

Groton Daily Independent

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Sunday, Dec. 29

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m. and at Zion, 11 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; No Sunday School.

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

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

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

United Methodist: Worship at Conde, 8:30 a.m., at Groton, 10:30 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.

Monday, Dec. 30

Senior Menu: Chicken alredo, broccoli, pineapple, breadstick.

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

Girls Varsity Wrestling at Sioux Falls Lincoln.

Boys Basketball at Webster: C at 5 p.m. followed by JV and Varsity.

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

Tuesday, Dec. 31

Senior Menu: Roast pork, mashed potatoes and gravy, three bean salad, fruit, whole wheat bread.

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

Pantry, 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., Groton Community Center

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



Wednesday, Jan. 1, 2025

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Thursday, Jan. 2

Senior Menu: Chickpea strips, tri-tators, peas and carrots, fruit, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Breakfast Pizza.

School Lunch: Lasagna bake, garlic toast.

School resumes

Emmanuel Lutheran: Nigeria Circle, 2 p.m.

Friday, Jan. 3

Senior Menu: Chili, corn bread, winter blend, oranges.

School Breakfast: Egg wraps.

School Lunch: Popcorn chicken, tri taters.

Girls Wrestling at McCook Central/Montrose (Salem), 2 p.m.

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Our Rudolph Land this year turned out quite nicely, apart from the wind. It has been a challenging year with the large inflatables. After the first storm, Bumble and Rudolph experienced their blowers ceasing to operate. I ended up getting leaf blowers to them back in the air. I got a replacement for Rudolph but Bumble is out of stock for this year so he still has the leaf blower on him.

Then the new Rudolph had a short in the wiring for the lights with only the rear half work and no blinking nose. Saturday I took Rudolph down and found the issue so his lights work once again.

Our big Hermey looks nice back there, but he has no internal lights. That will be my next project to get him lite up.

You may have noticed the archway. I got that from Dale and Joyce Grenz. The top part of the arch was worn out so I got metal arches to complete the set. I think it turned out neat.

Meanwhile, our garage has turned into an inflatable hospital. I brought in two Snoopy inflatables that are having issues. The blower is out on the Snoopy riding a motorcycle so I ordered a new one. The other one has been more challenging and I have yet to figure out why Snoopy can't pull Charlie Brown out of the chimney. Maybe the secondary blower is slowly wearing out. I'll keep working on that.

Then there is the large Gingerbread man. I'm on the third one. Its butt blew out in the first two. On the third one, I put some flextape in the area that seems to be the weak point. It seems to be working and keeping it up.

I already have plans for next year. I'm looking at getting a couple of more Snoopy inflatables for Snoppy Land. I'm also looking at putting up artificial Christmas Trees in Rudolph Land. If anyone has an artificial tree that they want to get rid of, you can either drop it off in our yard or let me know. I don't care if the lights on it work as I'll be putting my own lights on it. My plan is to get the soundtrack from Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and have the songs dance to the trees. Trying to find a device that I can use for the music has been challenging already.

It is neat to see people drive slowly down the road taking a look at our display. And there have been a lot of them. I even had someone stop by and take pictures with some of the inflatables.

Next year I will have to figure out a plan for Frosty to return. I have several sizes of snow people so I will need to make room for the family.

The weather looks nice for the next few days, but once the wind returns, everything will be down for the season. So stop by and take a look before it's gone! Happy New Year!



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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

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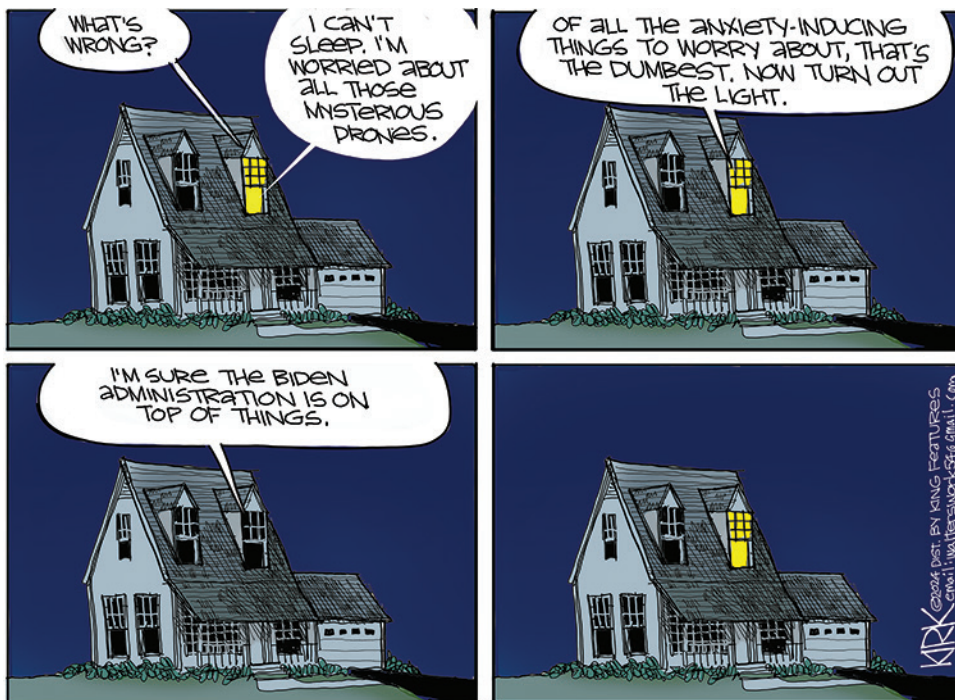


THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE

*He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
and vegetation for the service of man,
that he may bring forth food from the earth,
and wine that makes glad the heart of man,
oil to make his face shine, and bread which
strengthens man's heart.*

PSALM 104:14,15

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BIBLE

TRIVIA

by Wilson Casey

1. For possible new year's resolutions, Proverbs 16:3 (KJV) says, "Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be ____." *Resolved, Established, Directed, Bountiful*

2. Likewise, Psalm 37:5 (KJV) instructs us to, "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to ____." *Nurture, Pass, Action, Light*

3. From which book's 29:11 does the Lord declare plans to prosper you, thoughts of peace to give you hope and a future? *Leviticus, Ezra, Nehemiah, Jeremiah*

4. 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 2:20 are among the verses to focus on what in a new year? *Blessings, Moving forward, Grace, Church attendance*

5. In which month of the religious calendar did the new year begin in the Bible? *3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th*

6. From James 1:5, what may one lack, and if they ask God, it shall be given? *Love, Wisdom, Truth, Goals*

ANSWERS: 1) Established, 2) Pass, 3) Jeremiah, 4) Moving forward, 5) 7th, 6) Wisdom

Find expanded trivia online with Wilson Casey at www.patreon.com/triviaguy. FREE TRIAL!

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I'M FLASH GORDON


AND WHEN I WAS A KID, MY GRANDPA TOLD ME THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A FAIR FIGHT.

BECAUSE IF THE WORLD WAS FAIR, THERE'D BE NO NEED FOR A FIGHT IN THE FIRST PLACE.

TWENTY YEARS LATER, I'M IN AN OCEAN ON ANOTHER WORLD...


...TRYING TO WIN A DEATH MATCH AGAINST A SADIST WHO'S TRAINED IN UNDERWATER COMBAT SINCE HE WAS A KID.

A FEW HOURS AGO, I WAS LISTENING TO DALE'S SOFT VOICE BEAMED RIGHT INTO MY BRAIN.



SHE'D FOUND A LOOPHOLE IN TOA'S LAW.

JUGRID COULD FORCE KALA INTO A REMATCH-- BUT NAME A CHAMPION TO FIGHT IN HIS PLACE.




THUN WANTED TO AVENGE HIS DAD HIMSELF, BUT DOVA CONVINCED HIM IT HAD TO BE ME.

JUGRID CALLED KALA OUT.

KALA SAID YES, BECAUSE HE HAD TO...

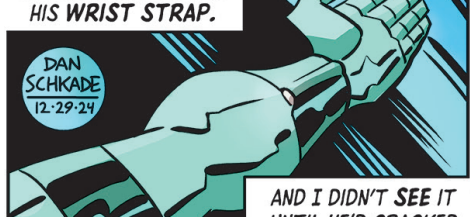


...BUT ONLY ON HIS TERMS: UNDERWATER, WITH NO ARMOR AND NO WEAPONS.



THOSE WERE THE RULES, ANYWAY.


BUT KALA HAD A STONESTEEL ROD IN HIS WRIST STRAP.



DAN SCHKADE 12-29-24

AND I DIDN'T SEE IT UNTIL HE'D CRACKED MY HELMET WITH IT.

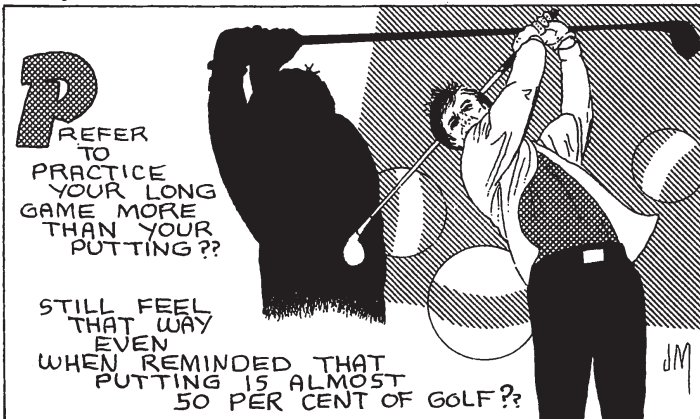
NOW I'M SECONDS FROM BREATHING WATER...



...WHILE KALA'S GOT MY BAD SHOULDER IN AN ARM BAR...

NEXT: BLOOD IN THE WATER

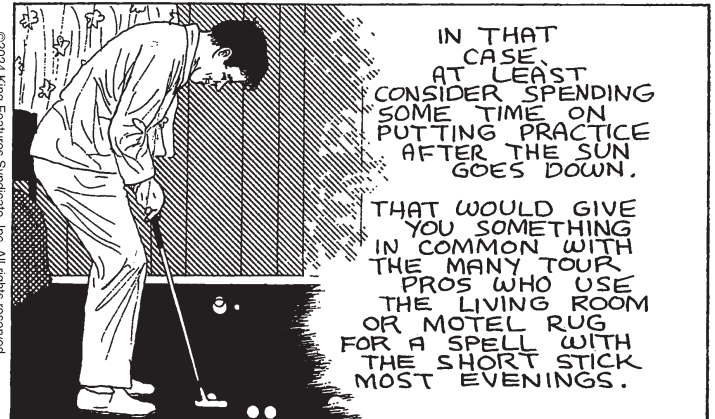
Play Better Golf with JACK NICKLAUS



PREFER TO PRACTICE YOUR LONG GAME MORE THAN YOUR PUTTING??

STILL FEEL THAT WAY EVEN WHEN REMINDED THAT PUTTING IS ALMOST 50 PER CENT OF GOLF??

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IN THAT CASE, AT LEAST CONSIDER SPENDING SOME TIME ON PUTTING PRACTICE AFTER THE SUN GOES DOWN.

THAT WOULD GIVE YOU SOMETHING IN COMMON WITH THE MANY TOUR PROS WHO USE THE LIVING ROOM OR MOTEL RUG FOR A SPELL WITH THE SHORT STICK MOST EVENINGS.



Why the Government Shouldn't Limit Sodium Intake

DEAR DR. ROACH: I read in a health journal that large amounts of sodium are unhealthy for one's diet. The government standard is no more than 2,300 mg of sodium per day. If one's health isn't so good, some doctors say that their sodium intake shouldn't be more than 1,500 mg per day. Everything you eat or drink counts.

If consuming sodium is so bad for your health, then why aren't there limitations in the amount of sodium a company can put into their products? Shouldn't this be controlled by the federal government, similar to alcohol or numerous other chemicals in food and drinks that we find in cans, boxes and packages?

