attack, has become a central place of

mourning since the suspect drove a car into the busy market on Friday evening, killing five people and injuring 200. A carpet of flowers now covers the broad sidewalk in front of the church.

Authorities have identified the suspect as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency. They say he does not fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks.

The man described himself as an ex-Muslim who was highly critical of Islam and in many posts on social media expressed support for the far-right. A picture has emerged of someone who had come to authorities' attention in the past for threatening behavior and been the subject of tipoffs, but was not known to have committed any violence.

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said Sunday that "the views and statements that the perpetrator expressed are being investigated, as are the tipoffs and proceedings with various authorities and the justice system." She said "the right conclusions" will then have to be drawn.

The country's vice chancellor voiced fears that the attack will fuel online misinformation ahead of a national election expected in late February. He urged people to "take time for the truth" and said: "Don't let yourselves be infected by hatred."

"There is still a lot we don't know and a lot is unexplained, including the exact motive," Robert Habeck said in a video posted Sunday. "All the same, I fear that the distrust that was immediately propagated on the net against Muslims, foreigners and people with a history of immigration will entrench itself deeper in society"

On Sunday night, police in the port city of Bremerhaven said they detained a man who threatened crimes at a Christmas market there in a TikTok video. German news agency dpa reported that he had said he would stab any people of Arabic appearance there on Christmas Day.

## **Tens of thousands displaced by ethnic violence in northeast India suffer squalid conditions in camps**

By RISHI LEKHI Associated Press

KANGPOKPI, India (AP) — Phalneivah Khonsai ran for her life when violence struck her neighborhood in India's restive northeast, carrying just the bare essentials in the hope that she and her family could return soon.

Khonsai, her husband and three children left behind their house, which was torched by a mob, and made for the hills, where thousands of people from their community headed for safety.

That was in May last year. Almost 19 months later, Khonsai, 35, is still away from home, living in a government building that was turned into a relief center with squalid conditions and little privacy.

The relief camp is in Kangpokpi, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) from Imphal, the capital of India's northeastern Manipur state, which has been wracked by ethnic violence since last year. In the building's damp and dark interior, fabric partitions separate at least 75 families like hers driven away from their homes.

"It is very difficult to live here," Khonsai said, as women went about their daily chores such as washing clothes and dishes.

The violent ethnic clashes erupted last year between the majority Meitei community and the minority Kuki-Zo tribes in Manipur. The conflict has claimed more than 250 lives and displaced at least 60,000 people.

The state remains divided into two ethnic zones, one controlled by the Meiteis and the other by the Kuki-Zo community. The factions have formed armed militias that patrol roads checking for signs of their rivals. Borders and buffer zones guarded by security forces separate the two regions. Youths spend nights guarding vulnerable villages.

Khonsai, a Kuki, said the struggles of living in a relief center are taking a toll on the family's health but they can't go back home because they fear for their lives.

"If we go back, they will kill us. There is no hope for going back," she said.

The Meiteis, who are predominantly Hindus, live in the Imphal Valley and nearby districts, while the Kuki-Zos live in hilly areas. The violence began last year when Meiteis demanded that they be listed by the government as a Scheduled Tribe, which would bring them more benefits such as quotas in jobs and

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educational institutions. That categorization would also bar non-Meiteis from buying land in the Meiteis' strongholds in the Imphal Valley.

The Kukis opposed this, saying such benefits should be given only to tribal groups that are less developed economically and less educated.

Soon, protests by both sides turned violent. Each side rampaged through villages, torching houses, massacring civilians and driving tens of thousands from their homes. Violence had receded in recent months, except for occasional flareups, but returned in November when 10 people were killed by paramilitary soldiers.

The Kuki-Zo community has been particularly hit hard by the violence. They accuse state Chief Minister N. Biren Singh of siding with the Meiteis and have sought his removal. They now seek federal rule over the state and administrative autonomy for the community.

Singh, a Meitei, has denied the accusations. His administration says people from the hill tribes — who share ethnic lineage with Myanmar's Chin tribe — are using illegal drugs to finance a war against the Hindu community. Manipur's government is led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

The displacement crisis has, however, impacted both communities. While most of the displaced from the Kuki-Zo community have gone to the hills, the Meiteis have taken shelter in refugee camps in Imphal. The mistrust between the two communities is far from over, with people from each side unable to venture into the other's zone.

Yengsom Junksom Memi, a Meitei, used to live in Kangpokpi until attackers rampaged her home and forced her family to run for their lives. Memi first took refuge in a police station before moving to a relief center in Imphal where she lives with 600 other displaced Meiteis. She said her house has been taken over by the attackers.

"We have no future left. It is difficult to even manage food in the morning and evening," Memi said.

Ngamminlun Kipgen, spokesperson for the Committee on Tribal Unity, which represents Kukis, blamed the federal government for failing to end the violence.

"I think the prime minister needs to intervene," Kipgen said.

India's opposition parties have been urging Modi to visit Manipur. Modi has not visited the state since the violence started but has instructed his home minister, Amit Shah, to find a solution.

Kipgen said a division of the state into two separately administered parts, one for the Kukis and the other for Meiteis, could calm the situation.

"The nation must understand that the Kukis and the Meiteis for the time being are not able to live together, so the state or the central government should not force both communities at this critical juncture to come together," Kipgen said.

## **Biden gives life in prison to 37 of 40 federal death row inmates so Trump can't have them executed**

By WILL WEISSERT and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced Monday that he is commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 people on federal death row, converting their punishments to life imprisonment mere weeks before President-elect Donald Trump, an outspoken proponent of expanding capital punishment, takes office.

The move spares the lives of people convicted in killings, including the slayings of police and military officers, people on federal land and those involved in deadly bank robberies or drug deals, as well as the killings of guards or prisoners in federal facilities.

It means just three federal inmates are still facing execution. They are Dylann Roof, who carried out the 2015 racist slayings of nine Black members of Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Robert Bowers, who fatally shot 11 congregants at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018, the deadliest antisemitic attack in U.S. history.

"I've dedicated my career to reducing violent crime and ensuring a fair and effective justice system," Biden said in a statement. "Today, I am commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 individuals on federal

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death row to life sentences without the possibility of parole. These commutations are consistent with the moratorium my administration has imposed on federal executions, in cases other than terrorism and hate-motivated mass murder.”

The Biden administration in 2021 announced a moratorium on federal capital punishment to study the protocols used, which suspended executions during Biden’s term. But Biden actually had promised to go further on the issue in the past, pledging to end federal executions without the caveats for terrorism and hate-motivated, mass killings.

While running for president in 2020, Biden’s campaign website said he would “work to pass legislation to eliminate the death penalty at the federal level, and incentivize states to follow the federal government’s example.”

Similar language didn’t appear on Biden’s reelection website before he left the presidential race in July. “Make no mistake: I condemn these murderers, grieve for the victims of their despicable acts, and ache for all the families who have suffered unimaginable and irreparable loss,” Biden’s statement said. “But guided by my conscience and my experience as a public defender, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, vice president, and now president, I am more convinced than ever that we must stop the use of the death penalty at the federal level.”

He took a political jab at Trump, saying, “In good conscience, I cannot stand back and let a new administration resume executions that I halted.”

Indeed, Trump, who takes office on Jan. 20, has spoken frequently of expanding executions. In a speech announcing his 2024 campaign, Trump called for those “caught selling drugs to receive the death penalty for their heinous acts.” He later promised to execute drug and human smugglers and even praised China’s harsher treatment of drug peddlers. During his first term as president, Trump also advocated for the death penalty for drug dealers.

There were 13 federal executions during Trump’s first term, more than under any president in modern history, and some may have happened fast enough to have contributed to the spread of the coronavirus at the federal death row facility in Indiana.

Those were the first federal executions since 2003. The final three occurred after Election Day in November 2020 but before Trump left office the following January, the first time federal prisoners were put to death by a lame-duck president since Grover Cleveland in 1889.

Biden faced recent pressure from advocacy groups urging him to act to make it more difficult for Trump to increase the use of capital punishment for federal inmates. The president’s announcement also comes less than two weeks after he commuted the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the COVID-19 pandemic, and of 39 others convicted of nonviolent crimes, the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The announcement also followed the post-election pardon that Biden granted his son Hunter on federal gun and tax charges after long saying he would not issue one, sparking an uproar in Washington. The pardon also raised questions about whether he would issue sweeping preemptive pardons for administration officials and other allies who the White House worries could be unjustly targeted by Trump’s second administration.

Speculation that Biden could commute federal death sentences intensified last week after the White House announced he plans to visit Italy on the final foreign trip of his presidency next month. Biden, a practicing Catholic, will meet with Pope Francis, who recently called for prayers for U.S. death row inmates in hopes their sentences will be commuted.

Martin Luther King III, who publicly urged Biden to change the death sentences, said in a statement issued by the White House that the president “has done what no president before him was willing to do: take meaningful and lasting action not just to acknowledge the death penalty’s racist roots but also to remedy its persistent unfairness.”

Donnie Oliverio, a retired Ohio police officer whose partner was killed by one of the men whose death sentence was converted, said the execution of “the person who killed my police partner and best friend



would have brought me no peace.”

“The president has done what is right here,” Oliverio said in a statement also issued by the White House, “and what is consistent with the faith he and I share.”

## **Nissan, Honda announce plans to merge, creating world’s No. 3 automaker**

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and ELAINE KURTENBACH Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese automakers Honda and Nissan have announced plans to work toward a merger, forming the world’s third-largest automaker by sales as the industry undergoes dramatic changes in its transition away from fossil fuels.

The two companies said they had signed a memorandum of understanding on Monday and that smaller Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors also had agreed to join the talks on integrating their businesses.

Honda’s president, Toshihiro Mibe, said Honda and Nissan will pursue unifying their operations under a joint holding company. Honda will initially lead the new management, retaining the principles and brands of each company. The aim is to have a formal merger agreement by June and to complete the deal and list the holding company on the Tokyo Stock Exchange by August 2026, he said.

No dollar value was given and the formal talks are just starting, Mibe said.

There are “points that need to be studied and discussed,” he said. “Frankly speaking, the possibility of this not being implemented is not zero.”

Automakers in Japan have lagged behind their big rivals in electric vehicles and are trying to cut costs and make up for lost time.

A merger could result in a behemoth worth more than \$50 billion based on the market capitalization of all three automakers. Together, Honda, Nissan and Mitsubishi would gain scale to compete with Toyota Motor Corp. and with Germany’s Volkswagen AG. Toyota has technology partnerships with Japan’s Mazda Motor Corp. and Subaru Corp.

News of a possible merger surfaced earlier this month, with unconfirmed reports saying that the talks on closer collaboration partly were driven by aspirations of Taiwan iPhone maker Foxconn to tie up with Nissan by buying shares from the Japan’s company’s other alliance partner, Renault SA of France.

Nissan’s CEO Makoto Uchida said there had been no direct approach to his company from Foxconn. He also acknowledged that Nissan’s situation was “severe.”

Even after a merger Toyota, which rolled out 11.5 million vehicles in 2023, would remain the leading Japanese automaker. If they join, the three smaller companies would make about 8 million vehicles. In 2023, Honda made 4 million and Nissan produced 3.4 million. Mitsubishi Motors made just over 1 million.

Nissan, Honda and Mitsubishi announced in August that they would share components for electric vehicles like batteries and jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to dramatic changes centered around electrification, following a preliminary agreement between Nissan and Honda set in March.

Nissan has struggled following a scandal that began with the arrest of its former chairman Carlos Ghosn in late 2018 on charges of fraud and misuse of company assets, allegations that he denies. He eventually was released on bail and fled to Lebanon.

Speaking Monday to reporters in Tokyo via a video link, Ghosn derided the planned merger as a “desperate move.”

From Nissan, Honda could get truck-based body-on-frame large SUVs such as the Armada and Infiniti QX80 that Honda doesn’t have, with large towing capacities and good off-road performance, Sam Fiorani, vice president of AutoForecast Solutions, told The Associated Press.

Nissan also has years of experience building batteries and electric vehicles, and gas-electric hybrid powertrains that could help Honda in developing its own EVs and next generation of hybrids, he said.

But the company said in November that it was slashing 9,000 jobs, or about 6% of its global work force, and reducing its global production capacity by 20% after reporting a quarterly loss of 9.3 billion yen (\$61 million).

It recently reshuffled its management and Makoto Uchida, its chief executive, took a 50% pay cut to take responsibility for the financial woes, saying Nissan needed to become more efficient and respond better to market tastes, rising costs and other global changes.

"We anticipate that if this integration comes to fruition, we will be able to deliver even greater value to a wider customer base," Uchida said.

Fitch Ratings recently downgraded Nissan's credit outlook to "negative," citing worsening profitability, partly due to price cuts in the North American market. But it noted that it has a strong financial structure and solid cash reserves that amounted to 1.44 trillion yen (\$9.4 billion).

Nissan's share price also has fallen to the point where it is considered something of a bargain.

On Monday, its Tokyo-traded shares gained 1.6%. They jumped more than 20% after news of the possible merger broke last week.

Honda's shares surged 3.8%. Honda's net profit slipped nearly 20% in the first half of the April-March fiscal year from a year earlier, as sales suffered in China.

The merger reflects an industry-wide trend toward consolidation.

At a routine briefing Monday, Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi said he would not comment on details of the automakers' plans, but said Japanese companies need to stay competitive in the fast changing market.

"As the business environment surrounding the automobile industry largely changes, with competitiveness in storage batteries and software is increasingly important, we expect measures needed to survive international competition will be taken," Hayashi said.

## **Luigi Mangione to appear in Manhattan court to face state charges in death of UnitedHealthcare CEO**

NEW YORK (AP) — The man accused of fatally shooting the CEO of UnitedHealthcare is expected to be arraigned in a Manhattan court Monday on murder and terror charges in a state case that will run parallel to his federal prosecution.

Luigi Mangione, 26, was formally charged last week by the Manhattan district attorney with multiple counts of murder, including murder as an act of terrorism. His initial appearance in New York State Supreme Court was preempted by federal prosecutors bringing their own charges over the shooting.

The federal charges could carry the possibility of the death penalty, while the maximum sentence for the state charges are life in prison without parole. Prosecutors have said the two cases will proceed on parallel tracks, with the state charges expected to go to trial first.