For instance, why should diet soda have sodium in it? -- E.R.

ANSWER: It is true that excess sodium has health risks, and I agree with public health officials in recommending that people consume less sodium. High sodium increases blood pressure levels for most people. Even in people without high blood pressure levels, a high-sodium diet slightly increases stroke risk and predisposes them to kidney stones.

However, sodium is an essential nutrient, and although sodium deficiency is unheard of now, there are conditions where a high-sodium diet is important. I recently saw a patient who had POTS (postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome) after COVID, and she needs 8-12 grams of sodium daily to keep her blood pressure up.

As a physician, my role is to advise. It's not for me to dictate public policy, and I worry about the government making regulations about what is a personal choice. Pretzels contain 250-300 mg of sodium in a 1-ounce serving, so a big bag of pretzels might have 5 grams of sodium -- two day's worth. I'm uncomfortable with the government limiting my ability to buy this, even if it isn't a good idea for me to consume it all in a day.

On the other hand, I think that the decision made by the Food and Drug Administration in 2015 to ban the use of trans fats was correct. Trans fats are exceedingly unhealthy, and manufacturers quickly switched to healthier options. The decision to ban a substance or limit its use must be made wisely.

As far as diet sodas, sodium suppresses the bitter taste that can accompany some artificial sweeteners. A typical diet soda might have 20 mg of sodium (0.02 grams), so those usually aren't the biggest offenders. On the other hand, a large pizza might have 6-10 grams of sodium.

DEAR DR. ROACH: I am 73 years old with an extremely large prostate. My PSA reading was over 11 ng/mL. I've had negative biopsies, and my new urologist put me on finasteride. He told me that he had great results with it and could cut my cancer risk by 80%.

I've been taking it for more than six months, and my latest PSA was 4.4 ng/mL. I'm reluctant to keep taking it. What are your thoughts on finasteride? -- H.D.

ANSWER: I agree that finasteride decreases the risk of prostate cancer and death due to prostate cancer. Unfortunately, the data show more of a 25% to 30% decreased risk rather than an 80% risk. If it were 80% successful at stopping prostate cancer, we would be recommending it to all men (in absence of side effects). Still, a decrease in prostate cancer risk is worth considering when it comes to the treatment of symptomatic prostate enlargement.

Finally, finasteride reduces PSA levels by about half, which needs to be taken into account when interpreting the PSA level.

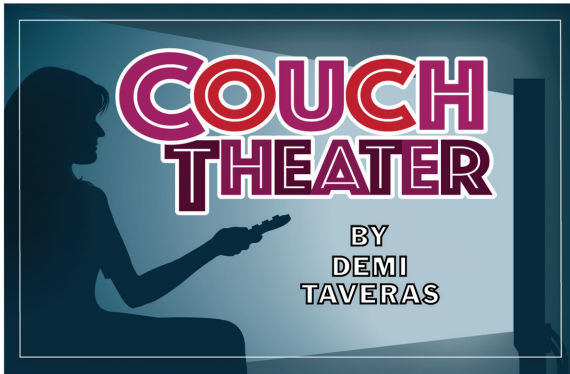
Dr. Roach regrets that he is unable to answer individual questions, but will incorporate them in the column whenever possible. Readers may email questions to ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu.

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"Gladiator II" (R) -- The sequel to director Ridley Scott's "Gladiator" has finally arrived 24 years after the original film was released, but how will it hold up alongside its predecessor? Starring Paul Mescal ("Normal People"), Pedro Pascal ("The Last of Us") and Denzel Washington ("The Equalizer 3"),

the sequel picks up 16 years after the death of Marcus Aurelius, and Rome is thick with corruption due to its psychotic twin emperors Geta and Caracalla. But Lucius (Mescal), the long-lost imperial heir, lurks in the shadows under the name "Hanno" and coincidentally becomes a gladiator when his North African kingdom gets conquered by the Roman army. Most reviews were positive, but critics did sound off on its likeness to the first film, whose magic cannot be imitated or repeated. Out now to rent. (Amazon Prime Video)

Mark Eydelshteyn, left, and Mikey Madison star in "Anora." (Courtesy of MovieStillsDB)

"A Real Pain" (R) -- This short comedy-drama film seems to be a hidden gem for the upcoming 2025 award season, with it already receiving four nominations for the Golden Globes. Directed, written by and starring Jesse Eisenberg ("Manodrome"), the film follows American-Jewish cousins David (Eisenberg) and Benji (Kieran Culkin) who embark on a trip to Poland to reconnect with their heritage. Throughout the trip, the two cousins' personalities contrast completely as David assumes the honorable family-man role, while Benji is more free-spirited and laid-back with his life. But showing their complex love for each other against the backdrop of emotional moments in Jewish history makes for a very heartwarming watch indeed. Available to rent on Dec. 31. (Apple TV+)

"Anora" (R) -- From Sean Baker, director of "The Florida Project," this comedy-drama recently won the Palme d'Or at the 77th Cannes Film Festival in May, and it's also one to watch during the award season race. Mikey Madison ("Once Upon a Time in Hollywood") has received much praise for her performance as the titular character, a 23-year-old stripper living in Bright Beach, New York. During a night at work, Anora gets introduced to Vanya, the young son of a Russian oligarch, and he hires her to spend a week with him. The pair fly to Las Vegas with his entourage, where the two fall into a passionate love affair that seems everlasting. They marry, and just when Anora thinks she's about to start her "happily ever after," Vanya's parents make moves to get the marriage annulled. Out now to rent. (YouTube)

"Carry-On" (PG-13) -- This action-thriller out now starring Taron Egerton ("Blackbird") and Jason Bateman ("Ozark") is sure to keep you on your toes! Egerton plays Ethan, a TSA officer at Los Angeles International Airport who requests to work a shift on the baggage-scanning lane on Christmas Eve. In the middle of his shift, Ethan finds an earbud that he's told to put on; through the earbud, a mercenary called the Traveler (Bateman) demands that Ethan let a dangerous carry-on suitcase through the scanning lane. Threatening Ethan's pregnant girlfriend as blackmail, the Traveler gives him direct orders to follow, or else people will begin to die. But did he pick the right TSA agent? (Netflix)

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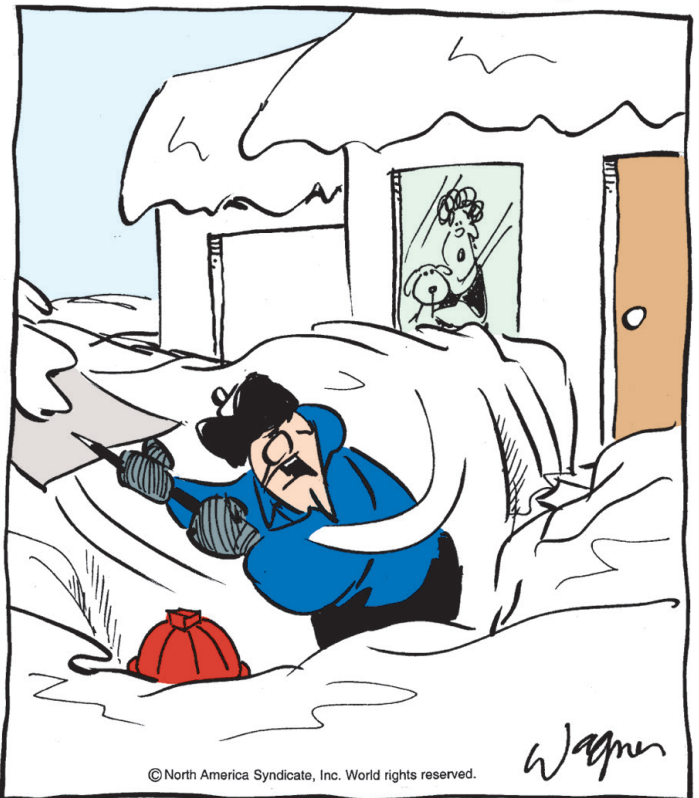
1. Which artist had a hit with "Touch Me in the Morning"?
2. Who released "Just the Two of Us"?
3. "We Don't Need Another Hero" was on the soundtrack for which film?
4. Which group released "The Love Cats"?
5. Name the song that contains this lyric: "I've always been the kind of man who doesn't believe in strings, Long term obligations are just unnecessary things."

Answers

1. Diana Ross, in 1973. The song was her second solo single and appeared on her album of the same name.
2. Grover Washington Jr. and Bill Withers in 1980. The song climbed to No. 2 on the charts but was blocked from the No. 1 spot by "Bette Davis Eyes." However, it netted a Grammy for Best R&B Song.
3. "Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome," in 1985, starring Mel Gibson. The song was nominated for multiple awards, including Best Original Song.
4. The Cure, in 1983.
5. "Every Which Way But Loose," by Eddie Rabbitt, in 1978. The song was in the soundtrack of the film of the same name (starring Clint Eastwood and his orangutan Clyde). It stayed at the top of the charts as a single for several weeks.

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GRIN *and* BEAR IT ^{Wagner}



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Wagner

"I found the fireplug! Let the dog out!"

Just Like Cats & Dogs

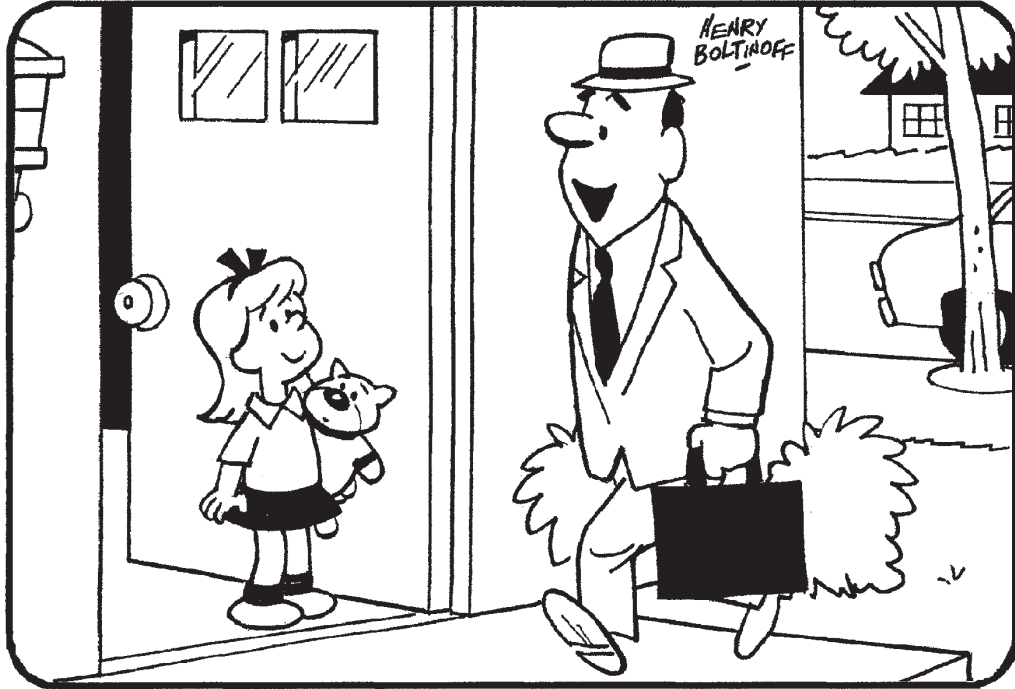
by Dave T. Phipps



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HOCUS-FOCUS

BY
HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



Differences: 1. Briefcase is larger. 2. Bush is larger. 3. Collar is missing. 4. Car bumper is missing. 5. Label is missing. 6. Windows in door are smaller.

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* Keep medication bottles to hold buttons, spare change or even hand lotion. Be sure to clean well before reusing.

* "Clean foam egg cartons can be stuffed down into boots to keep them from flopping over between uses. If the leg fabric is not heavy, you can even cut one in half. You may use rolled-up magazines for this purpose as well." -- I.Y. in New York

* "Used fabric softener sheets can be used to shine faucets and to clean the tub. I use mine for dusting around the house, too. To keep a steady supply, I put an empty tissue box next to my dryer. When the clothes (and the used sheets) come out, I stuff them down in the box, and they are ready whenever I need one." -- B.J. in Arizona

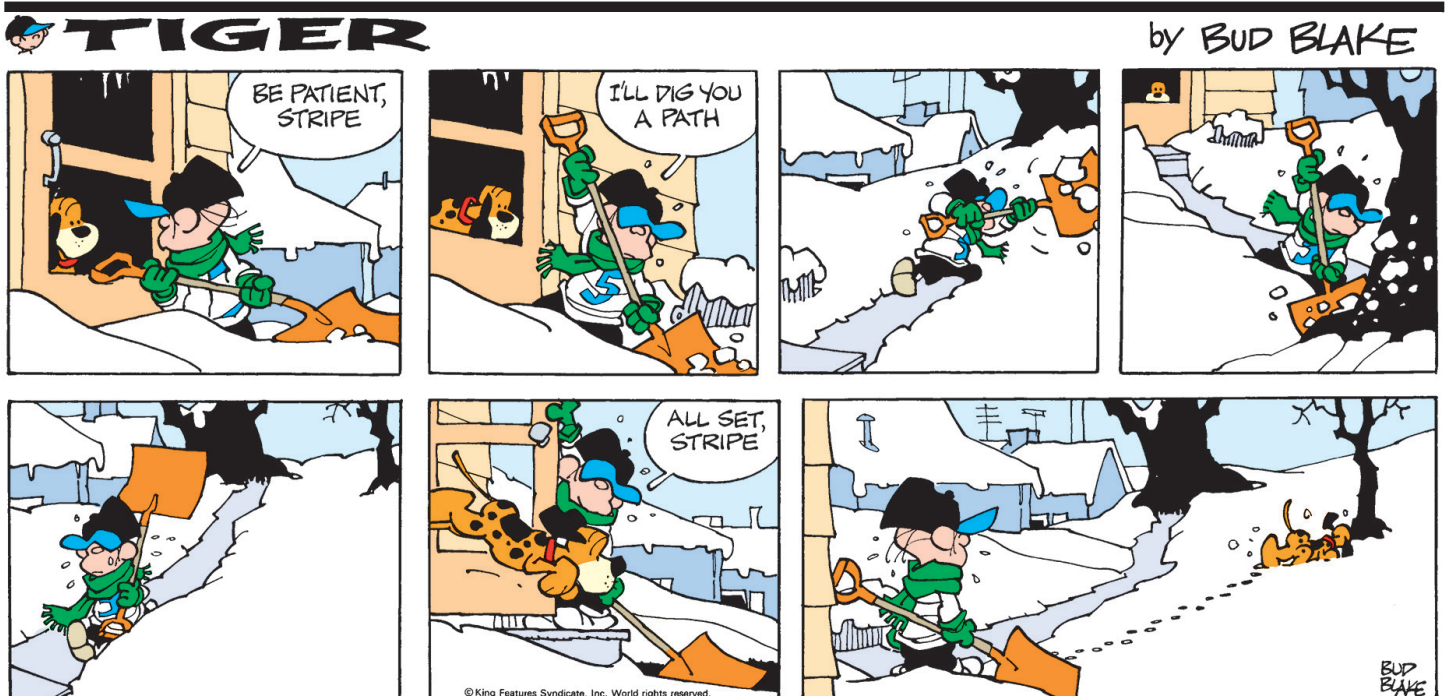
* A chef's trick to keep cooked spinach green is to make sure

the pot is not covered while cooking.

* "When cooking shrimp in a bouillon, put them in the freezer for about 10 minutes before cooking. They will cook up nice and tender. I have had success with this also when grilling. When putting shrimp on a skewer, I use double skewers, which hold about five shrimp. When I thread the skewers side by side, the shrimp are easier to turn over, and they do not spin on the skewer." -- R.R. in Florida

* To keep cheese blocks moist and mold free, place in a container with a tight-fitting lid. Place a piece of napkin dampened with white vinegar in with the cheese.

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

ACROSS

- 1 Wash thoroughly
- 6 Black Sea port
- 12 Saudi neighbor
- 13 Reacts to a pun
- 14 Baseball's Roberto
- 15 Attack verbally
- 16 — -pedi
- 17 Barrel bottom bit
- 19 — tree
- 20 Use a stun gun
- 22 California's Big —
- 24 Director Brooks
- 27 Campbell of "Scream"
- 29 Eve's guy
- 32 Citrusy flavoring used in baking
- 35 Pedestal part
- 36 Actress de Matteo
- 37 Pro vote
- 38 Decade parts (Abbr.)
- 40 "No seats" signs
- 42 Food additive
- 44 Help a crook
- 46 Like custard
- 50 Venetian marketplace

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
12											
14											
16					17	18			19		
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50			51				52	53			
54							55				
56							57				

- 52 Security desk request
- 54 "Nothing for me, thanks"
- 55 Protruding navels
- 56 Breeds, as salmon
- 57 Spiteful
- 7 Pulls
- 8 Very long time
- 9 The "S" of SNL
- 10 Crisp cookie
- 11 Hammett pooch
- 12 Candied veggie
- 18 Undo
- 21 Director Lee
- 23 Former Mideast gp.
- 24 '60s chic
- 25 Mound stat
- 26 "Bad Romance" singer
- 28 Physical effort
- 30 Super serve
- 31 NYC subway overseer
- 33 Fish-fowl link
- 34 Eastern "way"
- 39 Squelched
- 41 Factions
- 42 Hosp. scans
- 43 Ninny
- 45 Physiques
- 47 Pace
- 48 Neutral color
- 49 QB's gains
- 51 Blue
- 53 "Levitating" singer Lipa

DOWN

- 1 Ward of "Once and Again"
- 2 "Let's go!"
- 3 Pay
- 4 Italian article
- 5 Tweety's meal
- 6 Monster

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— King Crossword —

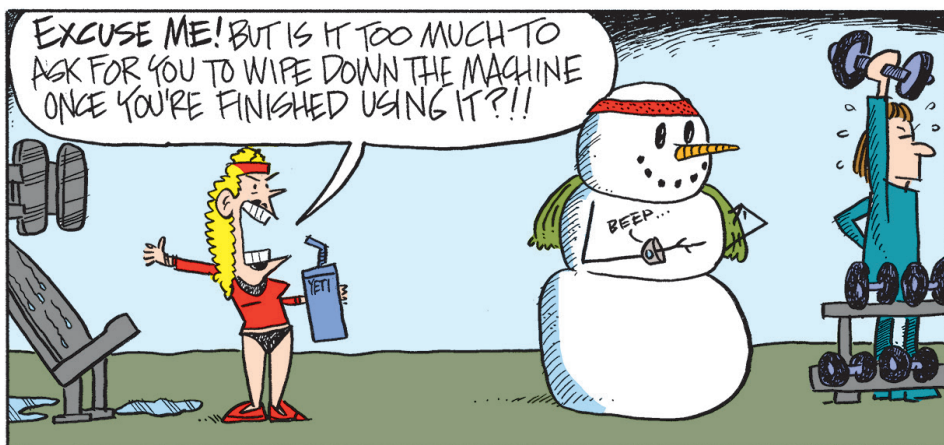
Answers

Solution time: 21 mins.

	S	C	R	U	B		O	D	E	S	S	A
Y	E	M	E	N	I		G	R	O	A	N	S
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Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas

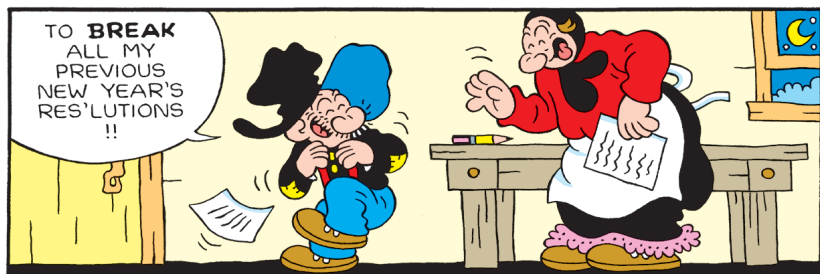
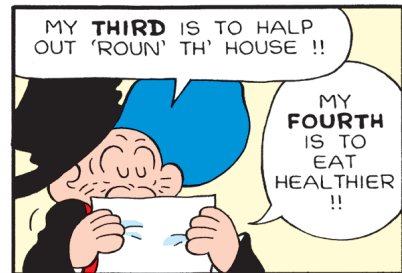
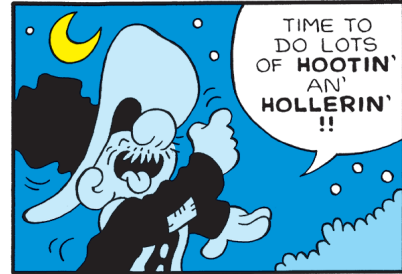
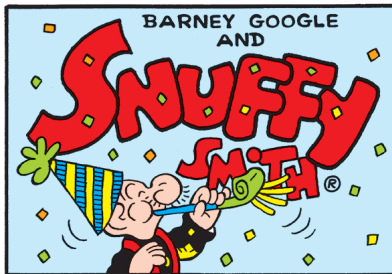
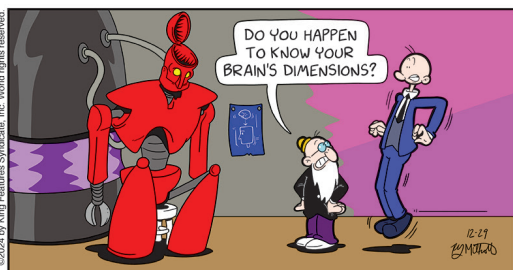
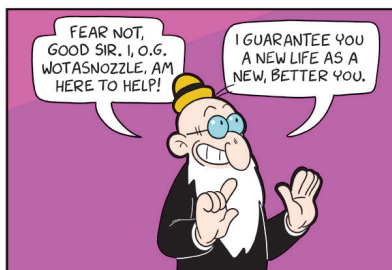
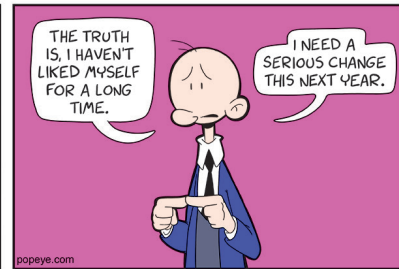
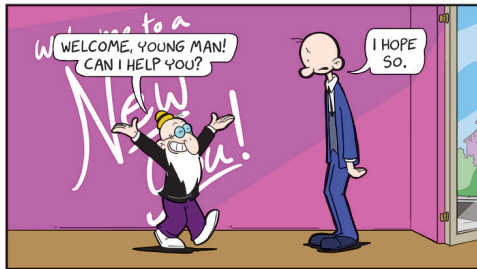


FROSTY THE
SNOWMAN AT THE
GYM.