Authorities say Mangione gunned down Brian Thompson as he was walking to an investor conference in midtown Manhattan on the morning of Dec 4.

Mangione was arrested in a Pennsylvania McDonald's after a five-day search, carrying a gun that matched the one used in the shooting and a fake ID, police said. He also was carrying a notebook expressing hostility toward the health insurance industry and especially wealthy executives, according to federal prosecutors.

At a news conference announcing the state charges on Tuesday, Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg said the application of the terrorism law reflected the severity of a "frightening, well-planned, targeted murder that was intended to cause shock and attention and intimidation."

"In its most basic terms, this was a killing that was intended to evoke terror," he added. "And we've seen that reaction."

Karen Friedman Agnifilo, an attorney for Mangione, has accused federal and state prosecutors of advancing conflicting legal theories. In federal court last week, she called their approach "very confusing" and "highly unusual."

Mangione is being held in a Brooklyn federal jail alongside several other high-profile defendants, including Sean "Diddy" Combs and Sam Bankman-Fried.

He was extradited from Pennsylvania on Thursday and quickly rushed to New York City, where he was seen wearing an orange jumpsuit as he was led away from a helicopter by heavily armed police officers

and New York City Mayor Eric Adams.

Adams said he was hoping to send a message to the suspect: "I wanted to look him in the eye and say you carried out this terroristic act in my city — the city that the people of New York love," the mayor told a local TV station. "I wanted to be there to show the symbolism of that."

An Ivy-league graduate from a prominent Maryland family, Mangione appeared to have cut himself off from family and friends in recent months. He posted frequently in online forums about his struggles with back pain. He was never a UnitedHealthcare client, according to the insurer.

Thompson, a married father of two high-schoolers, had worked at the giant UnitedHealth Group for 20 years and became CEO of its insurance arm in 2021.

The killing has prompted some to voice their resentment at U.S. health insurers, with Mangione serving as a stand-in for frustrations over coverage denials and hefty medical bills. It also has sent shockwaves through the corporate world, rattling executives who say they have received a spike in threats.

## 'Squid Game' returns looking for win with season 2

By ALICIA RANCILIO Associated Press

Stepping onto the set of "Squid Game" season two, Lee Jong-jae felt like he had never left.

"Including promotion, I'd been living with Gi-hun for about two years," said Lee in a recent interview. "I really felt like I was him," he said in a recent interview.

"Squid Game" follows an underground competition in Korea that recruits people in debt to participate in childlike games for money. Once the games begin, the contestants realize there are deadly consequences.

The show was a global hit when it was released in 2021, becoming Netflix's most-watched series. It also won numerous accolades including Primetime Emmy Awards for acting for Lee Jung-jae and directing for Hwang Dong-hyuk. Lee's career catapulted, taking him to the Cannes Film Festival and giving him his first English-language role in the "Star Wars" series "The Acolyte" for Disney+.

Lee says when Netflix ordered a second season of "Squid Game," he questioned the timeline because it took Hwang years to work on the first one. "I wondered, 'How many years will it take him to write season two,'" said Lee. Hwang, in turn, surprised everyone — including himself — by taking just six months to write season two and a third and final season. "I'm not sure I'll ever be able to write something that fast again," he said.

Creating new characters and their individual stories came easily. The biggest, challenge, Hwang said, was deciding what should happen with Gi-hun. Lee says when he read the scripts he thought Hwang "really is a genius."

It's rare for even successful TV shows in Korea to have more than one season so it was a big swing, even for the new cast.

"There's a Korean phrase, 'there's not a sequel that does better than its prequel,' said actor Yang Dong-geong, whose character debuts in season two. "I've been careful because we aren't really sure what the reaction will be." The outlook is positive. Season two has already been nominated in the best drama series category at the upcoming Golden Globe Awards.

The opportunity to work on a project with worldwide appeal is a dream come true for a performer. Lee Byung-hun, who reprises his villain role from season one, has appeared in big budget English-language films like "G.I. Joe: The Rise of the Cobra" with Channing Tatum and Dennis Quaid and "Red 2" with Bruce Willis. It's "Squid Game" that he credits for taking his career to another level.

"I've been an actor for over three decades and ... maybe most people outside of Korea have never seen anything that I've been in. If anyone through 'Squid Game' wishes to see more of me or becomes more curious about my previous works, as an actor, nothing would be more rewarding or bring me greater joy."

The audition process moved slowly. Jo Yu-ri recalls waiting two months between the first and second-round. When she finally got the part Jo says, "I actually remember crying." The actors were asked to not speak publicly about their casting to wait for Netflix to make an announcement. "There were a couple of close friends that popped champagne for me when they found out," said Yang.

Netflix's "Squid Game" universe is also growing. A second season of a reality competition show based on the series has been ordered and an English version is in development. Season three of the original has also completed filming and is in post-production.

Season two is not without controversy. The new episodes feature a transgender character played by Park Sung-hoon. Hwang says he understands why hiring a trans actor would have been ideal, but that the casting is a reflection of how the LGBTQ community and gender identity is viewed in Korea.

"To be honest with you, in Korea, when it comes to the LGBTQ and gender minority community and culture compared to the Western worlds, it's not as widely socially accepted yet. Unfortunately, a lot of the groups are marginalized and neglected from society, which is heartbreaking," said Hwang.

"We don't have a very large pool of actors that allow for authentic casting when it comes to transgender characters. We did our research. We tried to find someone who we thought could be the best fit. However, we weren't able to." Hwang also went on to say that Park's talent and approach to the character ended up making him "the perfect fit."

## Abortion opponents shift focus to pills with lawsuits, proposed laws and possible federal action

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Opponents of abortion are increasingly focusing on restricting access to pills, which are the most common way to end a pregnancy in the U.S.

This month, the Texas attorney general's office filed a lawsuit against a New York doctor, saying she violated Texas law by prescribing abortion pills to a patient there via telemedicine. The suit represents the first lawsuit of its kind and could lead to a legal test for the New York law designed to protect providers there who prescribe the drugs to patients in states with abortion bans.

Anti-abortion officials are taking other steps, too, through legislation and lawsuits.

Abortion rights advocates are also concerned that President-elect Donald Trump's administration could take action to restrict access if it chose to.

Pills are the most common means of abortion

By the time the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 and opened the door for states to ban abortion, over half of all abortions were obtained using medication, usually a combination of the drugs mifepristone and misoprostol.

The drugs are different than Plan B and other emergency contraceptives that are usually taken within three days after possible conception, weeks before women know they're pregnant. Studies have found they're generally safe and result in completed abortions more than 97% of the time, which is less effective than procedural abortions.

By last year, nearly two-thirds of abortions were from medications, according to a tally by the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion access.

Much of the growth has been through abortion pills prescribed via telehealth and mailed to patients. A survey conducted for the Society of Family Planning found that by the first half of 2024, such prescriptions accounted for about one-tenth of abortions in the U.S.

That number has risen rapidly since 2023 when some Democratic-controlled states started adopting laws that seek to protect medical providers in their borders who prescribe abortion pills via telehealth to patients in states where abortion is banned.

"Telehealth for abortion has been a huge success," said Ushma Upadhyay, a professor at the Center of Health and Community and the University of California San Francisco. "It has helped people in an incredible way."

Texas is going after a New York doctor despite a law intended to protect prescribers

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton rolled out a new strategy in the fight over pills this month when he sued Dr. Maggie Carpenter, who is based in New York, alleging she prescribed and sent pills to a Texas

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woman.

New York is one of at least eight states with a law intended to protect medical providers who prescribe abortion pills to patients in states with bans.

If Texas prevails upon a judge to block Carpenter from prescribing in the state, it's unclear what would happen next. New York's shield law would bar it from being enforced in New York, said David Cohen, a professor at Drexel University's Thomas R. Kline School of Law.

Cohen said he expects any ruling would not have a major chilling effect on other doctors who prescribe out-of-state patients. "They certainly seem undeterred by legal risk," he said.

And, he said, like illegal drugs, they'll continue to be available if there's a demand for them. Cohen said Paxton "is going to plug one hole if he succeeds. There's no way he plugs them all."

Another lawsuit from states is trying a different way to restrict pills

Pill prescribing has already withstood one key effort to block it. The U.S. Supreme Court this year ruled that a group of anti-abortion physicians and organizations that represent them lacked the legal standing to force the undoing of federal approvals for mifepristone.

The state attorneys general from Idaho, Kansas and Missouri responded in October with a legal filing contending that they can make such an argument. Instead of focusing on the drug's initial approval in 2000, they're looking at later changes from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that allow its use for the first 10 weeks of pregnancy and telemedicine prescriptions.

There hasn't yet been a ruling on their case. When there is, it will likely be appealed to a higher court.

States are also considering laws aimed at abortion pills

This year, Louisiana became the first state with a law to reclassify both mifepristone and misoprostol as "controlled dangerous substances." The drugs are still allowed, but medical personnel have to go through extra steps to access them.

Some doctors said in a legal challenge that the change could cause delays in administering them in emergencies, such as when a woman is hemorrhaging after giving birth.

Dr. Jennifer Avengo, director of the New Orleans Health Department, said that in the first few months of enforcement, she did not hear of any cases where the drugs could not be accessed in time.

Additional states are considering ways to restrict abortion pills in their 2025 legislative sessions.

In Tennessee, a Republican state lawmaker has proposed creating a \$5 million civil liability against those who deliver or help access abortion pills with the intent of helping someone end a pregnancy.

Rep. Gino Bulso said he filed the bill after learning that abortion pills were being sent to Tennessee despite state law prohibiting such actions. "I began to think about how we might be able to both provide an additional deterrent to companies violating the criminal law and provide a remedy for the family of the unborn children," he said.

A proposal in Missouri would make it a crime to deliver mifepristone or other drugs with the intent of causing an abortion. In November, the state's voters adopted a constitutional amendment to allow abortion until fetal viability — which is somewhere past 21 weeks into a pregnancy, though there's no fixed timeframe.

The federal government could take steps to regulate the pills, too

Trump's administration also could take action on the pill policy.

One approach that abortion rights advocates have warned about — and which some abortion opponents have suggested — includes enforcing an 1873 law against pills that bans mailing medications or instruments used in abortion. President Joe Biden's administration has declined to do so.

The FDA could also change its approvals of the drugs, even without being forced to do so by a court ruling.

During his campaign, Trump flip-flopped on abortion policy and at points attempted to distance himself from abortion opponents. Since he won the election, though, he has nominated abortion opponents to administration posts.

In an interview with Time magazine published this month, he gave rambling answers to questions about pills. He said he intended to maintain access but also left the door open to changing his mind.

## The new right celebrates Trump at a conservative conference and sidesteps inconsistencies

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — As Washington heaved over the possibility of a partial government shutdown, leading far-right figures gathered with thousands of Donald Trump's most ardent supporters and, for the most part, gloried in splintering the president-elect's party.

Speakers and attendees at Turning Point USA's AmericaFest 2024 hailed Trump and billionaire Elon Musk for initially scuttling a bipartisan agreement to keep government open. They jeered House Speaker Mike Johnson and his willingness to engage with Democrats, disregarding Johnson's close alliance with Trump and frequent appearances at his side.

"The political class is infected with a malignant cancer. The cancer is bipartisanship," boomed Steve Bannon, the Trump adviser who perhaps more than any other reflects and stokes the president-elect's pugilistic populism.

"We don't need partisanship," Bannon continued, as he called for Johnson's ouster. "We need hyper-partisanship."

The president-elect has wide latitude with his core supporters and is in turn responsive to their demands. That dynamic fuels the unpredictability put on display in last week's budget fight and sets up inevitable future conflicts within Trump's broadened Republican coalition.

That Trump failed to achieve his central goals — with 38 Republicans voting against a plan backed by Trump and Musk — seemed unimportant to Bannon and others who welcomed Trump to the conference's Sunday finale. The fight itself, and the incoming president being at the center of it, was the point.

"Thank you, God, for sending us Donald Trump," said Turning Point founder Charlie Kirk as Trump took the stage. Thousands roared and held their cell phones aloft to capture the moment.

Trump's supporters differ on what they want

Interviews with people at AmericaFest and arguments from speakers illustrated that, beyond fealty to Trump, the new right in America is defined philosophically by anti-establishment sentiment, staunchly conservative social mores and vocal declarations of patriotism — not a uniform policy consensus.

"I just want everything Trump said he was going to do," said Andrew Graves, a 39-year-old former Disney employee who now works as an Arizona organizer for Turning Point. "It doesn't matter how as long as we get it done."

Pressed on what "it" is, Graves mentioned "what's going on in education" and "keeping women out of men's sports." He talked about Trump's signature promises — tariffs on foreign imports, a hardline immigration crackdown — only when prompted.

Jennifer Pacheco, a 20-year-old student from Southern California, said she embraced Turning Point because she likes Kirk's unapologetic Christianity and believes "we need to have God be more present in this country."

In Trump, Pacheco sees a transformative figure. "It's just everything that's off track, and I think we will see things get fixed," she said, talking about the economy and cultural values.

When asked, Pacheco said she does sometimes worry about national debt levels. But she said she did not closely follow the week's maneuvers in Washington and was unfamiliar with Trump's call to essentially eliminate the nation's debt ceiling through the entirety of his upcoming term.

Alexander Sjorgen, a 26-year-old from Berks County, Pennsylvania, volunteered a more detailed list of policy priorities: addressing structural deficits, boosting domestic energy production, launching a mass deportation program, curtailing "the transgender rights" agenda, rethinking how involved the U.S. is in international affairs.

"For the most part, we all just want to see the country strong again and feel like it's ours again," he said. One speaker calls for a 'revolutionary moment'

That ethos permeated convention halls and meeting rooms awash in Trump paraphernalia — the "Make

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America Great Again" hats, T-shirts emblazoned with the bloodied candidate after Trump survived an assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania. Among the throngs, there was the occasional fully costumed "Uncle Sam" or Revolutionary War figure.

Top speakers seized on the atmosphere, being greeted as celebrities and drawing roars of approval on everything from demanding confirmation of Trump's Cabinet picks to imprisoning members of Congress who investigated the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol.