KOPERVAS

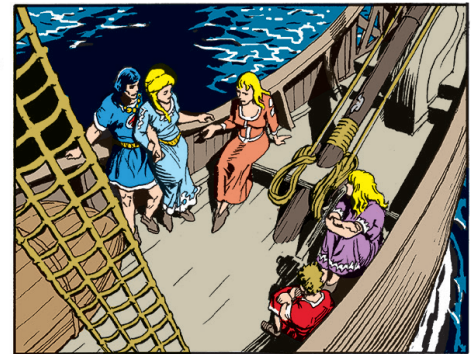
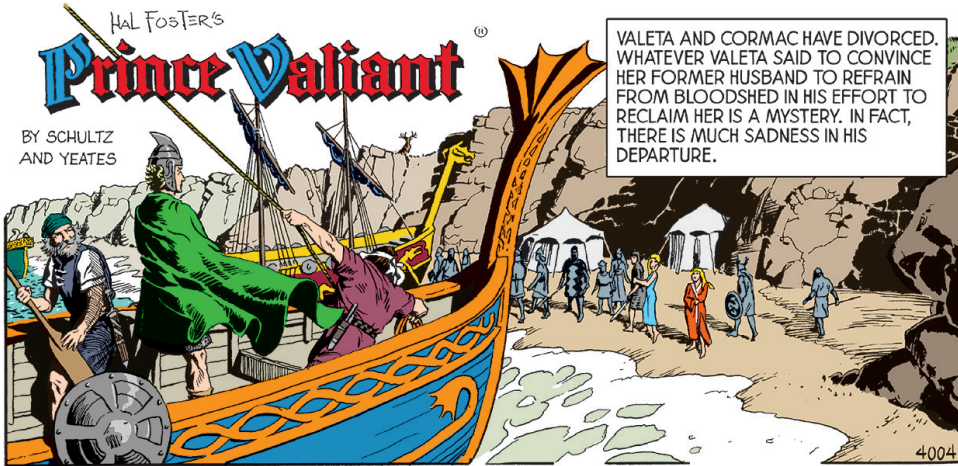
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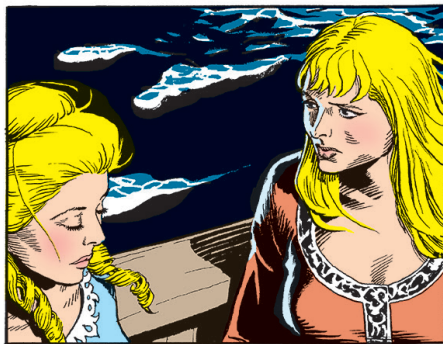


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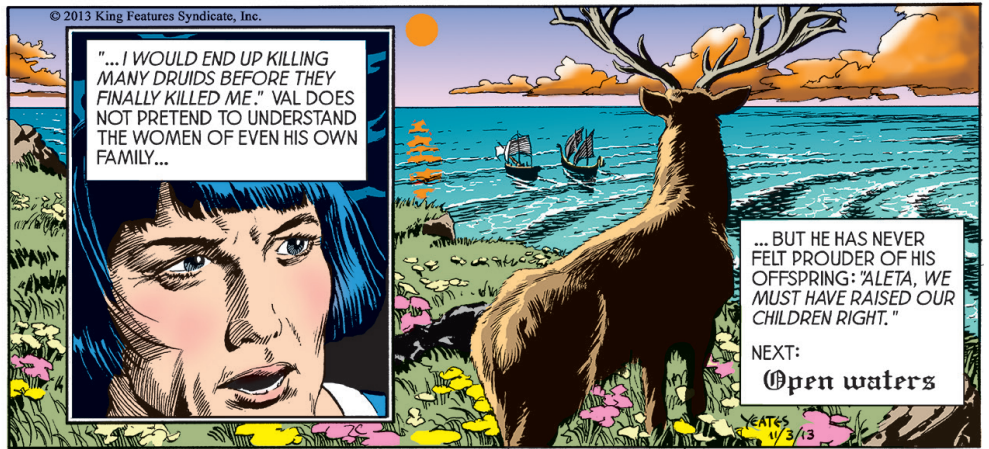
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WITH CORMAC'S FORCES DEPARTED TO THE NORTH, THE ISLAND QUEEN SAILS SOUTH, AROUND BRITTANY. ONLY THEN DOES VALETA ATTEMPT AN EXPLANATION: "CORMAC IS A GOOD, JUST MAN - BUT HIS PEOPLE ARE NOT GOOD AND JUST TO THEIR WOMEN."

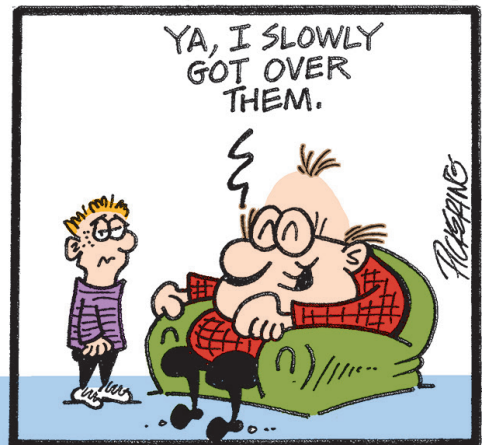
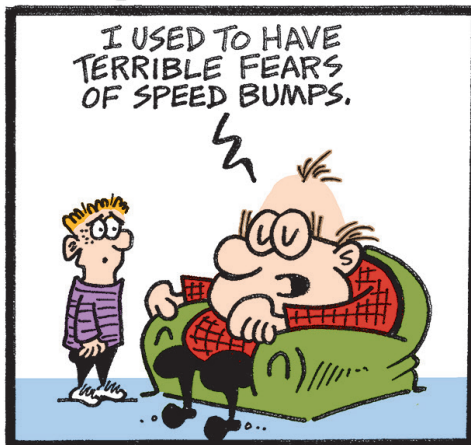


"THE DRUIDS ARE PARTICULARLY SAVAGE TO THOSE WHO OPENLY PRACTICE THE CRAFT..." - VALETA EXCHANGES A KNOWING GLANCE WITH HER MOTHER AND SISTER - "... AND I FINALLY CONVINCED CORMAC THAT, SHOULD I BE FORCED TO RETURN TO THAT SOCIETY..."



The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



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SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

Retirement -- not yet for many of us

Many of us didn't plan for this. Years after we expected to retire, we're still working. For too many of us, working is still a necessity for financial reasons.

Careful planning likely convinced most of us that with a bit of savings and a monthly Social Security check we could safely (and voluntarily) retire. A recent study concluded that roughly 80% of us fall into this category, thinking we would be financially OK in retirement.

On the flip side of the coin, there are those who were pushed into early retirement before they were financially ready. Whether it was because of the health of a spouse and the need to become a caretaker or corporate downsizing, they were out the door and left in a difficult financial position, forced to sign up for Social Security before their full retirement age and giving up nearly one-third of the monthly benefit amount because of the early retirement. Many grab onto part-time jobs just to have a few extra dollars coming in every month. Those few extra dollars mean the difference between paying the light bill ... or not.

I did an informal poll of neighbors and acquaintances, all of whom are past retirement age. A full 90% are employed, with most of them working at part-time jobs. All of them said it was for financial reasons. One gentleman shared that he's working to save up for the glasses he needs, the costs that Medicare won't cover. Another is working to put every possible dollar into paying off the last of her mortgage. Everyone else, it seems, is still working to put groceries on the table, keep gas in the car or make the mortgage payment.

Clearly, the small Social Security increases we've been receiving aren't enough. They just aren't.

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15 N Main St. - Ste. 101
Downtown Groton

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Call/Text Tina: 605-397-7285



Open 24/7

Living Heart Fitness Center

Senior Citizens 65+
Physical Therapy. **\$20 a month**

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1. What two NFL teams combined for 79 points, 809 yards passing and 1,036 total yards in an epic AFC divisional playoff game in January 1982?

2. Name the defenseman who played 13 seasons in the NHL -- most notably with the Detroit Red Wings from 1986-94 -- until his death in an auto accident in May 1999.

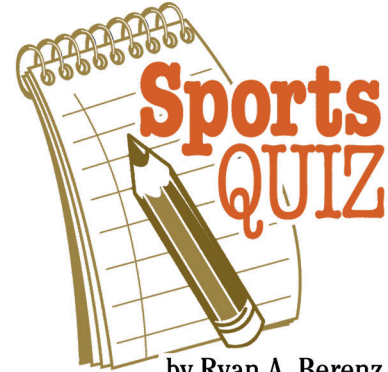
3. Basketball Hall of Famer Denise Curry was a three-time All-American (1979-81) for what college team?

4. In 1979, CBS Sports "traded" NFL play-by-play announcer Don Criqui to NBC in exchange for what sportscaster?

5. What American swimmer, winner of two gold medals at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, is the older sister of actor/director Joanna Kerns ("Growing Pains")?

6. On April 6, 1973, the New York Yankees' Ron Blomberg made history by becoming the first player to do what in a regular-season Major League Baseball game?

7. What NASCAR driver was declared the unofficial winner of the first Daytona 500 in 1959, then had the result overturned three days later and wound up finishing second to Lee Petty?



by Ryan A. Berenz

Answers

1. The San Diego Chargers defeated the Miami Dolphins 41-38 in overtime.

2. Steve Chiasson.

3. UCLA.

4. Curt Gowdy.

5. Donna de Varona.

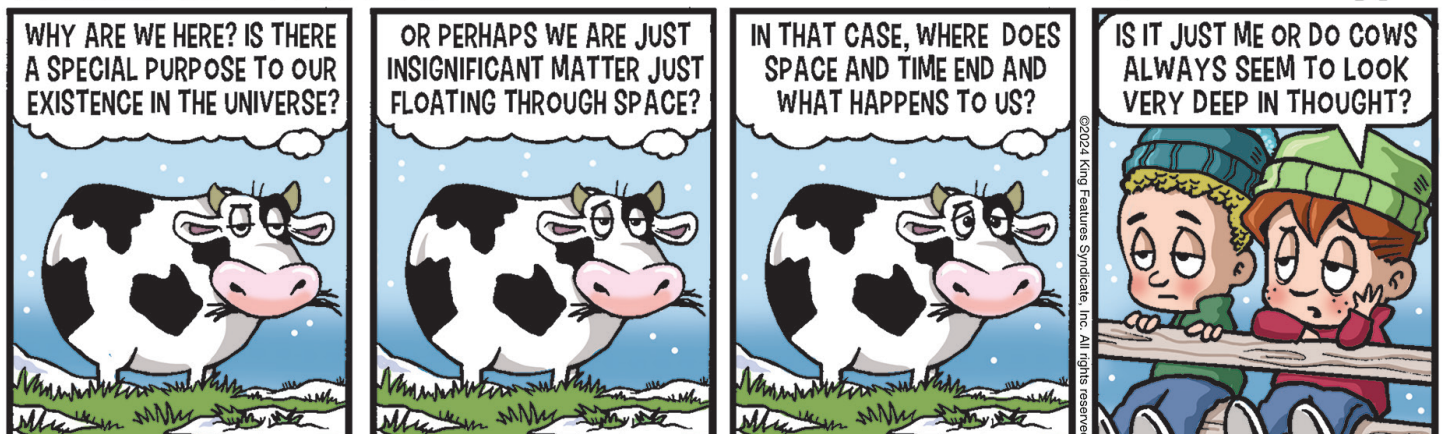
6. Bat as a designated hitter.

7. Johnny Beauchamp.

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps





Cat's strange lump needs a vet's care

DEAR PAW'S CORNER: I inherited my aunt's cat, "Tabitha," late last year. When Tabbi came to live with me, I noticed that she had six toes, but only on one paw. Her other front paw was normal. I thought that was unusual but not dangerous, or my aunt would have done something about it. However, on our first visit to the veterinarian, when I pointed out the toe as a strange genetic anomaly, the vet got very concerned. The "toe" was actually a lump! Tabbi had surgery to remove it. Fortunately, it was benign, and she recovered completely. Please tell your readers to contact the vet when they notice any strange growth. -- Joe in Portland, Oregon

DEAR JOE: Thank you for sharing your story! Cats, dogs and other pets can develop strange growths or lumps during their lifetime. It's not always easy to determine whether a growth is harmless or needs to be removed. The vet will do a needle biopsy and can often examine the cells under a micro-scope right in their office, so they can report their findings to you almost immediately. Sometimes, they will send a sample to a veterinary pathologist, who can provide a clearer picture of what's going on with a lump or mass.

Having new lumps and bumps checked out as soon as possible is important, because the vet can treat them while they're still small, so your pet suffers less pain and discomfort. If a mass turns out to be cancerous, the faster the treatment happens, the better.

So, just as a change in behavior or energy signals that it's time to visit the vet, a new lump or bump (or any strange new growth) should be checked out as soon as possible.

Send your tips, comments or questions to ask@pawscorner.com.

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Strange BUT TRUE

* Despite the NFL making more than \$9 billion annually, being projected to make more than \$25 billion a year by 2027, and paying its CEO more than \$30 million a year, 68% of NFL stadium construction costs since 1923 have come from taxpayer money.

* One of Walt Disney's first art jobs was drawing cartoons for a local barber in exchange for haircuts.

* The Khasis are a tribe in India that grow their own bridges. For generations, they have passed down the art of

tree-root manipulation, forming centuries-old "living bridges" out of the powerful roots of *Ficus elastica* trees.

* Jesse James once gave a widow who housed him enough money to pay off her debt collector and then robbed the debt collector as the man left the widow's home.

* In 2007, a Swiss woman was unable to enter the U.S. because she had no fingerprints. She had a rare genetic disorder called *adermatoglyphia*, where a person is born without fingerprints. There are only four known extended families worldwide that are affected by this condition.

* Arnold Schwarzenegger was paid \$15 million for his role in "Terminator 2," which averaged out to a most impressive \$21,429 per word.

* Lions, tigers, leopards and other big cats go wild for Calvin Klein's Obsession for Men cologne! It's used by researchers to lure animals toward cameras in the wild and is sprayed at zoos and wildlife refuges.

Thought for the Day: "There's no hope without endeavor. Hope has no meaning unless we are prepared to work to realize our hopes and dreams." -- Aung San Suu Kyi

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The Garden Bug

Burning Christmas trees

Real pine, spruce, or fir Christmas trees are NOT appropriate fuel for an indoor fireplace. They have a high amount of sap in their trunks and branches, which can create intense, unpredictable blazes that are difficult to control. Their needles burn quickly and produce lots of sparks, which are dangerous, and these trees also produce creosote when burning, which is a respiratory hazard. It's better to compost a real tree in the garden. - *Brenda Weaver*

Source: www.advancechimney.com



by Freddy Groves

VA outreach: blast exposure

The Department of Veterans Affairs has launched a significant outreach to bring more eligible veterans under the VA health care umbrella. The reason: increased concern about the health impacts of repeated blast exposure.

Blast exposure and head trauma can come from any number of situations -- anything from heavy fire, IEDs, missile launches, artillery blasts -- and can later result in a variety of problems, including thoughts of suicide and mental health concerns.

The VA is reaching out to veterans who served in Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan, and they're going all-out with public service announcements, advertising and even text messages to veterans. Veterans who served in those locations may be eligible for care, ranging from regular and specialty care, to primary care, mental health care and regular screenings, as well as blast exposure screenings.

Meanwhile, the VA has geared up their research about the health impact of blast exposure and encourages all eligible veterans to sign up for care. The more veterans who sign up, the more research they can do. The more research they do, the better the treatments that can be developed.

Blast exposure isn't the only concern the VA is looking at. Veterans who were exposed to toxins, whether on active duty or in training, are eligible to enroll in VA health care, even if they never deployed to Vietnam, the Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan or any combat zone post-9/11.

If you suspect you might have experienced blast exposure, call the VA for a screening. For immediate information, go to va.gov and search for "blast exposure." You'll find several podcasts and videos exploring blast exposure and the effects on mental health, how blasts affect cognitive function and more.

If you need to sign up, see www.va.gov/health-care/how-to-apply for the four different ways to apply for care: by phone, by mail, in person at the closest VA center or with the help of an accredited VSO or attorney. For an immediate connection, call them at 877-222-8387.

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Wishing Well®

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

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

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1. FOOD & DRINK: What kind of cake is named after a British queen?
2. TELEVISION: What is the name of the family dog on "The Simpsons"?
3. ANATOMY: How long does a human red blood cell exist?
4. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: Where is New Year's celebrated first each year?
5. ADVERTISING: Which company sponsors a 13-foot-long Weinermobile?
6. MEASUREMENTS: How many pints are in a quart?
7. MOVIES: What is the name of the dance performed in the "Rocky Horror Picture Show"?
8. BIOLOGY: What does the term ectothermic mean?
9. GEOGRAPHY: Which country has the longest coastline in the world?
10. LITERATURE: Who is the author of "The Canterbury Tales"?

Answers

1. Victoria Sponge Cake.
2. Santa's Little Helper.
3. About 120 days.
4. The island of Kiribati in the Oceanic nation of Kiribati.
5. Oscar Mayer.
6. Two.
7. The Time Warp.
8. Coldblooded, when body temperature is regulated by the environment.
9. Canada.
10. Geoffrey Chaucer.

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South Dakota Governor

Kristi Noem



South Dakota: *Under God, the People Rule*

Ring in the New Year

By: Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden

New Year's means looking ahead. Growing up on my family ranch, we always looked forward to a long year of hard work. After all, calving season wasn't too far in the future. We celebrated the holidays; we wished each other "Merry Christmas!" and "Happy New Year!" with smiles, good food, and the enjoyment of each other's company. And then we got back to work taking care of the land and the animals so that they can feed us and everyone else.

We have important work to get back to in the upcoming year, as well. A new year means that a new legislative session is right around the corner, and we will get back to work on behalf of the people of South Dakota.

It is in my nature to always look for ways to do even better. New Year's is a great time to do this. As Benjamin Franklin once said, "Let every new year find you a better man."

South Dakota is full of truly excellent men and women. Over the last several years, I have been so impressed by how South Dakotans tackle adversity. And through that adversity, we found an opportunity to demonstrate to the nation what adhering to Christian conservative principles can achieve. We demonstrated to the state, the nation, and the planet what Freedom looks like.

We've built the strongest economy in America, and I hope that we find opportunities to take our state to even greater heights. We've become the freest state in a nation built on the principle of Freedom. But defending the Freedom of our people is not work that ever ends. We need to work hard to protect our rights and look for leaders who understand where those rights come from – from God. And we should honor those who fought and died to defend the Freedoms which we are blessed with.

It is an awesome charge to carry Freedom on to the next generation, and South Dakotans are well equipped to do it.

I hope that every South Dakotan took time to celebrate with friends and family this holiday season. I hope that your time together was special and full of memories, and I hope that the new year brings plenty more for you to celebrate. As we kick off 2025, I hope that you find ways to make your families, your communities, and our state stronger than ever before.

Our people have built a state that I am proud to call home. I have been honored to serve them in a position of leadership alongside Governor Noem. I am blessed with the opportunity to continue serving South Dakotans in this new year. If you ever have any ideas for how we can make South Dakota even stronger in the days and years to come, please do not hesitate to reach out.

God bless you all, and Happy New Year!

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Dr. James L. Snyder Ministries

PO Box 831313 - Ocala, FL 34483

1-352-216-3025

And Then It All Came To An End

Time has a way of getting ahead of me. Just when I think I've caught up, I find out I was wrong.

The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage and I were sitting down, relaxing after a wonderful Christmas activity with all the kids, grandkids, and great-grandkids. It was a wonderful time, but with my age, I ran out of steam very quickly.

Once upon a time, I had enough steam to do just about anything. Now, that seems to have evaporated.

This year's Christmas celebration was a wonderful time, and as we sat around the table, I noticed that the people around us were a lot older than they were a year ago.

I was not going to tell anybody; I would just let them find out for themselves that they were getting old.

My bathroom mirror tells me every morning that I am an old goat and older than yesterday's goat. I could not help but reflect back when I was a teenager and we had family get-togethers, and looking around grandma's table, everybody seemed to be rather young. That isn't the case anymore.

Looking at me with a smirk, The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage said, "Well, I guess this year's over." Then she let out one of her patented laughs

As always, she was right. This year will be over in a few days, and I can tuck it into bed and let it go to sleep.

It seems strange that when I'm getting used to something, it's over before I know it. Things go by so quickly these days.

As a young teenager, I just couldn't wait until I was 16 to get my driver's license. It took me four and a half years to get to the point where I was old enough. It seemed like an eternity.

Looking back, I have had my driver's license for over 50 years, and I'm not sure how much time has passed. I can remember wanting my driver's license, and now, all of a sudden, all of that is over.

I remember when I was teaching teenagers in our church, and often told them when they visited their grandmother, asked her to show her wedding picture. Then compare that picture with what she looks like today. I wasn't finished. Then, look at your picture and just remember that one day you just might be as old as your grandmother.

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Why is it that when you're young and have energy, things don't go very fast, no matter how hard you try? However, the older you get the faster things seem to go. I guess I'll never figure that one out.

Then The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage mentioned the unmentionable, "So, have you worked on your New Year's resolutions yet?"

That's the one question I don't want to hear.

When she brought that up, I looked back at her, smiled and said, "On the top of my list is that I will only eat one Apple Fritter at a time."

She did not laugh at that one.

When I was done chuckling, I looked at her and said, "Okay, have you made your New Year's resolution list yet?"

Then she began with her list, which was almost infinity. She had so many things that she wanted to get done in the next year that I got tired of listening to them. I did know that if she made a list of something, you can bet your bottom dollar that she's going to complete every one of them.

That's what made me a little alarmed.

I won't challenge that kind of thing with her. Whatever she wants to do, she can do it with my blessing.

Of course, there is the idea that if she's as busy as that list suggests she might be, I could sneak in an Apple Fritter occasionally without her knowing it. Now I'm smiling.

We were reflecting on what a great year we had. Sure, there were some bumps along the way. Despite those things, we had an excellent year together. This year, we celebrated our 54th Christmas together. I can't believe it's been that long.

With a very curious look in her eyes, she looked at me and said, "Out of all those Christmases that we had together, which one would you think is your best Christmas?"

I learned a lot from my father, so I responded, "Oh, my dear. My best Christmas is the one we're celebrating right now."

You can get in trouble by saying something like that. Sure, we've had Christmases all the way back to 1970, and most of them I don't remember, so I believe the best Christmas I've ever had is the one I'm enjoying now.

Coming to the end of a year and the beginning of a new year, I couldn't help but think of a verse in the Bible.

Solomon wrote many years ago, "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

My experience is that the older I get the less things change. As a young person, I always hoped things would change and get better. Sometimes they did, but more often than not, things remain the same.

The only change in my life was when I surrendered my life unto the Lord Jesus Christ as my Saviour.