"It feels good to win back our country," Kirk told the opening assembly. But, he added, "the transformation of the Republican Party is not yet complete." He threatened primaries against any GOP senator who votes against a Trump nominee, warnings that have already affected Capitol Hill.

Bannon praised the assembled activists as "the vanguard of a revolutionary movement" and compared Trump's election to Franklin Roosevelt's 1932 realignment of working-class Americans behind Democrats. Bannon skewered Johnson and other establishment Republicans in "the imperial capital," his derisive quip for Washington.

"President Trump came back from the political dead," Bannon said, framing Trump's sweep of seven battleground states as a landslide. "We have nothing else to discuss. It's only about the execution of President Trump's agenda."

During 75 minutes at the podium on Sunday, Trump ticked through many of his usual pledges and policy ideas. But he did not acknowledge his unsuccessful venture on Capitol Hill last week or continued questions about whether he will try to unseat Johnson. Summing up his intentions, Trump opted for politically fuzzy rhetoric.

"Last month, the American people voted for change," he said, touting a "common-sense" agenda and promising a "golden age" for the country.

Kirk, Bannon and other influencers discussed the Trump agenda in more detail than most attendees, sometimes even acknowledging discrepancies and complexity.

Bannon conceded Trump did not get his way on the debt ceiling vote but said he eventually would. But he also insisted that doesn't mean Trump won't cut spending. "He's got a plan. ... But you've got to line everything up," he said, spotlighting billionaires Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy and their "government efficiency" commission.

Ben Shapiro, another commentator, offered assurances that Trump would rethink tariffs if they "are in fact inflationary." Further, Shapiro tried to reconcile Trump's staunch support for U.S. aid to Israel and conservatives' disdain for foreign aid, including for Ukraine in its war against its invading Russian neighbors. Israel's fight against Hamas, Shapiro argued, is "existential," suggesting that Ukraine's defensive posture is not.

Retired Gen. Michael Flynn, a firebrand forced out of Trump's first White House who Trump has suggested he would bring back once in office, insisted conservatives are not isolationist even as he assailed the Pentagon footprint around the world.

"I'm not anti-war," Flynn said from the main podium. "I'm anti-stupid war."

Kirk, meanwhile, tried to frame any differences across Trump's coalition as reconcilable.

"Maybe you are a parents-rights advocate. Maybe you are here as a Second Amendment enthusiast. ... Maybe you are a pastor. Maybe you are a 'Make America Healthy Again' advocate," Kirk said. "Whatever focus group you have, as long we can agree on the big stuff ... we need to combine forces and defeat the incumbent regime. Welcome aboard. We are going to make America great again."

## Many Americans have come to rely on Chinese-made drones. Now lawmakers want to ban them

By DIDI TANG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Russell Hedrick, a North Carolina farmer, flies drones to spray fertilizers on his corn, soybean and wheat fields at a fraction of what it would cost him to use a conventional ground spreader.

As a volunteer rescuer, Hedrick uses thermal drones to search for people trapped by mudslides and cargo drones to send water and baby formula to those who are stranded — something he did after Hur-

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ricane Helene.

Now he is fretting that one day he will have to ground his drone fleet. Most commercial drones sold in the United States, including those used by Hedrick, are made in China. They have become a target of U.S. lawmakers, who see the dominance of Chinese drones not only as an espionage threat but as a commercial threat because they make it nearly impossible for American manufacturers to compete.

It's another front in the U.S.-China economic and technological competition that's likely to intensify with the return to the White House in January of Republican Donald Trump, who has promised to get tough on China.

Washington has already placed restrictions on Chinese telecommunications companies and imposed high tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles as the U.S. competes with China in semiconductors, artificial intelligence and other areas.

A defense bill that Congress passed on Dec. 18 includes a clause to stop two Chinese companies from selling new drones in the U.S. if a review finds they pose "an unacceptable risk" to American national security. Congress has banned federal agencies from acquiring Chinese drones, with some exceptions, and several states have barred publicly funded programs from using or procuring Chinese drones.

A broader ban is worrisome for Americans for whom drones have become a part of their lives and work. It could disrupt wide-ranging operations, from law enforcement to mapping and filmmaking that drone operators say are viable because of the low cost and high performance of the Chinese drones. American-made drones just aren't comparable, they say.

American reliance on Chinese-made drones

In Hickory, North Carolina, Hedrick began flying Chinese-made drones in 2019 to fertilize crops and monitor crop health. A drone spreader costs \$35,000, while a conventional ground sprayer would set him back \$250,000, he said.

"With the drone efficiency, we are able to do things we were never able to do before: to apply fertilizer but use less, which is good for American consumers," Hedrick said.

But it's precisely that reliance on Chinese drones that worries U.S. lawmakers.

"It is strategically irresponsible to allow Communist China to be our drone factory," argued Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who has been tapped by Trump to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. She led earlier House efforts to ban new Chinese drones.

It was the role of drones in everyday life that drove Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., to get Congress to restrict the purchase of Chinese drones by federal agencies. Those restrictions were included in a defense bill that Democratic President Joe Biden signed last year.

Scott has compared Chinese drones to spy balloons that could "gather data or carry harmful payloads" across America, posing risks to military bases, critical infrastructure and natural resources.

Michael Robbins, president and chief executive officer of AUVSI, an advocacy group for unmanned vehicles such as drones, opposes an immediate ban. Instead, his group has urged the government to support the U.S. drone-making industry through investment so it can catch up with its Chinese competitors in both capability and cost.

He applauds Congress for addressing some of the issues in the 2025 defense budget, including promoting investment in autonomous technology and working to develop a secure supply chain for U.S. drone manufacturing.

That vulnerability was clear earlier this year when Beijing sanctioned the U.S. drone maker Skydio, forcing it to ration its batteries sourced from China.

"This is an attempt to eliminate the leading American drone company and deepen the world's dependence on Chinese drone suppliers," wrote Adam Bry, chief executive officer of Skydio.

Citing security interests, China has restricted exports to the U.S. of drone parts, including motors, flight controllers and imaging equipment.

John Goodson, CEO of Darkhive, a San Antonio-based drone maker, said a ban would not stop Chinese drone makers from selling their products elsewhere in the world but could hurt U.S. drone companies that



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rely on China for parts.

For now, it remains unrealistic to ban Chinese drones when there are few comparable products, said Faine Greenwood, a drone enthusiast who writes extensively about drones. "If we ban the Chinese drones, we knock out many amazing things we do."

The dominant Chinese player

The best-known Chinese drones are those by DJI Technology Co., a company founded in 2006 and based in the southern city of Shenzhen. It's named in the defense spending bill, along with another Chinese company, Autel Robotics.

DJI has the lion's share of the global drone market and is the dominant player in the U.S. market. Its devices are known for their affordability and high performance. They are even used on the battlefield in Ukraine by both sides, even though DJI does not make military drones.

DJI's drones have been used by first responders to locate disaster victims, mappers to survey roads and utility lines, mosquito control officers to reach swarms of larvae, and filmmakers to capture aerial footage. Police use them to help prevent crime and find missing people.

Hedrick, the North Carolina farmer, mobilized drone search efforts as a volunteer after Helene hit. On the first night, he and his teammates located 150 stranded people. When they could not be immediately rescued, Hedrick said his team used DJI cargo drones to send in supplies.

"I am not going to say I won't love to have U.S. drones, but I don't see the American drones as anywhere close to the DJI drones in terms of reliability, ease of use, and just the user-friendly software," Hedrick said. "The U.S. drones are not as good as the DJI ones but cost twice as much."

But as U.S.-China relations have soured, DJI drones have come under scrutiny. The U.S. government has put the company on several blacklists, saying it violates human rights by supplying drones to Chinese police to surveil members of the ethnic Uyghur minority, and alleging links to the Chinese military.

DJI has denied wrongdoing and is suing the Pentagon over the designation that it is a Chinese military company. U.S. customs officials also have blocked some DJI shipments over concerns that the products might have been made with forced labor. DJI has called it "a customs-related misunderstanding."

As for the defense bill, DJI said it contains no provision that would allow the company to defend itself. "We call on a relevant technical intelligence agency to undertake an audit of our products, and we ask for a fair right of reply to any findings," DJI said.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington said China opposes what it calls the politicization of trade.

"The Chinese government firmly supports Chinese companies in carrying out international trade and cooperation in drones for civilian use, and opposes certain countries' frequent illegal sanctions on Chinese companies and individuals on the grounds of so-called national security," Liu Pengyu, the embassy spokesman, said in a statement.

A lack of alternatives

Several states have already restricted the use of Chinese drones. In Tennessee, public agencies, including police and fire departments, are no longer allowed to purchase DJI drones.

That caused a headache for Capt. Chris Lowe of the Kingsport Fire Department. After his department lost a DJI Mavic Pro drone, he was quoted \$5,000 for a replacement from an approved list of drones, when another DJI Mavic Pro would cost \$1,000 to \$1,500.

"Basically it would be a DJI clone but doesn't have all the capabilities," Lowe said of the alternative. Without any state assistance, he said he would either forgo a new drone or tighten the belt in equipment maintenance elsewhere. He said the department has used drones to scope out wildfires, chemical leaks and disaster scenes and to search for missing people. "It's about life and death," he said.

In Wimberley, Texas, Gene Robinson has used high-resolution drone images to analyze differences in vegetation to discover buried bodies. He said he helped police find a victim's buried arm, making prosecution possible. Robinson doesn't think there's a viable alternative to the DJI drone he uses.

He said his project at Texas State University's Forensic Anthropology Center would be "deader than a doornail" if there's a national ban on Chinese-made drones.

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At the Interior Department, the policy against foreign-made drones has hamstrung its drone operations, resulting in the “loss of opportunities to collect data on landscape, natural and cultural resources, wildlife and infrastructure,” according to a September report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

Florida’s state ban

In Florida, law enforcement officers last year complained to the state senate that a ban on state-funded agencies operating Chinese-made drones left them with costlier aircraft that didn’t perform as well. That prompted state lawmakers to appropriate \$25 million to help government-run drone programs acquire compliant models.

Christopher Todd, executive director of the not-for-profit group Airborne International Response Team, described the ban and the subsequent switch as “an absolute mess.”

“Lawmakers failed to understand that this issue is far more complicated than simply changing from one drone to another,” he said. “You need to learn a new user interface with new shortcuts and new protocols, and then you need to change all of the software and accessories and re-examine all of your network configurations to accommodate the technology change.”

But the financial assistance as well as training programs, such as the one provided by his group, made the transition possible, he said.

More than 90% of law enforcement agencies in Florida used DJI drones in 2022, and the share plummeted to about 14% after the ban, according to Todd’s group.

In Orange County, where Orlando is located, the sheriff’s office said it spent nearly \$580,000 to replace 18 noncompliant drones last year and received nearly \$400,000 in reimbursements from the state.

“The transition has gone well and has simultaneously increased our drone fleet with better capabilities and technology,” the sheriff’s office said.

## **A Holy Year is about to start in Rome. Here’s what you need to know**

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

VATICAN CITY (AP) — Pope Francis on Tuesday formally inaugurates the 2025 Holy Year, reviving an ancient church tradition encouraging the faithful to make pilgrimages to Rome, amid new security fears following a Christmas market attack in Germany.

At the start of Christmas Eve Mass, Francis will push open the Holy Door on St. Peter’s Basilica, which will stay open throughout the year to allow the estimated 32 million pilgrims projected to visit Rome to pass through.

The first Holy Year was called in 1300 and in recent times they are generally celebrated every 25 to 50 years. Pilgrims who participate can obtain “indulgences” — the centuries-old feature of the Catholic Church related to the forgiveness of sins that roughly amounts to a “get out of Purgatory free” card.

The last regular Jubilee was in 2000, when St. John Paul II ushered in the church’s third millennium. Francis declared a special Jubilee in 2015-2016 dedicated to mercy and the next one planned is in 2033, to commemorate the anniversary of the crucifixion of Christ.

What are indulgences?

According to church teaching, Catholics who confess their sins are forgiven and therefore released from the eternal or spiritual punishment of damnation. An indulgence is designed to remove the “temporal” punishment of sin that may remain — the consequence of the wrongdoing that might disrupt the sinner’s relationships with others.

Martin Luther’s opposition to the church’s practice of selling indulgences inspired him to launch the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. He was excommunicated, and the practice of buying and selling indulgences has been illegal since the 1562 Council of Trent. But the granting of them has continued and is an important element in Holy Year pilgrimages.

According to the norms issued for the 2025 Jubilee, Catholics can obtain an indulgence if they:

— Undertake a pious pilgrimage, participating in Masses and other sacraments, at any of the four papal

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basilicas in Rome or the Holy Land, or other sacred Jubilee sites “so as to manifest the great need for conversion and reconciliation.”

— Participate in works of charity, mercy or penance, such as visiting prisoners, sick people or elderly people or undertaking corporal works of mercy “to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, heal the sick, visit the imprisoned, and bury the dead.”

— Abstain, in a spirit of penance, for at least one day of the week from “futile distractions,” such as social media, or from “superfluous consumption,” such as fasting; or donating the proportionate sum to the poor or to help migrants.

Why the focus on prisoners?

Francis has long made ministry to prisoners a hallmark of his priestly vocation, and a Holy Year dedicated to a message of hope is no exception.

In fact, the only other Holy Door that Francis will personally open this year is located at the chapel of Rome’s Rebibbia prison, to draw attention to the need to give prisoners in particular hope of a better future.

The final big event of the Holy Year before it closes on Jan. 6, 2026, is the Jubilee of Prisoners on Dec. 14, 2025.

What’s on the calendar?

The Jubilee calendar is a dizzying compilation of official and unofficial Holy Year events that will sorely test the stamina of Francis, who just turned 88 and went into the Christmas season with a cold that made it hard for him to catch his breath.

Every month has two, three or four official Jubilee events that Francis is expected to attend which are designated for particular categories of people: the armed forces, artists, priests, poor people, volunteers and teachers. Then there are the unofficial Jubilee events, in which individual dioceses and other groups have organized their own pilgrimages to Rome.

One item on the Jubilee’s unofficial calendar, Sept. 6, has made news because it has been organized by an Italian association, “La Tenda di Gionata” or “Jonathan’s Tent,” which is dedicated to making LGBTQ+ Catholics feel more welcome in the Catholic Church.