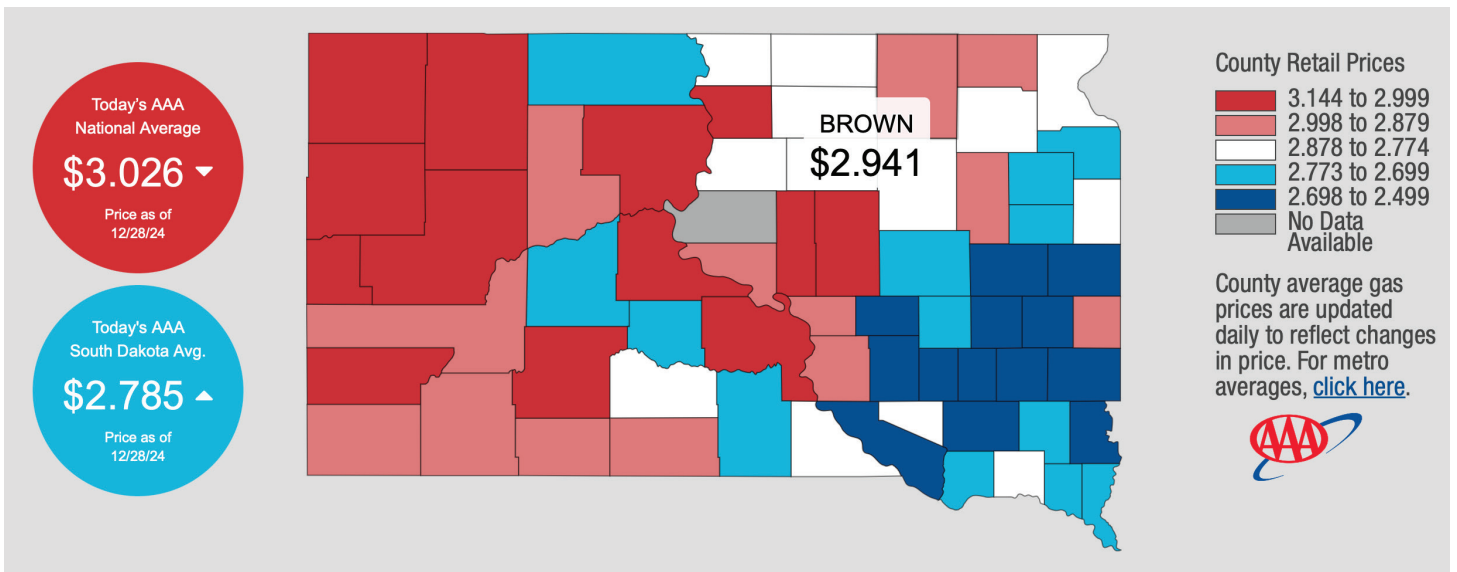
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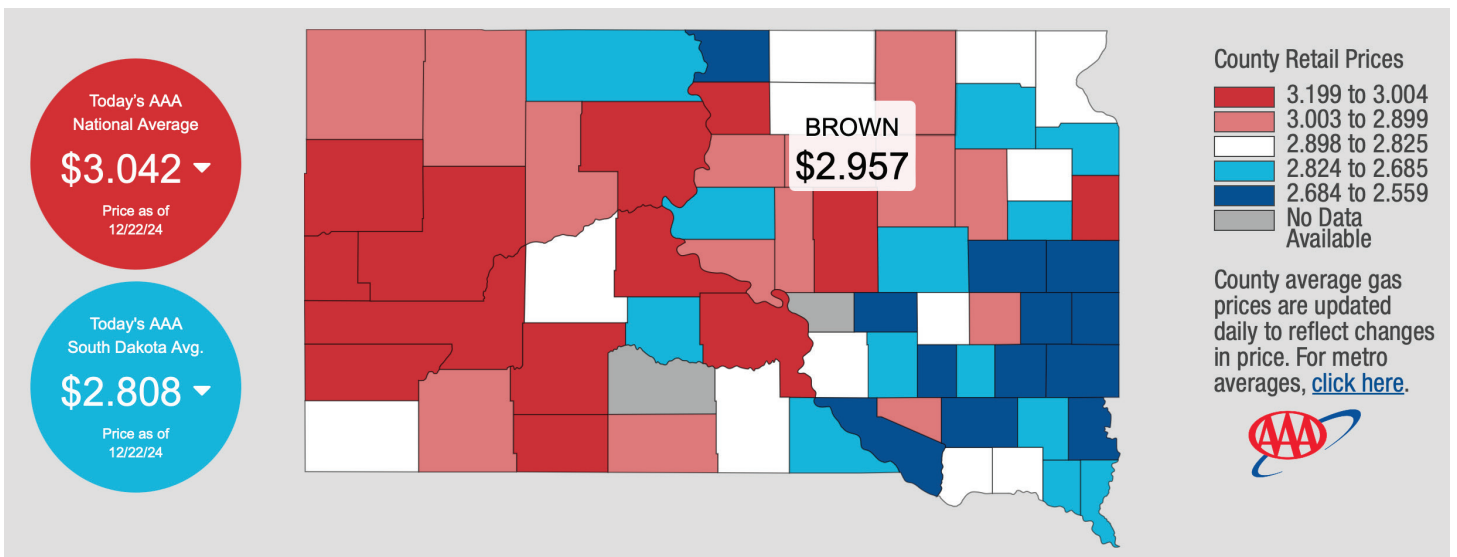
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.785	\$3.000	\$3.443	\$3.201
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.779	\$3.010	\$3.471	\$3.189
Week Ago Avg.	\$2.825	\$3.037	\$3.464	\$3.223
Month Ago Avg.	\$2.863	\$3.058	\$3.494	\$3.265
Year Ago Avg.	\$2.955	\$3.139	\$3.636	\$3.757

This Week



Last Week



Drought Classification

None

D0 (Abnormally Dry)

D1 (Moderate Drought)

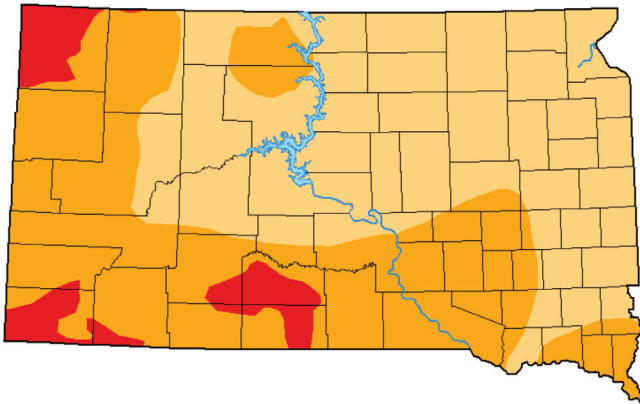
D2 (Severe Drought)

D3 (Extreme Drought)

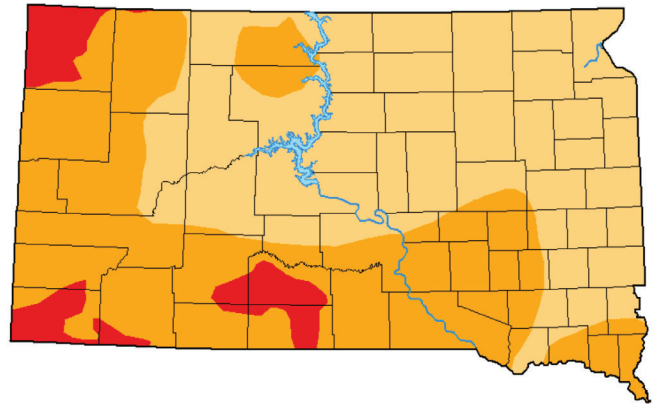
D4 (Exceptional Drought)

No Data

Drought Monitor



December 24



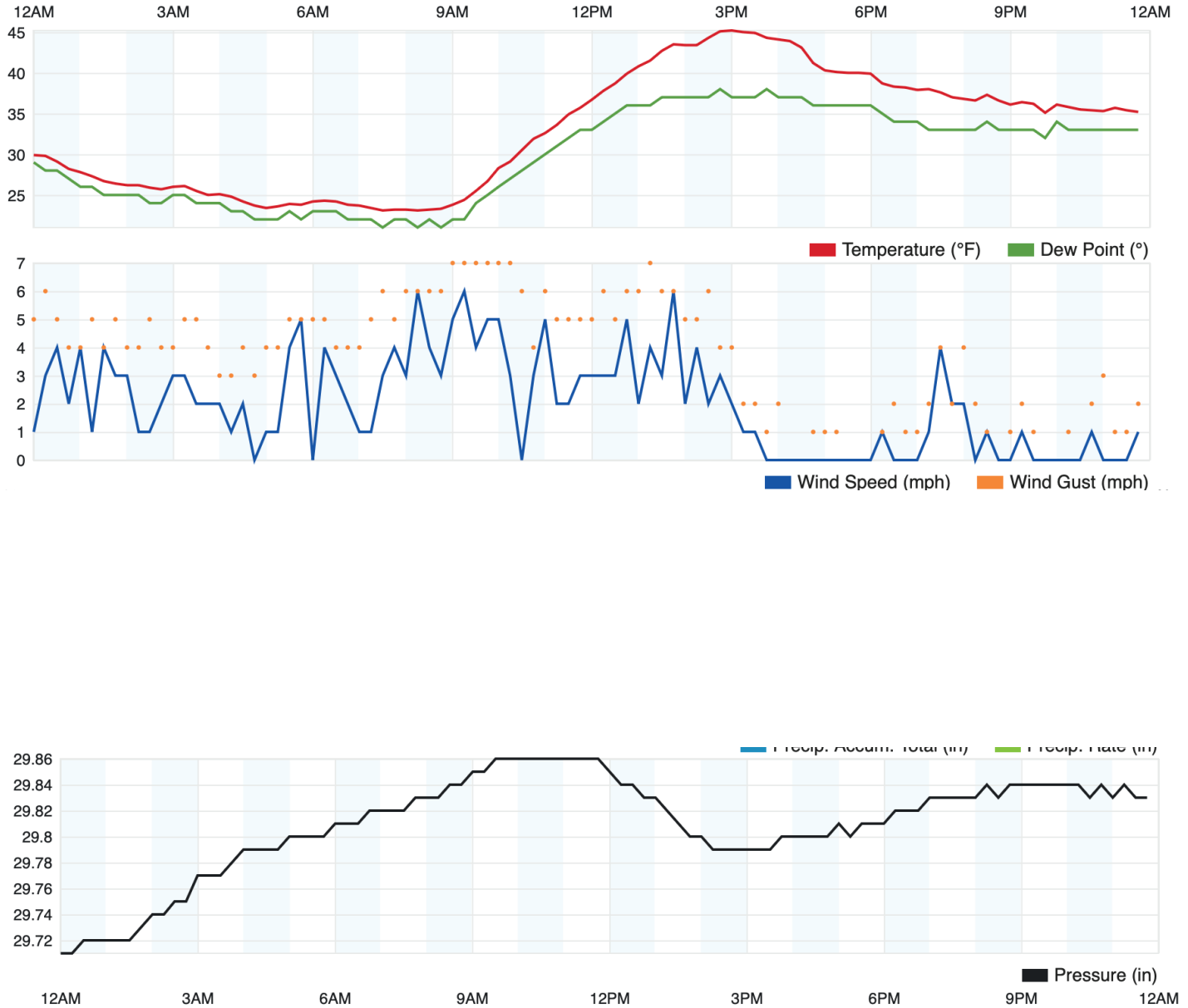
December 17

Based on SPIs at various time scales, low snowpack, and the NDMC short-term blend, a 1-category degradation was made to northern Colorado along with southern and northwestern Wyoming. Snow water equivalent amounts are below the 5th percentile where extreme drought (D3) was expanded in Wyoming. These same indicators justified an expansion of abnormal dryness (D0) across southwestern Colorado. Severe drought (D2) was expanded across western Nebraska due to soil moisture percentiles falling below the 10th percentile and support from the 90 to 120-day SPI.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 44 °F

Decreasing Clouds

Tonight



Low: 25 °F

Mostly Cloudy then Patchy Fog

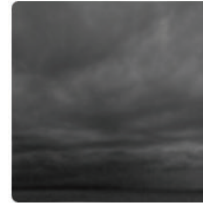
Monday



High: 29 °F

Chance Wintry Mix and Patchy Fog

Monday Night



Low: 18 °F

Cloudy

Tuesday



High: 25 °F

Partly Sunny



Rain, Freezing Rain, Snow Possible Monday

December 29, 2024
3:37 AM

Key Messages

- 60-90% chance of a wintry mix of rain, freezing rain, and sleet Monday morning southwest of a line from Mobridge to Redfield.
- Light ice possible along & south of Highway 212 in eastern South Dakota.
- The wintry mix becomes all snow Monday afternoon, with 1 to 2 inches possible.
- Highest accumulations across central/south central South Dakota. Potential for Travel Issues during Monday Morning Commute

Weather Forecast

	12/30 Mon								12/31 Tue
	12am	3am	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am
McIntosh	15%	25%	50%	50%	25%	25%	10%	10%	5%
Eagle Butte	50%	50%	80%	80%	45%	45%	10%	10%	5%
Murdo	40%	40%	90%	95%	100%	100%	30%	30%	10%
Mobridge	15%	25%	55%	55%	30%	30%	5%	5%	0%
Pierre	35%	50%	85%	95%	90%	70%	20%	20%	5%
Gettysburg	30%	45%	80%	85%	60%	55%	10%	10%	5%
Kennebec	35%	40%	75%	85%	95%	95%	25%	25%	5%
Eureka	5%	15%	35%	35%	25%	25%	5%	5%	0%
Chamberlain	20%	15%	55%	70%	95%	80%	35%	35%	5%
Miller	25%	30%	85%	90%	85%	65%	20%	20%	5%
Ellendale	0%	5%	15%	15%	15%	15%	5%	5%	0%
Redfield	15%	20%	55%	70%	65%	45%	15%	15%	5%
Aberdeen	5%	10%	25%	30%	30%	30%	5%	5%	0%
Huron	15%	20%	65%	80%	80%	65%	25%	25%	5%
Britton	0%	5%	10%	15%	15%	15%	5%	5%	0%
Clark	5%	10%	35%	55%	55%	40%	15%	15%	5%
Webster	0%	5%	25%	25%	25%	20%	10%	10%	0%
Watertown	5%	10%	25%	35%	35%	30%	15%	15%	5%
Sisseton	0%	0%	10%	10%	15%	10%	5%	5%	0%
Brookings	5%	15%	45%	50%	60%	60%	25%	25%	5%
Milbank	0%	5%	15%	15%	20%	15%	10%	10%	5%
Wheaton	0%	0%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	5%	0%

Created: 3 am CST Sun 12/29/2024. Shows most impactful weather for the period beginning at the time shown. Weather symbols display where Probability of Precipitation ≥ 0%.