What about security for so many people?

Rome Mayor Roberto Gualtieri has said the security plans call for a mix of traditional policing — a reported 700 extra officers — plus high-tech surveillance using drones and closed-circuit cameras that, thanks to algorithms informed by artificial intelligence, can keep track in real time of crowd sizes and congestion points.

“There will be more vehicles, more men, and very, very shall we say robust and important security devices,” Gualtieri told reporters last week.

As it is, the Vatican has tried to reduce congestion as much as possible for pilgrims by allowing them to reserve their visits to St. Peter’s Basilica in advance.

After a driver plowed into a Christmas market in Magdeburg, Germany, killing five people, Italian authorities last week sent a circular to police stations around the country recommending “maximum” investigative efforts and to immediately boost surveillance and police patrols around Christmas markets and displays and tourist attractions.

The Vatican, with its life-sized creche and giant Christmas tree in St. Peter’s Square and outdoor exhibit of nativity scenes in the Bernini colonnade ringing it, certainly qualifies as an at-risk target.

How else is Rome preparing?

Rome has been groaning under two years of intense preparations for the Holy Year that involved major public works projects and artistic renovations that have coincided with separate initiatives paid for by the European Union’s COVID-19 recovery funds.

Fewer than a third of the 323 Jubilee projects have been finished or are wrapping up, meaning the traffic headaches and eyesores will continue well into 2025 and even 2026. But Romans and visitors are at least beginning to see some of the finished products.

Bernini’s fountains in Piazza Navona are glistening white again after a monthslong cleaning. Just this weekend, a spiffed-up Trevi Fountain reopened, and on Monday the main Jubilee project was being un-

veiled: A pedestrian piazza linking Castel St. Angelo to the Via della Conciliazione, the main boulevard leading to St. Peter's Square.

## 2 US Navy pilots shot down over Red Sea in apparent 'friendly fire' incident, US military says

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Two U.S. Navy pilots were shot down Sunday over the Red Sea in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the U.S. military said, marking the most serious incident to threaten troops in over a year of America targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels.

Both aviators were recovered alive after ejecting from their stricken two-seat F/A-18 aircraft, with one suffering minor injuries. But the shutdown underlines just how dangerous the Red Sea corridor has become, with ongoing attacks on shipping by the Iranian-backed Houthis despite U.S. and European military coalitions patrolling the area.

The U.S. military had conducted airstrikes targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels at the time of the friendly fire incident, though the U.S. military's Central Command did not elaborate on what the pilots' mission was and did not respond to questions from The Associated Press.

The F/A-18 shot down had just flown off the deck of the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier, Central Command said. On Dec. 15, Central Command acknowledged the Truman had entered the Mideast, but hadn't specified that the carrier and its battle group was in the Red Sea.

"The guided-missile cruiser USS Gettysburg, which is part of the USS Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group, mistakenly fired on and hit the F/A-18," Central Command said in a statement. "This incident was not the result of hostile fire, and a full investigation is underway."

From the military's description, the aircraft shot down was a two-seat F/A-18 Super Hornet fighter jet assigned to the "Red Rippers" of Strike Fighter Squadron 11 out of Naval Air Station Oceana, Virginia. While Central Command referred to both as pilots, typically a two-seat F/A-18 has a pilot and a weapons officer on board.

It wasn't immediately clear how the Gettysburg could mistake an F/A-18 for an enemy aircraft or missile, particularly as ships in a battle group remain linked by both radar and radio communication.

However, Central Command said that warships and aircraft earlier shot down multiple Houthi drones and an anti-ship cruise missile launched by the rebels. Incoming hostile fire from the Houthis has given sailors just seconds to make decisions in the past.

Since the Truman's arrival, the U.S. has stepped up its airstrikes targeting the Houthis and their missile fire into the Red Sea and the surrounding area. However, the presence of an American warship group may spark renewed attacks from the rebels, like what the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower saw earlier this year. That deployment marked what the Navy described as its most intense combat since World War II.

On Saturday night and early Sunday, U.S. warplanes conducted airstrikes that shook Sanaa, the capital of Yemen which the Houthis have held since 2014. Central Command described the strikes as targeting a "missile storage facility" and a "command-and-control facility," without elaborating.

Houthi-controlled media reported strikes in both Sanaa and around the port city of Hodeida, without offering any casualty or damage information. In Sanaa, strikes appeared particularly targeted at a mountainside known to be home to military installations. However, there were no images or information released regarding the strikes — which has happened previously when airstrikes hit vital facilities for the rebels.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, released a prerecorded statement hours later in which he claimed the rebels launched eight drones and 17 cruise missiles in their attack. He also claimed without offering any evidence that the Houthis shot down the F/A-18, likely following a pattern of him making exaggerated claims. During the Eisenhower's deployment, he repeatedly falsely claimed the carrier had been struck by Houthi fire.

The Houthis have targeted about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023 after Hamas' surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people

and saw 250 others taken hostage.

Israel's grinding offensive in Gaza has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, local health officials say. The tally doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians.

The Houthis have seized one vessel and sunk two in a campaign that has also killed four sailors. Other missiles and drones have either been intercepted by separate U.S.- and European-led coalitions in the Red Sea or failed to reach their targets, which have also included Western military vessels.

The rebels maintain that they target ships linked to Israel, the U.S. or the United Kingdom to force an end to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran.

The Houthis also have increasingly targeted Israel itself with drones and missiles, resulting in retaliatory Israeli airstrikes.

On Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said his country would act "forcefully" against the Houthis, as it has against other allies of Iran, "only in this case, we are not acting alone." Israeli media reports late Sunday, relying on anonymous sources, suggested senior security officials believe that Israel should directly strike Iran over the Houthi attacks, rather than hit targets in Yemen again.

## Trauma lingers on for survivors of the deadly tsunami that hit Thailand 20 years ago

By JINTAMAS SAKSORNCHAI Associated Press

BAN NAM KHEM, Thailand (AP) — The 20-year-old freshman student was still asleep that Sunday morning at the family's house on the Andaman Sea coast of southern Thailand when her mom, sensing something wasn't right, woke her up saying they needed to leave right away.

The day is forever seared in Neungduangjai Sritrakarn's memory: Dec. 26, 2004, the day the deadly Indian Ocean tsunami struck across South and Southeast Asia, after a 9.1 magnitude earthquake off the west coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island.

It was one of modern history's worst natural disasters.

Neungduangjai's mom had noticed a strange pattern of whitecaps on the sea, just as a relative who returned from a fishing trip came by to warn them. They grabbed all the family members' essential documents and hopped on motorbikes.

Within minutes, Neungduangjai, her mother, father, brother and sister were speeding away, trying to get as far as they could from their village of Ban Nam Khem. Looking back, Neungduangjai saw a surging wall of water, taller than her home, moving toward shore from far away.

She had never seen anything like it.

They got about 3 kilometers (1.8 miles) away when the wall of water crashed into the shore of Phang Nga province and caught up with them, knocking them off their bikes. The water was dark, sweeping all kinds of objects, man-made and natural.

Neungduangjai pulled herself to her feet but could barely stand in the moving mass — the water was almost up to her knees.

She didn't know at the time that the tsunami had hit a dozen countries, leaving about 230,000 dead, around a third of them in Indonesia. Some 1.7 million people were displaced, mostly in the four worst-affected countries: Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

Along Thailand's Andaman coast, at least 5,400 people were killed and some 3,000 remain missing to this day, according to the Thai government.

The shrimp farm where Neungduangjai's family worked and lived was wiped out.

In its place today is a thriving bar and restaurant — the fruits of Neungduangjai's rebuilding efforts — with a porch looking out to a beautiful sea view. A view she said wouldn't be there if not for the tsunami that destroyed parts of the coast.

In Phang Nga, life has been rebuilt and the tourists are back — on the surface, all is fine.

Neungduangjai, who was home from her studies in Bangkok for the New Year break when the tsunami

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hit, said her immediate family survived but they lost five relatives, including her grandparents. One of her uncles was never found.

After a week of staying with relatives in nearby Ranong province, she went back. She remembers the stench of death and how she thought everything had been moved from its original place.

"There were bodies everywhere," she said. "When I returned to the village, I couldn't recognize a single thing. ... Everything was different."

Though tourists have little reason to notice them, reminders of the tragedy abound today in Phang Nga — signs showing an evacuation route, tsunami shelters near beach areas, several memorials and museums displaying wreckage and photos that tell the story of that day.

Sanya Kongma, the assistant to Ban Nam Khem's village chief, said development has come a long way, and that the quality of life in the village is good compared to 20 years ago.

But the haunting memories and the trauma of what they lived through are very much present and fear is never far away, he said.

"Even now ... if there's an announcement from the government on TV, or whatever, that there's an earthquake in Sumatra, everyone will be spooked," he said.

About once a year, a siren blares off in a tsunami evacuation drill. But what is meant to reassure residents of their safety can cause some survivors to relive their pain.

Somneuk Chuaykerd lost one of her young sons to the tsunami while she was out at sea, fishing with her husband.

The 50-year-old still lives in the same spot, the sea right at her backyard. In evacuation drills, she has learned to keep an emergency tote bag with all important documents. The bag is in her bedroom, along with a photo of the little boy she lost.

But the siren freezes her up every time and sends her heartbeat racing. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to grab," she says. "It's so scary."

But she has made peace with the tragedy and has no plans to move away.

"I live by the sea. This is my living. I don't have anywhere else to go," she said.

As for Nuengduangjai, for years after the tsunami, every time she looked at the sea she would get a panic attack. A roaring sound of waves haunted her in her sleep.

She chose to move back home after college and make a living right next to the sea. She is proud of her bar and restaurant.

"I'm still scared, but I have to live with it, because it's my home," she said. "Some people moved away, but I did not. I'm still here."

## Takeaways from Trump's 1st rally speech as president-elect

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump came to Arizona on Sunday for his first rally speech since winning the November election.

He was greeted by thousands of adoring supporters who confirmed his popularity across the conservative base. Trump attempted in his 75-minute on stage to go beyond his core supporters. But he also employed his usual aggressiveness, including ratcheting up threats against Panama and sending a message to billionaire Elon Musk. Here are some takeaways from the speech:

President-elect tests unity message alongside characteristic bombast

Trump spoke for about 75 minutes, much of it a typical Donald Trump speech — plenty of quips about the U.S. being "ripped off" and more false assertions that he, not Democrat Joe Biden, won the 2020 presidential election. But Trump was nonetheless relaxed, relishing his victory over Vice President Kamala Harris in November, especially prevailing in the popular vote after not getting the most votes in 2016 or 2020. He went so far as to offer talk of national unity — though with a sideways compliment to vanquished Democrats.

"We had no riots. We had no anything. It was a beautiful thing to watch," Trump said. "They just said, 'We lost.' And we want to try bringing everybody together. We're going to try. We're going to really give

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it a shot."

Trump, who likes to say that his clear but close victory was a landslide, argued: "There's a spirit that we have now that we didn't have just a short while ago."

Trump adds Panama Canal to his international tough talk

Besides his "Make America Great Again" motto, Trump's policy brand that resonates so strongly with his supporters is "America First." It encapsulates his criticisms of foreign aid, certain U.S. military interventions overseas and his plans to impose sweeping tariffs on imported goods.

He focused on a new target Sunday: the Panama Canal and Panama's government. Trump suggested he would try to regain control of the canal if Panama does not adjust passage fees that Trump insists are unfair. He said the U.S. is being "ripped off" and took a shot at 100-year-old former President Jimmy Carter for "foolishly" ceding control of canal during his one White House term almost a half century ago.

Within hours, Panama's conservative president, José Raúl Mulino, who was elected in May on a pro-business platform, rejected the idea as an affront to his country's sovereignty.

The move continues a run of Trump poking at foreign leaders. He recently mocked Canada as a U.S. state and referred to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as "governor." Trump's supporters love the brashness and argue he is simply using leverage and public pressure to U.S. advantage. The actual policy outcomes remain to be seen.

Trump sends Elon Musk a message

Trump doesn't seem to mind the idea of having two presidents at a time as long as it involves him getting a jump on succeeding outgoing President Joe Biden. Trump went to Paris for the reopening of Notre Dame cathedral. He was feted at the Army-Navy football game.

But the president-elect drew a line Sunday at the suggestion that he will be looking over his shoulder at Elon Musk, the world's richest man.

Trump mocked Democrats' recent suggestions that Trump has ceded the presidency to Musk. "No, no. That's not happening," Trump said. "He's not gonna be president."

Still, the charge flowed freely after Musk's social media posts helped spike one bipartisan congressional budget deal and pushed Washington to the brink of a partial government shut down. Trump also has empowered Musk by naming him as co-chair of a quasi-government "efficiency" commission charged with slashing federal spending.

Trump has long been accustomed to running his businesses, his campaigns and the White House as the clear No. 1. And he notably does not like to be outshone by lieutenants. In Musk, though, he has opted for an ally who has the same background and approach.

What he did not mention: tariff details and Washington budget fight

Trump did not talk much about tariffs — a key plank in his economic platform. Since winning, Trump has notably declined to promise that widespread tariffs would not result in higher prices for U.S. consumers. The issue came up in several sessions at the Turning Point convention. But not from the president-elect, even as he ticked through other policy matters.

The president-elect also did not acknowledge any details of the recent budget fight in Washington, his part in it and his failure to convince House Republicans to lift the national debt ceiling, or government borrowing limit — perhaps for as long as the duration of his term. That doesn't mean Trump isn't thinking about the fight he's going to have early in his term, when the short-term congressional deal runs out in March. But it's notable that he sidestepped the matter publicly after wading in so explicitly last week.

Trump celebrates a broadened Republican coalition

The president-elect relished reliving political pundits' analysis that he had a weak voter turnout effort — "ground game," in campaign parlance. He thanked Turning Point and its founder, Charlie Kirk, for their part in corralling votes and expanding the GOP coalition. Trump singled out young voters, Hispanic voters and Black voters for their increased support over what he earned from those blocs four years ago.

"You had Turning Point's grassroots armies," Trump said. "It's not my victory, it's your victory."

## **New York City police apprehend suspect in the death of a woman found on fire in a subway car**

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

New York City police announced Sunday they have in custody a "person of interest" in the early morning death of a woman who they believe may have fallen asleep on a stationary subway train before being intentionally lit on fire by a man she didn't know.

Transit police apprehended the suspect after receiving a report from three high school students who had recognized the man. They had seen images of the suspect taken from surveillance and police body cam video and widely distributed by police.

"New Yorkers came through again," said New York City Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch, who described the case as "one of the most depraved crimes one person could possibly commit against another human being."

Tisch said the suspect and the woman, both of whom have not been identified, were riding a subway train without any interaction between them to the end of the line in Brooklyn at around 7:30 a.m.

After the train came to a stop, surveillance video from the subway car showed the man "calmly" walk up to the victim, who was seated motionless, possibly sleeping, and set her clothing on fire with what appeared to be a lighter. The woman's clothing then "became fully engulfed in a matter of seconds," Tisch said.

Police do not believe the two knew one another.

Officers on a routine patrol at the Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue subway station smelled and saw smoke and discovered the woman on fire, standing in the middle of the subway car. After the fire was extinguished, emergency medical personnel declared the woman dead at the scene.

Unbeknownst to the officers, the suspect had remained at the scene and was seated on a bench on the subway platform, just outside the train car, Tisch said. Body cameras worn by the officers caught a "very clear, detailed look" at the suspect and those images were publicly disseminated.

After later receiving a 911 call from the teenagers, other transit officers identified the man on another subway train and radioed ahead to the next station, where more officers kept the train doors closed, searched each car and ultimately apprehended him without incident, said Chief of Transit Joseph Gulotta. The man had a lighter in his pocket when he was taken into custody, Tisch said.

Gulotta said the investigation was continuing, including whether the woman was homeless and the background of the suspect.

The case marked the second fatality on a New York subway Sunday.

At 12:35 a.m., police responded to an emergency call for an assault in progress at the 61st Street-Woodside Station in Queens and found a 37-year-old man with a stab wound to his torso and a 26-year-old man with multiple slashes throughout his body. The older man was pronounced dead at a nearby hospital while the younger man was in stable condition, police said.

An investigation was continuing.

New York Gov. Kathy Hochul this year has sent New York National Guard members to the city's subway system to help police conduct random searches of riders' bags for weapons following a series of high-profile crimes on city trains. Hochul recently deployed additional members to help patrol during the holiday season.

About a year ago, Hochul supported funding to install video cameras on every train car in the New York subway system, said Michael Kemper, chief security officer for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. He and other officials on Sunday credited the cameras with helping to track down the suspect so quickly.

## **Russia's Putin holds talks with Slovakian PM Fico, in a rare visit to Moscow by an EU leader**

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday hosted Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, in a rare visit to the Kremlin by an EU leader since Moscow's all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.



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Fico arrived in Russia on a "working visit" and met with Putin one-on-one on Sunday evening, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russia's RIA news agency. According to Peskov, the talks were expected to focus on "the international situation" and Russian natural gas deliveries.

Russian natural gas still flows to some European countries, including Slovakia, through Ukraine under a five-year agreement signed before the war that is due to expire at the end of this year. At a summit in Brussels on Thursday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy told EU leaders that Kyiv has no intention of renewing the deal, something Fico insisted will harm his country's interests.

Fico said on Facebook after meeting with Putin that he informed European Union leaders about his trip on Friday.

He said the talks in Moscow were a reaction to what Zelenskyy told him on Thursday in Brussels, that he is against any gas transit to Slovakia through Ukraine. Fico also said that Zelenskyy is in favor of sanctions against Russia's nuclear program, which he said was unacceptable and against the interest of his country that relies on nuclear energy.

Fico said Putin confirmed to him that Russia is still ready to deliver gas to the West. He said the two also discussed the military situation in Ukraine, chances for a peaceful solution to the war and the bilateral relations between their two countries which Fico said they will seek to "standardize."

His trip was condemned by the major Slovak opposition parties.

Slovakia last month signed a short-term pilot contract to buy natural gas from Azerbaijan, as it prepares for a possible halt to Russian supplies through Ukraine. Earlier this year, it struck a deal to import U.S. liquefied natural gas through a pipeline from Poland.

The country can also receive gas through Austrian, Hungarian and Czech networks, enabling imports from Germany among other potential suppliers.

Visits and phone calls from European leaders to Putin have been rare since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine, although Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited Russia in July, and Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer met with the Russian leader just weeks into the full-scale war. Both trips drew condemnation from Kyiv and European leaders.

Orbán, widely seen as having the warmest relations with Putin among EU leaders, has routinely blocked, delayed or watered down EU efforts to assist Kyiv and impose sanctions on Moscow for its actions in Ukraine. He has long argued for a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine but without outlining what that might mean for the country's territorial integrity or future security.

Fico's views on Russia's war on Ukraine differ sharply from most other European leaders. The Slovakian PM returned to power last year after his leftist party Smer (Direction) won parliamentary elections on a pro-Russia and anti-American platform. Since then, he has ended his country's military aid for Ukraine, lashed out at EU sanctions on Russia, and vowed to block Ukraine from joining NATO.

Fico has also been a rare senior EU politician to appear on Russian state TV following Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. In an interview with the Rossiya-1 channel in October, he contended the West has "prolonged the war" by supporting Ukraine, adding that sanctions against Russia were ineffective. He declared that he was ready to negotiate with Putin.

Fico also vowed to attend a military parade in Moscow next May that will mark the 80th anniversary of Nazi Germany's defeat in World War II. The Kremlin has used the annual "Victory Day" celebrations to tout its battlefield prowess, and Putin hailed Russian troops fighting in Ukraine as "heroes" at this year's event.

## **Pickup truck driver killed by police after driving through busy mall store is identified**

KILLEEN, Texas (AP) — A pickup truck driver fleeing police careened through the doors of a JCPenney store at a busy Texas mall, injuring five people before he was fatally shot by officers, authorities said.

A 53-year-old man identified as John Darrel Schultz of Kempner drove a truck and crashed into the department store in Killeen, about 70 miles (110 kilometers) north of the state capital Austin, on Saturday afternoon and continued into the building, striking people as he went, according to Sgt. Bryan Washko of

the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Emergency medical services transported four victims from the mall to area hospitals and another traveled to a hospital separately. They ranged in age from 6 to 75 years old and their conditions were not immediately known, he said.

The chase began around 5 p.m. on Interstate 14 in Belton, about 20 miles (30 kilometers) from Killeen, after authorities received calls about an erratic driver in a black pickup, Ofelia Miramontez of the Killeen Police Department said.

Schultz then pulled off the road and drove into the parking lot of the mall.

"The suspect drove through the doors and continued to drive through the JCPenney store, striking multiple people," Washko said. "The trooper and the Killeen police officer continued on foot after this vehicle, which was driving through the store, actively running people over. He traveled several hundred yards."

Officers from the state public safety department, Killeen and three other law enforcement agencies "engaged in gunfire to eliminate this threat," Washko said.

One of the officers who traded gunfire with the suspect was working as a security guard at the mall and others were off duty, he said.

Witnesses interviewed by local news outlets outside the mall said they heard multiple gunshots and saw people fleeing through the mall.

## Winter is hitting Gaza and many Palestinians have little protection from the cold

By WAFAA SHURAFa and FATMA KHALED Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Winter is hitting the Gaza Strip and many of the nearly 2 million Palestinians displaced by the devastating 14-month war with Israel are struggling to protect themselves from the wind, cold and rain.

There is a shortage of blankets and warm clothing, little wood for fires, and the tents and patched-together tarps families are living in have grown increasingly threadbare after months of heavy use, according to aid workers and residents.

Shadia Aiyada, who was displaced from the southern city of Rafah to the coastal area of Muwasi, has only one blanket and a hot water bottle to keep her eight children from shivering inside their fragile tent.

"We get scared every time we learn from the weather forecast that rainy and windy days are coming up because our tents are lifted with the wind. We fear that strong windy weather would knock out our tents one day while we're inside," she said.

With nighttime temperatures that can drop into the 40s (the mid-to-high single digits Celsius), Aiyada fears that her kids will get sick without warm clothing.

When they fled their home, her children only had their summer clothes, she said. They have been forced to borrow some from relatives and friends to keep warm.

The United Nations warns of people living in precarious makeshift shelters that might not survive the winter. At least 945,000 people need winterization supplies, which have become prohibitively expensive in Gaza, the U.N. said in an update Tuesday. The U.N. also fears infectious disease, which spiked last winter, will climb again amid rising malnutrition.

The U.N. Agency for Palestinian Refugees, known as UNRWA, has been planning all year for winter in Gaza, but the aid it was able to get into the territory is "not even close to being enough for people," said Louise Wateridge, an agency spokeswoman.

UNRWA distributed 6,000 tents over the past four weeks in northern Gaza but was unable to get them to other parts of the Strip, including areas where there has been fighting. About 22,000 tents have been stuck in Jordan and 600,000 blankets and 33 truckloads of mattresses have been sitting in Egypt since the summer because the agency doesn't have Israeli approval or a safe route to bring them into Gaza and because it had to prioritize desperately needed food aid, Wateridge said.

Many of the mattresses and blankets have since been looted or destroyed by the weather and rodents,

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she said.

The International Rescue Committee is struggling to bring in children's winter clothing because there "are a lot of approvals to get from relevant authorities," said Dionne Wong, the organization's deputy director of programs for the occupied Palestinian territories.

"The ability for Palestinians to prepare for winter is essentially very limited," Wong said.

The Israeli government agency responsible for coordinating aid shipments into Gaza said in a statement that Israel has worked for months with international organizations to prepare Gaza for the winter, including facilitating the shipment of heaters, warm clothing, tents and blankets into the territory. The agency also said Israel does not prevent the transfer of aid from Jordan.

More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed in the war in Gaza, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The ministry's count doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants, but it has said more than half of the fatalities are women and children. The Israeli military says it has killed more than 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

The war was sparked by Hamas' October 2023 attack on southern Israel, where the militant group killed 1,200 people and took 250 hostages in Gaza.

Negotiators say Israel and Hamas are inching toward a ceasefire deal, which would include a surge in aid into the territory.

For now, the winter clothing for sale in Gaza's markets is far too expensive for most people to afford, residents and aid workers said.

Reda Abu Zarada, 50, who was displaced from northern Gaza with her family, said the adults sleep with the children in their arms to keep them warm inside their tent.

"Rats walk on us at night because we don't have doors and tents are torn. The blankets don't keep us warm. We feel frost coming out from the ground. We wake up freezing in the morning," she said. "I'm scared of waking up one day to find one of the children frozen to death."

On Thursday night, she fought through knee pain exacerbated by cold weather to fry zucchini over a fire made of paper and cardboard scraps outside their tent. She hoped the small meal would warm the children before bed.

Omar Shabet, who is displaced from Gaza City and staying with his three children, feared that lighting a fire outside his tent would make his family a target for Israeli warplanes.

"We go inside our tents after sunset and don't go out because it is very cold and it gets colder by midnight," he said. "My 7-year-old daughter almost cries at night because of how cold she is."

## Israeli strikes in Gaza kill at least 22 as Vatican envoy visits Christians for pre-Christmas Mass

By WAFAA SHURAFI and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli strikes across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Sunday killed at least 22 people, including five children, Palestinian medical officials said, while Gaza's small Christian community celebrated a pre-Christmas Mass.

Israeli authorities allowed a rare Gaza visit by the leader of the Catholic Church in the Holy Land, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, for the Mass while the ever-present buzz of Israeli drones was heard outside.

One of the latest Israeli strikes hit a school housing displaced people in Gaza City and killed at least eight, including three children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Israel's military said it struck Hamas militants sheltering there.

A strike on a home in the central city of Deir al-Balah late Saturday killed at least eight, including three women and two children, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. Israel's military said it struck an Islamic Jihad militant. Another six people were killed in separate strikes on Sunday, according to local hospitals.

"The children are still inside the house. We are looking for them. They were sleeping in the living room, five of them together," said a relative, Noman Abu Samra, as people searched rubble in Deir al-Balah. A window full of children watched.

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Israel has carried out daily strikes in Gaza more than 14 months into the war with Hamas. It says it only targets militants, accusing them of hiding among civilians, but the bombings frequently kill women and children.

Israel and Hamas recently appeared to draw closer to a ceasefire agreement that would include the release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners, but several obstacles remain.

Vatican envoy celebrates Mass with Gaza's Christians

Dozens of worshipers gathered in the Holy Family Church in Gaza City as Pizzaballa and other clergy celebrated Mass. A twinkling Christmas tree was decorated with golden ornaments.

"I want to say, to tell you, that all the world, not only the Christian world, all the world is with you, So the war will finish and we will rebuild," the cardinal said, urging Gazans to never be afraid.

His visit came as Pope Francis again criticized Israel's actions in Gaza. Francis said Saturday his envoy had been unable to enter because of Israeli bombing.

"Yesterday children have been bombed. This is cruelty, this is not war," Francis said during his annual Christmas greetings. On Sunday, he called for a ceasefire.

The pope recently called for an investigation to determine if Israel's actions in Gaza constitute genocide, a conclusion reached by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The International Court of Justice is investigating genocide allegations brought against Israel by South Africa.

Israel, which was founded as a refuge for Jews after the Nazi Holocaust, rejects such allegations. It says it is only at war with Hamas, which ignited the conflict.

Now winter sets in

In an Oct. 7, 2023, attack, Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel and killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250. Around 100 hostages are still in Gaza, at least a third believed to be dead.

Israel's subsequent bombardment and ground invasion have killed over 45,000 Palestinians in Gaza, more than half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians in its count.

The offensive has caused widespread destruction and displaced some 90% of Gaza's 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Hundreds of thousands are packed into squalid tent camps along the coast as the cold, wet winter sets in.

Israel has been carrying out a major operation in northern Gaza since October, battling Hamas in the most isolated and heavily damaged part of the territory. Tens of thousands have fled as the military has ordered a complete evacuation and allowed almost no humanitarian aid to enter.

The Israeli military body overseeing civilian affairs in Gaza, known as COGAT, said on Friday it facilitated the evacuation of over 100 patients, caregivers and others from Kamal Adwan Hospital and Al-Awda Hospital in the north. They have struggled to function.