- Rain + - Fz Rain + - Wintry Mix + - Snow + - Fog +



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Rain, freezing rain, and snow are all expected Monday. Light ice accumulation is possible along and south of Hwy 212 in eastern SD. All precipitation is expected to become snow in the afternoon with accumulations of 1 to 2 inches possible, highest in central/south central SD.

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Snow and Ice Probabilities

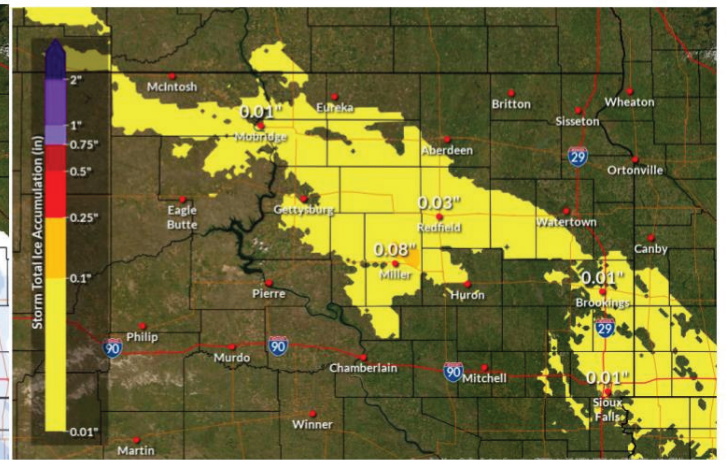
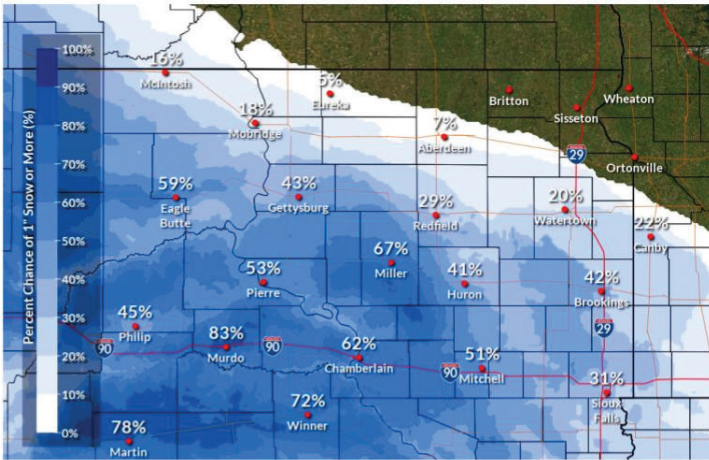
December 29, 2024

3:41 AM

Valid: 12 AM CST Monday to 12 AM CST Tuesday

Probability of exceeding 1" of Snow

Expected Ice Accumulation



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Chance of more than 1 inch is highest across central and south central SD at 60-80%. Highest ice accumulations are in central SD with less than an a tenth of an inch expected.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 2:52 PM

Low Temp: 23 °F at 7:29 AM

Wind: 8 mph at 10:03 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 49 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1999

Record Low: -35 in 1917

Average High: 25

Average Low: 4

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.57

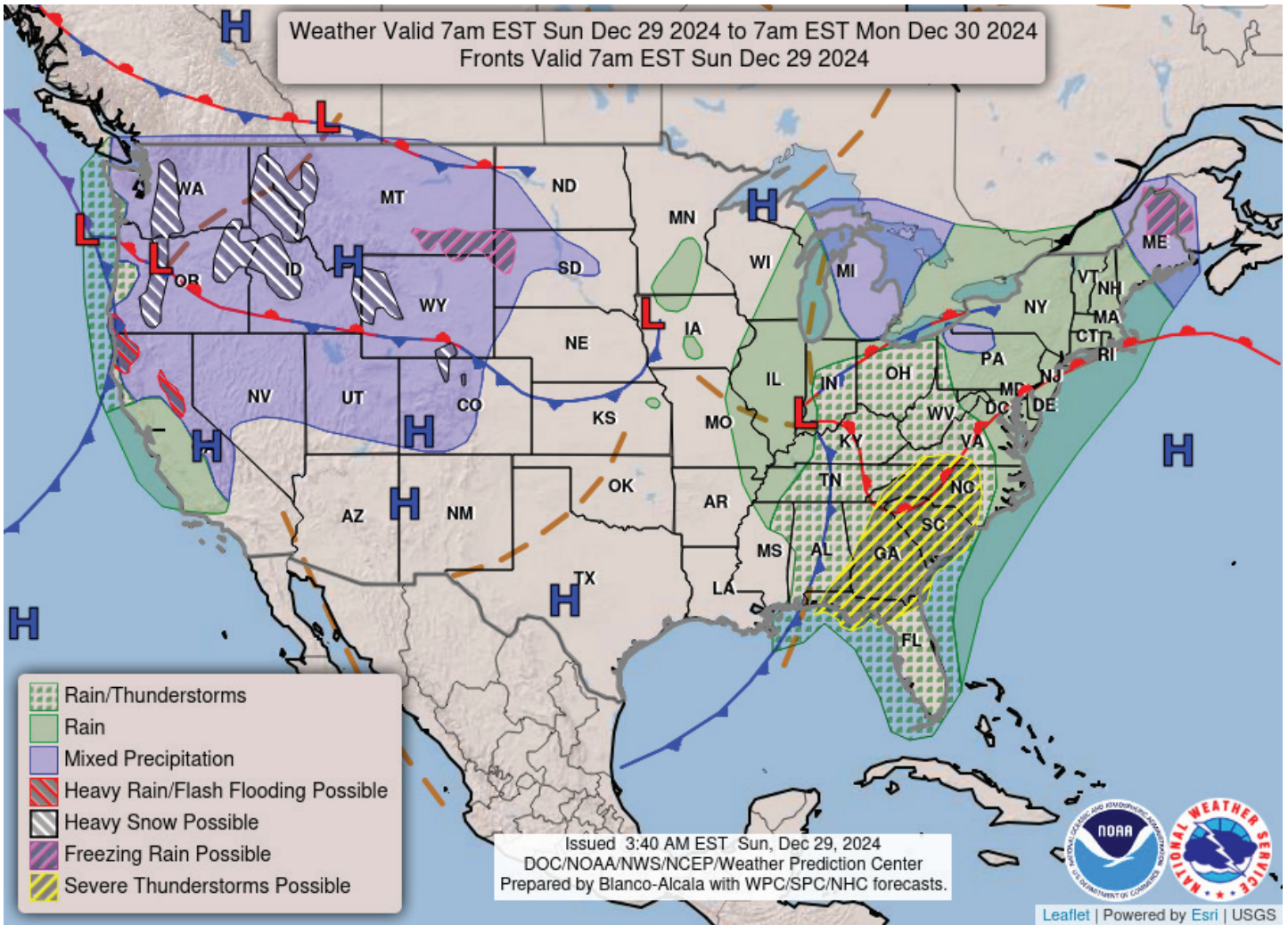
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.78

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:59:18 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:22 am



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Today in Weather History

December 29, 2005: Heavy snow of 6 to 14 inches fell across parts of north-central and most of north-east South Dakota from the morning of the 29th through the early afternoon of the 30th. Big Stone and Traverse counties in west-central Minnesota had 7 to 8 inches of snow the evening of the 29th through the early afternoon of the 30th. Light rain and freezing rain fell before the snow, creating some slick roads which resulted in some accidents. Some snowfall amounts included 7 inches at Watertown, Big Stone City, and Artichoke Lake; 8 inches at Waubay, Browns Valley, and Wheaton; 9 inches northeast of Isabel and Hecla; 10 inches at Wilmot and Clear Lake; 12 inches at Milbank; and 14 inches at Summit.

1830 - A very heavy snowstorm ushered in the "winter of the deep snow." The storm produced 30 inches of snow at Peoria IL and 36 inches at Kansas City MO. Cold and snow continued until the middle of February causing great suffering among pioneers. (David Ludlum)

1876: The Pacific Express train was crossing the Ashtabula River in Ohio when the bridge collapsed. The bridge collapsed at 7:28 PM, during a snowstorm that left two feet of snow and produced 40 mph winds. The only railcar not to fall into the icy river below was the first locomotive.

1894: Express A severe freeze hit Florida destroying fruit and causing considerable damage to trees.

1954 - Fort Scott, KS, was buried under 26 inches of snow in 24 hours to establish a state record. (28th-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1984 - One hundred cities in the central and eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures. Kansas City, MO, experienced its warmest December day of record with a morning low of 60 degrees and an afternoon high of 71 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - A storm off the Middle Atlantic Coast produced heavy snow in the Appalachians and the north-eastern U.S. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in southeastern Massachusetts. Cape Cod received thirteen inches of snow, and snow drifts three feet deep were reported around Chatham MA. Strong winds produced wind chill readings as cold as 60 degrees below zero in southwestern New England. In the western U.S., a Pacific coast storm produced heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, with 24 inches reported at Mammoth Mountain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A cold front brought rain and snow to the northwestern U.S. The rainfall total of 2.70 inches at Astoria OR was a record for the date. High winds along the eastern slopes of the Northern Rockies gusted to 81 mph at Livingston MT. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Snow and ice prevailed from the southwestern U.S. to the Great Lakes Region. Flagstaff, AZ, received nine inches of snow in just six hours. Bitter cold weather continued over Maine. Portland ME reported a record twenty-two straight days with highs 32 degrees or colder. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



Why Parents Matter

There is limited information in Scripture that describes the home life of Jesus. Every now and then we get a glimpse of something. But there can be little doubt that God and His teachings were at the center of everything.

We read that "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." No doubt His knowledge of and reverence for the Law and Prophets shaped His life and His reverence and relationship with His Heavenly Father and others.

Luke's Gospel tells us about a family trip to the temple. On the way home, they noticed that He was not with them. When they returned to the temple they found Him listening to and answering questions of the learned teachers. At the tender age of twelve Jesus demonstrated to others the deep understanding of God's Word that obviously came from His parents.

Mary and Joseph realized that they were obligated to God for the welfare and well-being of His one and only Son. While He was waiting to begin His public ministry He listened to their teachings and followed their examples of godly living.

Parents can never overlook or underestimate the influence and impact they have on their children. Parents must follow the example of Joseph and Mary in raising their children.