Kamal Adwan's director on Saturday asserted that Israel's military had ordered an evacuation and said shelling was occurring. Israel's military on Sunday said there was no evacuation order and it was unaware of any strikes there.

Palestinian security force member killed in West Bank

In the volatile West Bank town of Jenin, militants shot and killed a member of the Palestinian security forces and wounded two others. The Western-backed Palestinian Authority launched a rare crackdown there this month.

A statement from the security forces blamed the shooting on "outlaws," without elaborating. The PA is internationally recognized but deeply unpopular among Palestinians, in part because it cooperates with Israel on security matters.

The PA exercises limited authority in population centers in the West Bank. Israel captured the territory in the 1967 Mideast War, and the Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state.

## 'Sonic 3' bests 'Mufasa: The Lion King' at the box office

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In the holiday season battle of big-budget family movies, Paramount Pictures' "Sonic the Hedgehog 3" sped past the Walt Disney Co.'s "Mufasa: The Lion King" to take the top spot at the box office ahead of the lucrative Christmas corridor in theaters.

"Sonic the Hedgehog 3" debuted with \$62 million in ticket sales over the weekend, according to studio estimates. With strong reviews (86% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes) and a high score from audiences (an "A" on CinemaScore), "Sonic 3" is well positioned to be the top choice in cinemas during the busiest moviegoing period of the year.

It was telling of some wider trends that "Sonic 3" — made for \$122 million — bested one of Disney's top properties. Videogame adaptations, once among the most derided movie genres, have emerged as one of the most dependable box office forces in recent years. The two previous "Sonic" movies together grossed more \$700 million worldwide and the third installment appears likely to do better than both of them. A fourth "Sonic" movie is already in development.

"Mufasa," however, was humbled in its opening weekend, with its \$35 million in domestic ticket sales coming in notably shy of expectations. The photorealistic "Lion King" prequel even opened wider than "Sonic 3," launching on 4,100 theaters and gobbling up most IMAX screens, compared with 3,761 locations for "Sonic 3."

Though "Mufasa's" reviews were poor (56% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes), audiences gave it an "A-" CinemaScore.

"Sonic 3" nearly doubled the haul for "Mufasa," which cost more than \$200 million to make. Disney could look to \$87.2 million in international sales to help make up the difference. The third "Sonic" will rollout in most overseas markets in the coming weeks.

In director Jeff Fowler's "Sonic 3," Ben Schwartz returns as the voice of the hedgehog, alongside Tails the Fox (Colleen O'Shaughnessey), Knuckles the Echidna (Idris Elba) and Jim Carrey in scene-stealing dual roles as Dr. Robotnik and his grandfather.

"Moonlight" filmmaker Barry Jenkins directs "Mufasa's" voice cast, including Aaron Pierre, Kelvin Harrison Jr., Donald Glover, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, Mads Mikkelsen and Blue Ivy Carter. It follows Jon Favreau's 2019 photorealistic "The Lion King" remake, which made \$1.66 billion globally despite mixed reviews. "Mufasa" didn't come close to that film's huge \$191 million opening weekend.

"We felt strongly that the marketplace could support both movies and we're certainly holding up our side of the bargain," said Chris Aronson, distribution chief for Paramount.

No major franchise movie is coming this Christmas. The most anticipated Dec. 25 release might be "A Complete Unknown," with Timothee Chalamet as Bob Dylan. That means "Sonic 3" could be looking at several weeks in a row at No. 1.

"The family audience was 59% on 'Sonic 2.' This time it's 46%. That 13% drop reflects the time of year we're dealing with," said Aronson. "I think once the marketplace really cooks, 'Sonic' is going to be the dominant force."

Many of Disney's live-action adaptations — including "Aladdin," "Beauty and the Beast" and "Jungle Book" — have been big hits. Others, such as "Dumbo," "Mulan" and "The Little Mermaid," have been less well received. More are on the way, including a new "Snow White" in March, "Lilo & Stitch" in May, and plans for "Moana" and "Tangled" to get the same live-action treatment.

Despite "Mufasa's" muted opening, Disney is still celebrating its strongest annual performance in years. The studio has accounted for more than \$5 billion in ticket sales worldwide, including the year's top two hits: "Inside Out 2" and "Deadpool and Wolverine." The animated "Moana 2" could give Disney the top three movies of the year. In four weeks of release, it has collected \$790.2 million globally, including \$13.1 million in U.S. and Canadian theaters over this weekend.

Though Christmas often sees some of the biggest releases of the year, movies released around Thanksgiving really drove the box office this season. That includes "Moana 2" and Universal Pictures' "Wicked," which managed third place in its fifth weekend.

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"Wicked," the hit musical adaptation starring Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande, added \$13.5 million in North American theaters to push its domestic total to \$383.9 million.

Those films, among others, have led a Hollywood rebound in 2024. After a significant deficit earlier in the year, overall sales are drawing close to those of 2023. According to Comscore, the gap has narrowed to 4.4% behind last year's results. While that's still significantly less than pre-pandemic years, it's enough to flip the script on what once looked like a rough year for the movies.

Family films like "Inside Out 2," "Moana 2" and "Sonic 3" have played a major role. Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for Comscore, noted animated movies have accounted for 26.5% of this year's box office.

"The box office year was saved by the family audience being drawn to the multiplex," said Dergarabedian.

"Homestead," the latest release from Christian-themed Angel Studios, the distributor of "Sound of Freedom," opened with \$6.1 million. It follows a group of Doomsday preparers who take shelter in a self-sufficient compound after a nuclear attack in California.

Brady Corbet's "The Brutalist," one of the year's top Oscar contenders, launched on four screens in New York and Los Angeles. Its \$66,698 per-screen average was one of the highest of 2024. The post-World War II epic runs three-and-a-half hours, posing obvious theatrical challenges. A24 is trying to turn the film starring Adrien Brody and Guy Pearce into an arthouse event. It was nominated for seven Golden Globes.

Final domestic box office figures will be released Monday. Estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore:

1. "Sonic the Hedgehog 3," \$62 million.
2. "Mufasa: The Lion King," \$35 million.
3. "Wicked," \$13.5 million.
4. "Moana 2," \$13.1 million.
5. "Homestead," \$6.1 million.
6. "Gladiator II," \$4.5 million.
7. "Kraven the Hunter," \$3.1 million.
8. "Red One," \$1.4 million.
9. "Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim," \$1.3 million.
10. "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever," \$825,000.

## What we know about the deadly Christmas market attack in Germany

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — Four women and a 9-year-old boy were killed and 200 people were injured when a man drove into a Christmas market teeming with holiday shoppers in the German city of Magdeburg — an attack that has left Germans mourning the victims and with a shaken sense of security.

How did the attack unfold?

At first, Thi Linh Chi Nguyen thought the loud bangs were fireworks. The 34-year-old manicurist from Vietnam, whose salon is near the Christmas market, was on the phone during a break when she heard the noise just after 7 p.m. on Friday. Then she saw a car drive through the market at high speed. People screamed and a child was thrown into the air by the car.

The woman recalled seeing the car bursting out of the market and turning right onto Ernst-Reuter-Allee street and then coming to a standstill at a tram stop where the suspect was arrested.

The Christmas market was surrounded by concrete barriers designed to prevent attacks, but there was a gap left for emergency access, wide enough for a car to speed through.

The market area reopened Sunday, and residents walked slowly amid the shuttered food, drink and craft stands. Nearby, people stopped to light candles or leave flowers at a growing makeshift memorial.

Who are the victims?

Police say the dead are four women, aged 45, 52, 67 and 75, and a boy, aged 9. He was named as André Gleissner by fire department officials in the Elm-Asse region west of Magdeburg, where he was a member

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of the children's fire brigade.

Authorities said 200 people were injured, including 41 in serious condition. They were being treated in multiple hospitals in Magdeburg, which is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) west of Berlin, and beyond.

Who is the suspect in the attack?

Prosecutors said the suspect, a 50-year-old Saudi doctor, is under investigation on suspicion of murder, attempted murder and bodily harm. In a closed-door hearing on Saturday evening, a judge ordered that he be kept in custody pending a possible indictment.

Several German media outlets identified the suspect as Taleb A., withholding his last name in line with privacy laws, and reported that he was a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy. He has lived in Germany since 2006, practicing medicine in Bernburg, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) south of Magdeburg.

The suspect's X account describes him as a former Muslim. It is filled with tweets and retweets focusing on anti-Islam themes and criticism of the religion, while sharing congratulatory notes to Muslims who left the faith. He was critical of German authorities, saying they had failed to do enough to combat the "Islamification of Europe." He has also voiced support for the far-right and anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

What was the motive?

Investigators are analyzing the suspect's computers, mobile devices and other evidence, trying to understand what motivated him to drive his black BMW into a crowd in the eastern German city. Prosecutors said the motive may have been "dissatisfaction with the treatment of Saudi refugees in Germany."

Intelligence agencies say that increasingly they are seeing attackers with a confusing mix of beliefs and motivations. The head of Britain's domestic intelligence agency MI5, Ken McCallum, said in October that "straightforward labels like 'Islamist terrorism' or 'extreme right-wing' don't fully reflect the dizzying range of beliefs and ideologies we see."

There are unanswered questions about what the authorities knew about the suspect. The head of the Federal Criminal Police Office, Holger Münch, said the agency — Germany's equivalent of the FBI — received a warning from Saudi Arabia in November 2023, but that the information was unspecific.

Münch said the suspect "published a huge number of posts on the internet," was in contact with various authorities and "made insults and even threats" — but was not known to be violent.

Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees also acknowledged it had received a warning about the suspect last year.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is facing criticism about security lapses that allowed the attack to happen, and was heckled by some bystanders during a visit to Magdeburg on Saturday.

A string of attacks

The violence shocked all of Germany, prompting several other German towns to cancel their weekend Christmas markets as a precaution, and out of solidarity with Magdeburg's loss. Berlin kept its markets open but increased the police presence.

Germany has suffered several extremist attacks in recent years, including a knife attack that killed three people and wounded eight at a festival in the western city of Solingen in August. Friday's attack came eight years after an Islamic extremist drove a truck into a crowded Christmas market in Berlin, killing 13 people and injuring many others.

Those attacks have led cities to beef up security at Christmas markets and other events.

The horror triggered by yet another act of mass violence in Germany makes it likely that migration will remain a key issue as Germans head toward an early election on Feb. 23.

It is the latest in a string of incidents around the world in which vehicles have been used as weapons by jihadi attackers, far-right extremists and others whose motives were unclear.

## **A million taxpayers will soon receive up to \$1,400 from the IRS. Who are they and why now?**

By SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

Approximately 1 million taxpayers will automatically receive special payments of up to \$1,400 from the IRS in the coming weeks. The money will be directly deposited into eligible people's bank accounts or sent in the mail by a paper check.

The IRS said it's distributing about \$2.4 billion to taxpayers who failed to claim a Recovery Rebate Credit on their 2021 tax returns. People who missed one of the COVID stimulus payments or had received less than the full amount were able to claim the credit. But the IRS on Friday said it discovered many eligible taxpayers hadn't done so.

"Looking at our internal data, we realized that one million taxpayers overlooked claiming this complex credit when they were actually eligible," IRS Commissioner Danny Werfel said in a statement.

Here's more about the unexpected cash this group of taxpayers will soon receive:

What's the likelihood I'll receive a check?

Sorry, it's probably pretty low. The IRS said most taxpayers eligible for the federal stimulus payments, formally known as Economic Impact Payments, have already received them.

The special payments announced by the IRS are being sent to those taxpayers who filed a 2021 tax return but left the data field for the Recovery Rebate Credit blank or they filled it out as \$0 when they were actually eligible for the credit.

How will this work?

Eligible taxpayers don't have to take any action. The payments will go out automatically this month and should arrive by direct deposit or check by late January 2025. They'll be sent to the bank account listed on the taxpayer's 2023 return or to the address IRS has on file.

Payments will vary but the maximum amount will be \$1,400 per individual. The IRS has posted information online about eligibility and how the payment was calculated.

IRS plans to send separate letters to eligible taxpayers notifying them of the special payment.

What if I haven't filed my 2021 tax return yet?

You still might be able to receive the money. However, taxpayers need to file a tax return and claim the Recovery Rebate Credit by the April 15, 2025 deadline, even if any income from a job, business or other source was minimal or nonexistent, according to IRS.

How many rounds of COVID stimulus payments were there?

There were three rounds of payments to households impacted by the pandemic, totaling \$814 billion. IRS based the amounts that taxpayers received on their income, tax filing status and number of children or qualifying dependents.

In March 2020, eligible individuals received up to \$1,200 per income tax filer and \$500 per child under the CARES Act. In December 2020, eligible individuals received up to \$600 per income tax filer and \$600 per child under the Consolidated Appropriations Act. In March 2021, eligible individuals received up to \$1,400 per income tax filer and \$1,400 per child under the American Rescue Plan Act.

## **Destructive Cyclone Chido unearths a rift between locals and migrants in France's Mayotte**

By SAM MEDNICK and THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

MAMOUDZOU, Mayotte (AP) — When Cyclone Chido ravaged Mayotte's fragile infrastructure, it also exposed deep-seated tensions between the island's residents and its large migrant population.

Thousands of people who have entered the island illegally bore the brunt of the storm that tore through the Indian Ocean archipelago — France's poorest territory. Authorities in Mayotte said many migrants avoided emergency shelters out of fear of deportation, leaving themselves and the precarious shantytowns they inhabit even more vulnerable to the devastation.



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Meanwhile, anger simmered among residents who accused the government of diverting the island's already scarce resources to migrants at their expense.

"We are the legitimate population of this island," said Amada Salime. Standing in the rubble of his home on Saturday, he added, "If there is help from the government — water or something to eat or money to make houses — Mahorais people will not have it. Immigrants are more numerous than us, and we will be left behind."

Mayotte, a French department located between Madagascar and mainland Africa, has a population of 320,000. French authorities have estimated another 100,000 migrants also live there, most of whom have arrived from the nearby Comoros Islands, just 70 kilometers (43 miles) away.

The island's fragile public services, designed for a much smaller population, are buckling under the strain. According to the French statistics agency INSEE, around three-quarters of Mayotte's population live in poverty, with a median annual disposable income just one-eighth that of the Paris metropolitan area.

"The problems of Mayotte cannot be solved without addressing illegal immigration," French President Emmanuel Macron said during his testy visit this week, acknowledging the challenges posed by the island's rapid population growth. "Despite the state's investments, migratory pressure has made everything explode," he added.

People living in Mayotte for decades worry about a crackdown

The cyclone further exacerbated the island's issues after destroying homes, schools and infrastructure. Though the official death toll remains 35, authorities say that any estimates are likely major undercounts, with hundreds feared dead.

The migrants' shantytowns, known as "bangas," have long been an issue in Mayotte. "Can we solve the issue of shantytowns today? The answer is no. We will address it during the stabilization and rebuilding phase," Macron said.

For many migrants, like Nazca Antoiy, a Comorian who has lived in Mayotte for a decade, the cyclone has heightened fears of displacement.

"I heard that people were told not to reconstruct new houses. So we need to worry about that," she said, reflecting a widespread concern that authorities may use the disaster to expedite demolitions of informal settlements.

Such concerns are not unfounded. Last year, France launched Operation Wuambushu, a controversial campaign to demolish shantytowns and deport migrants who entered illegally. Macron hinted that similar policies could resume but stressed reconstruction efforts would take precedence.

The storm has left many residents struggling to meet basic needs.

A hotspot for migrants

"I can't take it anymore. Just to have water is complicated," said Fatima, a 46-year-old mother of five whose family has been without clean water since the storm ravaged Mayotte last weekend. Fatima, who only gave her first name because her family is known locally, also said she felt the island could not support the current population, let alone more.

Most migrants have family links in Mayotte and speak the same language. They seek a better life on the island rather than aiming to reach the European continent.

Mayotte's geopolitical position has long made it a hotspot for migration. While the island voted to remain French in referendums held in 1974 and 1976, neighboring Comoros has never recognized its sovereignty and continues to claim the archipelago as its own. This unresolved dispute has fueled waves of migration, with thousands risking perilous sea crossings each year.

Outgoing French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau recently reignited the debate, describing the situation in Mayotte as a "war," earlier this week. Retailleau proposed stricter measures, including using drones and naval patrols to block further arrivals. "We must be much tougher on the Comoros," he said, accusing the neighboring government of allowing migrants to leave its shores unchecked.

Retailleau's calls to "change the rules" include proposals to restrict birthright citizenship in Mayotte, a policy already tightened in 2018 to require proof that at least one parent had been a legal resident for more than three months. Critics argue that these measures only deepen Mayotte's divisions without ad-

addressing the root causes of migration.

A 2023 parliamentary report cited in French media warned that the island was a “ticking time bomb,” while suggesting redistributing part of Mayotte’s migrant population to mainland France — a proposal unlikely to gain widespread support.

## German authorities received tipoffs last year about the suspect in Christmas market attack

By MICHAEL PROBST and VANESSA GERA Associated Press

MAGDEBURG, Germany (AP) — German authorities said they received tipoffs last year about the suspect in a car attack at a Christmas market in Magdeburg as more details emerged on Sunday about the five people killed.

Authorities have identified the suspect as a Saudi doctor who arrived in Germany in 2006 and had received permanent residency. Police haven’t publicly named the suspect, in line with privacy rules, but some German news outlets have identified him as Taleb A. and reported that he was a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy.

Authorities say he does not fit the usual profile of perpetrators of extremist attacks. The man described himself as an ex-Muslim who was highly critical of Islam and in many posts on social media expressed support for the far-right anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

He is being held in custody as authorities investigate him.

“This perpetrator acted in an unbelievably cruel and brutal manner — like an Islamist terrorist, although he was obviously ideologically an Islamophobe,” Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said Sunday.

The suspect originally lived in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where he completed his specialist training in Stralsund and also came to the attention of authorities due to threatening criminal acts, the state interior minister, Christian Pegel, said Sunday.

In a dispute over the recognition of examination results, he threatened members of the state medical association with an act that would attract international attention, triggering an investigation and a search of his home, the dpa news agency reported, citing Pegel. No evidence was found of real preparations for an attack but a court found him guilty in 2013 of threatening an attack.

That was followed by other threats he made, Pegel said.

The head of the Federal Criminal Police Office, Holger Münch, said in an interview on the German broadcaster ZDF on Saturday that his office received a tipoff from Saudi Arabia in November 2023, which led authorities to launch “appropriate investigative measures.”

“The man also published a huge number of posts on the internet. He also had contact with various authorities, made insults and even threats. However, he was not known to have committed acts of violence,” said Münch, whose office is the German equivalent of the FBI.

He said that the warnings, however, proved to be very unspecific.

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees also said it received a tipoff about the suspect in the late summer of last year.

“This was taken seriously, like every other of the numerous tips,” the office said on X on Saturday. But it also noted that it is not an investigative authority and that it referred the information to the responsible authorities. It gave no other details.

The Central Council of Ex-Muslims said in a statement that the suspect had “terrorized” them for years as it expressed shock at the attack.

“He apparently shared beliefs from the far-right spectrum of the AfD and believed in a large-scale conspiracy aimed at Islamizing Germany. His delusional ideas went so far that he assumed that even organizations critical of Islamism were part of the Islamist conspiracy,” said the statement.

The group’s chairwoman, Mina Ahadi, said in the same statement: “At first we suspected that he might be a mole in the Islamist movement. But now I think he is a psychopath who adheres to ultra-right conspiracy ideologies.”

Police in Magdeburg, the capital of the state of Saxony-Anhalt, said Sunday that those who died were four women aged 45, 52, 67 and 75, as well as a 9-year-old boy.

Authorities said 200 people were injured, including 41 in serious condition. They were being treated in multiple hospitals in Magdeburg, which is about 130 kilometers (80 miles) west of Berlin, and beyond.

The suspect was on Saturday evening brought before a judge, who behind closed doors ordered him to be kept in custody on allegations of murder and attempted murder. He is facing a possible indictment.

The horror triggered by yet another act of mass violence in Germany makes it likely that migration will remain a key issue as the country heads toward an early election on Feb. 23. A deadly knife attack by a suspected Islamic extremist from Syria in Solingen in August pushed the issue to the top of the agenda, and led the government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz to tighten border security measures.

Right-wing figures from across Europe have criticized German authorities for having allowed high levels of migration in the past and for what they see as security failures now.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is known for a strong anti-migration position going back years, used the attack in Germany to lash out at the European Union's migration policies and described it as a "terrorist act."

At an annual press conference in Budapest on Saturday, Orbán insisted that "there is no doubt that there is a link between the changed world in Western Europe, the migration that flows there, especially illegal migration and terrorist acts."

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## **When 2025 arrives, so will the end of the amateur athlete in college sports**

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

When the page turns on 2024, it will be time to say goodbye, once and for all, to the amateur athlete in college sports.

In theory, the concept held on stubbornly via the quaint and now all-but-dead notion that student-athletes played only for pride, a scholarship and some meal money.

In practice, the amateurs have been disappearing for years, washed away by the steady millions, now billions, that have flowed into college athletics, mostly through football and basketball both through legitimate and illicit means.

In the coming year, the last vestiges of amateur college sports are expected to officially sputter out — the final step of a journey that has felt inevitable since 2021. That's when the Supreme Court laid the foundation for paying college players in exchange for promotions — on social media, TV, video games, you name it — featuring their name, image or likeness (NIL).

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The changes have come in spasms so far, not always well thought out, not always fair and not regulated by any single entity like the NCAA or federal government, but rather by a collection of state laws, along with rules at individual schools and the leagues in which they play.

But on April 7, the day final approval is expected for the landmark, \$2.8 billion lawsuit settlement that lays the foundation for players to receive money directly from their schools, what was once considered anathema to the entire concept of college sports will become the norm.

David Schnase, the NCAA's vice president for academic and membership affairs, acknowledges that maintaining the unique essence of college sports is a challenge in the shifting landscape.

"You can use the word 'pro,' you can use the word 'amateur,' you can attach whatever moniker you want to it, but those are just labels," Schnase said. "It's much less about labels and more about experiences and circumstances. Circumstances are different today than they were last year and they are likely going to be different in the foreseeable future."

Do athletes get rich off these new deals?

Few would argue that college athletes should get something back for the billions they help produce in TV and ticket revenue, merchandise sales and the like.

But is everyone going to cash in? Are college players really getting rich?

Recent headlines suggest top quarterback recruit Bryce Underwood was lured to Michigan thanks to funding from billionaire Oracle founder Larry Ellison, and that a top basketball recruit, A.J. Dybantsa, is heading to BYU — not a hoops powerhouse — for the reported price of \$7 million.

For every Underwood or Dybantsa, though, there are even more Matthew Slukas and Beau Pribulas.

Sluka's agent says his son agreed to play quarterback at UNLV after a promise of receiving \$100,000 and quit three games into the season after the checks never came.

Pribula was the backup quarterback at Penn State who abruptly entered the transfer portal earlier this month, choosing the college version of free agency over a chance to play with the Nittany Lions in the College Football Playoff. He's not the only one hitting the portal in hopes of getting rich before new regulations related to the NCAA settlement take effect.

"We've got problems in college football," Penn State coach James Franklin said.

The settlement will overhaul the current system. Currently, players receive money via third-party collectives that are booster-funded groups affiliated with individual schools. Coming up fast: the schools paying the athletes directly — the term often used here is "revenue sharing" — with collectives still an option, but not the only one.

"It's going to be more transparent," said Jeff Kessler, the plaintiffs' attorney and antitrust veteran who helped shape the settlement. "If anything, having the schools handling all the payments is only going to improve the system."

The NCAA has started collecting data about NIL payments, which date to July 2021. Its first set of numbers, which includes data from more than 140 schools across more than 40 sports in 2024, show a bracing disconnect between have and have-nots.

For instance, average earnings for football and men's and women's basketball players is nearly \$38,000. But the median earning — the middle number among all the data points on the list — is only \$1,328, a sign of how much the biggest contracts skew the average.

Women make vastly less than men

The statistics also show a vast difference in earnings between men and women, an issue that could impact schools' ability to comply with Title IX. That 1972 law requires schools to provide equal athletic scholarships and financial aid but not necessarily that they spend the same dollar amount on men and women. Heading into 2025, there is no clarity on how this issue will play out.

Regardless, the numbers are jarring. The NCAA data set shows the average earnings for women in 16 sports was \$8,624, compared with \$33,321 for men in 11 sports. Men's basketball players averaged \$56,000 compared with \$11,500 for women.

Paying players could cost some and benefit others

The biggest losers from this move toward a professional model could be all the swimmers and wrestlers

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and field hockey players — the athletes in the so-called non-revenue sports whose programs also happen to serve as the backbone of the U.S. Olympic team.

Only a tiny percentage of those athletes are getting rich, and now that universities have to use revenue to pay the most sought-after players in their athletic programs, there could be cuts to the smaller sports.

Also, someone's going to have backfill the revenue that will now go to the players. Well-heeled donors like Ellison are not around for every school, nor have private equity firms started sending money.

The average fan will have to pony up, and the last six months have seen dozens if not hundreds of athletic directors begging alumni for money and warning them of changes ahead. Already there are schools placing surcharges on tickets or concessions.

How will fans respond to a more transactional model of college sports?

"I don't know that fans have this really great love for the idea of 100% pure amateurism," said Nels Popp, a University of North Carolina sports business professor. "I think what they care about is the colors and the logos and the brand. I don't know that it matters to them if the players are making a little bit of money or a lot of money. They've been making money for the last couple years, and I don't know that that's making fans really back off."

Olympics got rid of 'amateurs' and turned into a multibillion-dollar industry

The last time amateurism came under such assault was in the 1980s, when the Olympics unwound the final remnants of pretending the vast majority of their athletes were anything other than full-time professionals.

The transformation was tinged with a note of honesty: The people putting on the show should reap some benefits from it. Even 40 years later, there's an good argument they remain underpaid.

The contours of the same debate are shaping up in college sports.

Athletes are pushing for a players' association that would add more transparency to a business that, even with the changes coming, is still largely dictated by the schools.

The NCAA, while acceding to the need to pay the players, wants nothing to do with turning them into actual employees of the schools they play for. It's an expensive prospect that is winding its way through the legal system via lawsuits and labor hearings that many in college sports are desperate to avoid for fear it will push the entire industry off the financial cliff.

Among the few things everyone agrees on is that things aren't going back to a time when athletes pretended to play for pride while the money moved under tables and through shadows. And that this, in fact, could only be the start, not the end, of the transformation of college sports.

"At some point, I think people might have to understand that maybe college athletes don't go to college anymore," Popp said. "Or maybe they don't go to class during the season. There could be more radical changes, and as long as they're wearing the right logo and the right colors, I'm not sure that fans really care."

## What Trump's decision to wade into spending fight tells us about the next 4 years

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, STEPHEN GROVES, JILL COLVIN and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After days of threats and demands, Donald Trump had little to show for it once lawmakers passed a budget deal in the early hours of Saturday, narrowly averting a pre-Christmas government shutdown.

The president-elect successfully pushed House Republicans to jettison some spending, but he failed to achieve his central goal of raising the debt limit. It demonstrated that despite his decisive election victory and frequent promises of retribution, many members of his party are still willing to openly defy him.

Trump's decision to inject himself into the budget debate a month before his inauguration also showed that he remains more adept at blowing up deals than making them, and it foreshadowed that his second term will likely be marked by the same infighting, chaos and brinkmanship that characterized his first.

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"Stay tuned. Buckle up. Strap in," said Rep. Steve Womack, R-Ark., a senior appropriator.

A glance at Trump's agenda shows a cascade of opportunities for similar showdowns in the years to come. He wants to extend tax cuts that he signed into law seven years ago, slash the size of government, increase tariffs on imports and crack down on illegal immigrants. Many of those efforts will need congressional buy-in.

For many of Trump's supporters, disruption could be its own goal. Thirty-seven percent of those who voted for him this year said they wanted "complete and total upheaval," according to AP VoteCast, a broad survey of more than 120,000 voters. An additional 56% said they wanted "substantial change."

But the past few days made clear the difficulty Trump could face in quickly fulfilling his goals, especially with Republicans holding only thin majorities in the House and the Senate. Some lawmakers already seem weary of the apparent lack of a unified strategy.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said the budget battle was "a valuable lesson in how to get our act together." "There are no layups and it gets more complicated," he said.

How Trump's demands fell flat

The trouble started when top lawmakers released a copy of the bill, known as a continuing resolution, that was required to keep the federal government functioning until March. It wasn't the president-elect but Elon Musk, the world's richest man and a Trump confidant, who first began whipping up opposition to the legislation on social media by calling it excessive spending.

Trump eventually waded into the fight. He ordered Republicans to cancel the bipartisan deal they had made with Democrats. And he demanded they increase the debt limit — the cap on how much the government can borrow — in hopes of preventing that thorny issue from coming up while he is in charge of the government.

He ratcheted up the pressure even as his demands shifted. First he wanted to eliminate the debt limit altogether. Then he wanted to suspend it until 2027. Then he floated an extension until 2029.

If there was a shutdown, Democratic President Joe Biden would take the blame, Trump insisted.

"All Republicans, and even the Democrats, should do what is best for our Country, and vote "YES" for this Bill, TONIGHT!" Trump wrote Thursday, before a vote on a version of the bill that included a higher debt limit.

Instead, 38 Republicans voted no. It was a stunning brush-off to Trump, whose power over his party has at times seemed near-absolute.

"Without this, we should never make a deal," he wrote on Truth Social, his social media site.

If he didn't get what he wanted, Trump said, there should be a government shutdown. He also said members of his own party would face primary challenges if they refused to go along, saying "Republican obstructionists have to be done away with." He singled out Rep. Chip Roy of Texas by name and with insults.

But in the end, lawmakers left out that debt ceiling increase, and a final deal passed early Saturday.

Musk and other Trump allies tried to frame it as a win because the final legislation was significantly slimmed down and omitted unpopular items such as a pay raise for members of Congress. Charlie Kirk, the prominent conservative activist, wrote on X that Trump "is already running Congress before he takes office!"

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said he had been in "constant contact" with Trump, who, he added was "certainly happy about this outcome."

If Trump agreed, he didn't say so himself.

After days of frequent social media messages, Trump again went silent on Friday. He did not offer a reaction to the final vote or issue any statements. Instead, he went golfing at his Florida resort.

Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for Trump, said the president-elect helped prevent an original deal "full of Democrat pork and pay raises for members of Congress."

"In January, President Trump and DOGE will continue this important mission to cut the waste out of Washington, one bill at a time," she said. DOGE is a reference to the Department of Government Efficiency, an advisory panel that will be led by Musk and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

More clashes to come

The circus-like atmosphere of the funding fight was reminiscent of Trump's first term. Back then, one budget standoff led to a government shutdown when Trump demanded money for his U.S.-Mexico border wall. After 35 days — the longest shutdown in history — he agreed to a deal without the money he wanted.

It was a political low point for Trump, and 60% of Americans blamed him for the shutdown, according to an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll at the time.

Trump didn't stop trying to bend Republicans to his will then. He's certainly not going to do so now.

He is cranking up the pressure on his own party over his Cabinet picks, pushing reluctant Republican senators to get on board with some of his most controversial choices, such as anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as health secretary and then-Fox News host Pete Hegseth as defense secretary.

The spending debates next year seem certain to further test Trump's influence in the House. Many conservatives view the rapid growth of the federal debt as an existential threat to the country that must be addressed. But some Republicans fear a voter backlash if steep cuts are made to federal programs upon which Americans rely.

Concerns about deficit spending could intensify if Trump pushes expensive tax cuts that he promised during the campaign, such as eliminating taxes on tips, Social Security and overtime pay.

He also wants to extend the tax cuts he signed into law in 2017 that are set to expire next year. He has called for further lowering the U.S. corporate tax rate from 21% to 15%, but only for companies that produce in the United States.

Trump has said he will pay for the dips in revenue with aggressive new tariffs that economists warn will lead to higher prices for consumers.

Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, said reducing spending would likely continue to be a gulf between Trump and House Republicans.

"That's never been really a campaign promise of Trump, but it's a big priority for House Republicans," he said.

There was no sense that the animosity was dying down on Saturday. Some Republicans faulted the House leadership for not securing Trump's "blessing" on the original deal. Democrats cast Trump as second fiddle to Musk.

While Trump stayed quiet, Biden announced that he signed the budget legislation.

"This agreement represents a compromise, which means neither side got everything it wanted," he said. "But it rejects the accelerated pathway to a tax cut for billionaires that Republicans sought, and it ensures the government can continue to operate at full capacity."

## **NASA's Parker Solar Probe aims to fly closer to the sun like never before**

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A NASA spacecraft aims to fly closer to the sun than any object sent before.

The Parker Solar Probe was launched in 2018 to get a close-up look at the sun. Since then, it has flown straight through the sun's corona: the outer atmosphere visible during a total solar eclipse.

The next milestone: closest approach to the sun. Plans call for Parker on Tuesday to hurtle through the sizzling solar atmosphere and pass within a record-breaking 3.8 million miles (6 million kilometers) of the sun's surface.

At that moment, if the sun and Earth were at opposite ends of a football field, Parker "would be on the 4-yard line," said NASA's Joe Westlake.

Mission managers won't know how Parker fared until days after the flyby since the spacecraft will be out of communication range.

Parker planned to get more than seven times closer to the sun than previous spacecraft, hitting 430,000 mph (690,000 kph) at closest approach. It's the fastest spacecraft ever built and is outfitted with a heat shield that can withstand scorching temperatures up to 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit (1,371 degrees Celsius).

It'll continue circling the sun at this distance until at least September. Scientists hope to better under-



stand why the corona is hundreds of times hotter than the sun's surface and what drives the solar wind, the supersonic stream of charged particles constantly blasting away from the sun.

The sun's warming rays make life possible on Earth. But severe solar storms can temporarily scramble radio communications and disrupt power.

The sun is currently at the maximum phase of its 11-year cycle, triggering colorful auroras in unexpected places.

"It both is our closest, friendliest neighbor," Westlake said, "but also at times is a little angry."

## Stampedes in Nigeria leave at least 32 dead during Christmas food distribution

By DYEPKAZAH SHIBAYAN Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — The death toll from stampedes during two Christmas charity events in Nigeria has increased from 13 to 32, police said Sunday. The victims, including at least four children, collapsed during crowd surges as people grew desperate for food items while the country grapples with the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation.

The dead included 22 people in southeastern Anambra state's Okija town, where a philanthropist on Saturday organized a food distribution, local police spokesman Tochukwu Ikenga said. Ten others died in the capital, Abuja, during a church-organized similar charity event.

Police said they were investigating the two incidents, only days after another stampede in which 35 children were killed.

Africa's most populous country is seeing a growing trend by local organizations, churches and individuals to organize charity events ahead of Christmas to ease economic hardship caused by a cost-of-living crisis.

Witnesses of the Abuja stampede told The Associated Press there was a crowd surge at one of the church gates, as dozens tried to enter the premises at around 4 a.m., hours before gift items were to be shared.

Some of them, including older people, waited overnight to get food, said Loveth Inyang, who rescued one baby from the crush.

The stampedes prompted growing calls for authorities to enforce safety measures at such events. Nigerian police also mandated that organizers obtain prior permission.

## Bluesky finds with growth comes growing pains — and bots

By ALI SWENSON and BARARA ORTUTAY The Associated Press

Bluesky has seen its user base soar since the U.S. presidential election, boosted by people seeking refuge from Elon Musk's X, which they view as increasingly leaning too far to the right given its owner's support of President-elect Donald Trump, or wanting an alternative to Meta's Threads and its algorithms.

The platform grew out of the company then known as Twitter, championed by its former CEO Jack Dorsey. Its decentralized approach to social networking was eventually intended to replace Twitter's core mechanic. That's unlikely now that the two companies have parted ways. But Bluesky's growth trajectory — with a user base that has more than doubled since October — could make it a serious competitor to other social platforms.

But with growth comes growing pains. It's not just human users who've been flocking to Bluesky but also bots, including those designed to create partisan division or direct users to junk websites.

The skyrocketing user base — now surpassing 25 million — is the biggest test yet for a relatively young platform that has branded itself as a social media alternative free of the problems plaguing its competitors. According to research firm Similarweb, Bluesky added 7.6 million monthly active app users on iOS and Android in November, an increase of 295.4% since October. It also saw 56.2 million desktop and mobile web visits, in the same period, up 189% from October.

Besides the U.S. elections, Bluesky also got a boost when X was briefly banned in Brazil.

"They got this spike in attention, they've crossed the threshold where it is now worth it for people to

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flood the platform with spam," said Laura Edelson, an assistant professor of computer science at Northeastern University and a member of Issue One's Council for Responsible Social Media. "But they don't have the cash flow, they don't have the established team that a larger platform would, so they have to do it all very, very quickly."

To manage growth for its tiny staff, Bluesky started as an invitation-only space until it opened to the public in February. That period gave the site time to build out moderation tools and other distinctive features to attract new users, such as "starter packs" that provide lists of topically curated feeds. Meta recently announced that it is testing a similar feature.

Compared to the bigger players like Meta's platforms or X, Bluesky has a "quite different" value system, said Claire Wardle, a professor at Cornell University and an expert in misinformation. This includes giving users more control over their experience.

"The first generation of social media platforms connected the world, but ended up consolidating power in the hands of a few corporations and their leaders," Bluesky said on its blog in March. "Our online experience doesn't have to depend on billionaires unilaterally making decisions over what we see. On an open social network like Bluesky, you can shape your experience for yourself."

Because of this mindset, Bluesky has achieved a scrappy underdog status that has attracted users who've grown tired of the big players.

"People had this idea that it was going to be a different type of social network," Wardle said. "But the truth is, when you get lots of people in a place and there are eyeballs, it means that it's in other people's interests to use bots to create, you know, information that aligns with their perspective."

Little data has emerged to help quantify the rise in impersonator accounts, artificial intelligence-fueled networks and other potentially harmful content on Bluesky. But in recent weeks, users have begun reporting large numbers of apparent AI bots following them, posting plagiarized articles or making seemingly automated divisive comments in replies.

Lion Cassens, a Bluesky user and doctoral candidate in the Netherlands, found one such network by accident — a group of German-language accounts with similar bios and AI-generated profile pictures posting in replies to three German newspapers.

"I noticed some weird replies under a news post by the German newspaper 'Die Ziet,'" he said in an email to The Associated Press. "I have a lot of trust in the moderation mechanism on Bluesky, especially compared to Twitter since the layoffs and due to Musk's more radical stance on freedom of speech. But AI bots are a big challenge, as they will only improve. I hope social media can keep up with that."

Cassens said the bots' messages have been relatively innocuous so far, but he was concerned about how they could be repurposed in the future to mislead.

There are also signs that foreign disinformation narratives have made their way to Bluesky. The disinformation research group Alethea pointed to one low-traction post sharing a false claim about ABC News that had circulated on Russian Telegram channels.

Copycat accounts are another challenge. In late November, Alexios Mantzarlis, director of the Security, Trust and Safety Initiative at Cornell Tech, found that of the top 100 most followed named individuals on Bluesky, 44% had at least one duplicate account posing as them. Two weeks later, Mantzarlis said Bluesky had removed around two-thirds of the duplicate accounts he'd initially detected — a sign the site was aware of the issue and attempting to address it.

Bluesky posted earlier this month that it had quadrupled its moderation team to keep up with its growing user base. The company also announced it had introduced a new system to detect impersonation and was working to improve its Community Guidelines to provide more detail on what's allowed. Because of the way the site is built, users also have the option to subscribe to third-party "Labelers" that outsource content moderation by tagging accounts with warnings and context.

The company didn't respond to multiple requests for comment for this story.

Even as its challenges aren't yet at the scale other platforms face, Bluesky is at a "crossroads," said Edward Perez, a board member at the nonpartisan nonprofit OSET Institute, who previously led Twitter's civic integrity team.

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"Whether BlueSky likes it or not, it is being pulled into the real world," Perez said, noting that it needs to quickly prioritize threats and work to mitigate them if it hopes to continue to grow.

That said, disinformation and bots won't be Bluesky's only challenges in the months and years to come. As a text-based social network, its entire premise is falling out of favor with younger generations. A recent Pew Research Center poll found that only 17% of American teenagers used X, for instance, down from 23% in 2022. For teens and young adults, TikTok, Instagram and other visual-focused platforms are the places to be.

Political polarization is also going against Bluesky ever reaching the size of TikTok, Instagram or even X. "Bluesky is not trying to be all things to all people," Wardle said, adding that, likely, the days of a Facebook or Instagram emerging where they're "trying to keep everybody happy" are over. Social platforms are increasingly splintered along political lines and when they aren't — see Meta's platforms — the companies behind them are actively working to de-emphasize political content and news.

## Today in History: December 23, Franco Harris makes the 'Immaculate Reception'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Monday, Dec. 23, the 358th day of 2024. There are eight days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 23, 1972, in an NFL playoff game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders, Steelers running back Franco Harris scored a game-winning touchdown on a deflected pass with less than 10 seconds left in the game. The "Immaculate Reception," as the catch came to be known, is often cited as the greatest NFL play of all time.

Also on this date:

In 1823, the poem "Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" was published anonymously in the Troy Sentinel of New York; the verse, more popularly known as "The Night Before Christmas," was later attributed to Clement C. Moore.

In 1913, the Federal Reserve System was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act.

In 1941, during World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to Japanese forces.

In 1948, former Japanese Premier Hideki Tojo and six other Japanese war leaders were executed in Tokyo.

In 1968, 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

In 1986, the experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan and Jeana (JEE'-nuh) Yeager, completed the first nonstop, nonrefueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 2003, a jury in Chesapeake, Virginia, sentenced teen sniper Lee Boyd Malvo to life in prison, sparing him the death penalty.

Today's Birthdays: Former Emperor Akihito of Japan is 91. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer is 81. Retired U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark is 80. Actor Susan Lucci is 78. Distance runner Bill Rodgers is 77. Football Hall of Famer Jack Ham is 76. Political commentator William Kristol is 72. Author Donna Tartt is 61. Rock musician Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam is 60. Actor Finn Wolfhard is 22.