Prayer: We pray, Father, that parents will realize the important gift of a child and the trust You place in them to raise them to know, love, trust, obey and serve You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.27.24

3 7 37 49 55 6

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.28.24

12 17 22 30 42 2

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$19,360,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.28.24

14 19 21 25 30 9

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 50 Mins
58 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.28.24

5 10 20 27 32

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$191,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.28.24

22 40 42 54 68 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.28.24

6 31 51 54 55 12

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$163,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

- 01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
- 01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
- 04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 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
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Saturday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 66, Herreid-Selby 26
Burke 56, Chester 49
Clark-Willow Lake 58, Warner 41
Colman-Egan 47, Faulkton 26
Corsica/Stickney 46, Freeman Academy-Marion 31
DeSmet 60, Lower Brule 37
Gayville-Volin High School 45, Canistota 16
Howard 45, Kimball-White Lake 39, OT
Jones County 48, James Valley Christian School 4
Lyman 57, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 46
Marshall, Minn. 68, Tea 37
Rapid City Stevens 55, Spearfish 52
Sully Buttes 42, Wolsey-Wessington 32

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Baltic 53, Deubrook 45
Castlewood 64, Madison 50
DeSmet 56, Chester 43
Dell Rapids St Mary 60, Flandreau 43
Elkton-Lake Benton 78, Waverly-South Shore 55
Estelline-Hendricks 65, Deuel 61
Freeman 59, White River 45
Garretson 62, Arlington 31
Gayville-Volin High School 48, Canistota 31
Hamlin 53, Dell Rapids 26
Harrisburg 47, Orlando Christian Prep, Fla. 38
McCook Central-Montrose 51, Ethan 48
Mitchell 61, Orono, Minn. 60
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 59, Iroquois-Lake Preston 42
Pine Ridge 55, Parkston 48
Sioux Falls Christian 71, Coronado, Nev. 50
Sioux Valley 64, Colman-Egan 57
Spearfish 53, Rapid City Stevens 52
St. George's, Tenn. 66, Lower Brule 41
Wolsey-Wessington 53, Sully Buttes 44

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

Sutton scores 20, Omaha downs NAIA-member Mount Marty 81-51

By The Associated Press undefined

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Marquel Sutton had 20 points in Omaha's 81-51 victory against NAIA-member Mount Marty on Saturday night.

Sutton had eight rebounds and three steals for the Mavericks (6-9). Lance Waddles scored 19 points and

added seven rebounds. Isaac Ondekane shot 3 of 4 from the field and 2 of 5 from the free-throw line to finish with eight points.

The Lancers were led in scoring by Tash Lunday, who finished with 14 points and seven rebounds. Mount Marty also got 14 points from Brandon Garcia. Rugby Ryken also recorded seven points.

Washington State hires South Dakota State's Jimmy Rogers as football coach

PULLMAN, Wash. (AP) — Washington State hired South Dakota State's Jimmy Rogers as its head football coach Saturday.

Rogers replaces Jake Dickert, who left to become Wake Forest's head coach Dec. 18.

"Throughout the process, it was evident Jimmy embodies the qualities needed to lead our program: character, passion, vision and commitment," Washington State athletic director Anne McCoy said in a statement. "His coaching acumen is extremely high as is his work ethic, and the value he places on mentoring the young men in his program is evident."

Rogers arrives in Pullman after two successful years as South Dakota State's head coach. He led the Jackrabbits to the 2023 FCS national championship and to the national semifinals this season, compiling a 27-3 record.

Rogers earned the Eddie Robinson Award as the FCS's top coach following the 2023 championship run and was the defensive coordinator when the Jackrabbits won the national title the year before. He's spent the past 12 years at South Dakota State, starting as linebackers coach in 2013.

Rogers played linebacker for three seasons at South Dakota State, ending his career as the school's career tackles leader. He started his coaching career at his alma mater right after his playing days and spent two seasons at Florida Atlantic before returning.

Rogers takes over a program decimated by the transfer portal. The Cougars lost at least 25 players and several coaches, including both coordinators.

Short-handed Washington State lost 52-35 to No. 22 Syracuse in the Holiday Bowl on Friday night.

A plane is engulfed in flames after skidding off the runway in South Korea, killing at least 177

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

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A passenger plane burst into flames Sunday after it skidded off a runway at a South Korean airport and slammed into a concrete fence when its front landing gear apparently failed to deploy. Most of the 181 people on board died in one of the country's worst aviation disasters.

The Jeju Air passenger plane crashed while landing in the town of Muan, about 290 kilometers (180 miles) south of Seoul. The Transport Ministry said the plane was a 15-year-old Boeing 737-800 jet that was returning from Bangkok and that the crash happened at 9:03 a.m.

At least 177 people — 84 women, 82 men and 11 others whose genders weren't immediately identifiable — died in the fire, the South Korean fire agency said. Emergency workers pulled two people, both crew members, to safety. Health officials said they are conscious and not in life-threatening condition.

Two people remained missing about nine hours after the incident. Among the 177 bodies found, officials have so far identified 57 of them, the fire agency said. The passengers were predominantly South Korean, as well as two Thai nationals.

The fire agency deployed 32 fire trucks and several helicopters to contain the blaze. About 1,570 firefighters, police officers, soldiers and other officials were also sent to the site, according to the fire agency and transport ministry.

Footage of the crash aired by South Korean television channels showed the Jeju Air plane skidding across the airstrip at high speed, apparently with its landing gear still closed, overrunning the runway and colliding head-on with a concrete wall on the outskirts of the facility, triggering an explosion. Other local TV stations

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aired footage showing thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the plane, which was engulfed in flames.

Lee Jeong-hyeon, chief of the Muan fire station, told a televised briefing that the plane was completely destroyed, with only the tail assembly remaining recognizable among the wreckage. Lee said that workers were looking into various possibilities about what caused the crash, including whether the aircraft was struck by birds, Lee said.

Transport Ministry officials later said their early assessment of communication records show the airport control tower issued a bird strike warning to the plane shortly before it intended to land and gave its pilot permission to land in a different area. The pilot sent out a distress signal shortly before the plane went past the runway and skidded across a buffer zone before hitting the wall, the officials said.

Senior Transport Ministry official Joo Jong-wan said workers have retrieved the flight data and cockpit voice recorders of the plane's black box, which will be examined by government experts investigating the cause of the crash and fire. He said it may take months for investigators to complete their probe. The runway at the Muan airport will be closed until Jan. 1, the ministry said.

The Transport Ministry said the plane's passengers include two Thai nationals. Thailand's prime minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, expressed deep condolences to the families of those affected by the accident in a post on social platform X. Paetongtarn said she ordered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide assistance immediately.

Kerati Kijmanawat, the director of Airports of Thailand, confirmed in a statement that Jeju Air flight 7C 2216 departed from Suvarnabhumi Airport with no reports of abnormal conditions with the aircraft or on the runway.

Jeju Air in a statement expressed its "deep apology" over the crash and said it will do its "utmost to manage the aftermath of the accident."

In a televised news conference, Kim E-bae, Jeju Air's president, bowed deeply with other senior company officials as he apologized to bereaved families and said he feels "full responsibility" for the incident. Kim said the company hadn't identified any mechanical problems with the aircraft following regular checkups and that he would wait for the results of government investigations into the cause of the incident.

Family members wailed as officials announced the names of some victims at a lounge in the Muan airport.

Boeing said in a statement on X it was in contact with Jeju Air and is ready to support the company in dealing with the crash.

"We extend our deepest condolences to the families who lost loved ones, and our thoughts remain with the passengers and crew," Boeing said.

It's one of the deadliest disasters in South Korea's aviation history. The last time South Korea suffered a large-scale air disaster was in 1997, when a Korean Airline plane crashed in Guam, killing 228 people on board. In 2013, an Asiana Airlines plane crash-landed in San Francisco, killing three and injuring approximately 200.

Sunday's accident was also one of the worst landing mishaps since a July 2007 crash that killed all 187 people on board and 12 others on the ground when an Airbus A320 slid off a slick airstrip in Sao Paulo and collided with a nearby building, according to data compiled by the Flight Safety Foundation, a nonprofit group aimed at improving air safety. In 2010, 158 people died when an Air India Express aircraft overshot a runway in Mangalore, India, and plummeted into a gorge before erupting into flames, according to the safety foundation.

The incident came as South Korea is embroiled into a huge political crisis triggered by President Yoon Suk Yeol's stunning imposition of martial law and ensuing impeachment. Last Friday, South Korean lawmakers impeached acting President Han Duck-soo and suspended his duties, leading Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok to take over.

Choi ordered officials to employ all available resources to rescue the passengers and crew before he headed to Muan. Yoon's office said his chief secretary, Chung Jin-suk, will preside over an emergency meeting between senior presidential staff later on Sunday to discuss the crash.

A Palestinian was shot dead in her West Bank home. Her family blames Palestinian security forces

By MAJDI MOHAMMED and WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

JENIN, West Bank (AP) — A Palestinian woman was shot and killed in her home in the volatile northern West Bank town of Jenin, where the Palestinian Authority is carrying out a rare campaign against militants. The family of Shatha al-Sabbagh, a 22-year-old journalism student, said she was killed by a sniper with the Palestinian security forces late Saturday while she was with her mother and two small children. They said there were no militants in the area at the time.

A statement from the Palestinian security forces said she was shot by “outlaws” — the term it has been using for local militants who have been battling Israeli forces in recent years. The security forces condemned the shooting and vowed to investigate it.

Separately, a fourth infant has died of hypothermia in the Gaza Strip, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians displaced by nearly 15 months of war are huddled in tents along the rainy, windswept coast.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority exercises limited self-rule in parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. It is deeply unpopular among Palestinians, largely because it cooperates with Israel on security matters, even as Israel accuses it of incitement and of generally turning a blind eye to militancy.

In a statement, the al-Sabbagh family accused the Palestinian security forces of having become “repressive tools that practice terrorism against their own people instead of protecting their dignity and standing up to the (Israeli) occupation.”

The Hamas militant group also blamed the security forces and condemned the shooting. It noted that al-Sabbagh was the sister of one of its fighters who was killed in a battle with Israeli troops last year.

Palestinian security forces launched a rare operation earlier this month in Jenin, which has seen heavy fighting between Palestinian militants and Israeli forces in recent years. The Palestinian Authority says the operation is aimed at restoring law and order, while critics charge it with aiding the occupation.

Violence has flared in the West Bank since Hamas’ Oct. 7, 2023 attack out of Gaza triggered the war there. At least 835 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in the West Bank since then, according to the Palestinian Authority. Most appear to have been militants killed in clashes with Israeli forces, but the dead also include civilians and participants in violent demonstrations.

Israel captured the West Bank, along with Gaza and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for a future state.

An infant dies from cold and his twin is hospitalized in Gaza

In the Gaza Strip, 20-day-old Jomaa al-Batran died from hypothermia and his twin brother Ali was in the intensive care unit of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital.

Their father, Yehia, said the twins were born one month premature and were only able to spend a day in the nursery at the hospital, which like other health centers in Gaza has been overwhelmed by the war and is only partially functioning.

He said medics told their mother to keep the newborns warm, but it was impossible because they live in a tent and temperatures regularly drop below 10 degrees Celsius (50 F) at night. At least three other babies have died from the cold in recent weeks, according to local health officials.

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

Israel’s offensive has killed over 45,000 Palestinians and wounded more than 100,000, according to local health authorities. They say women and children make up more than half the fatalities but do not distinguish between militants and civilians in their count. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 militants, without providing evidence.

Israel’s bombardment and ground operations have displaced some 90% of Gaza’s population of 2.3 million people, often multiple times. Vast areas of the territory, including entire neighborhoods, have been pounded to ruins, and critical infrastructure has been destroyed.

Israeli restrictions, ongoing fighting and the breakdown of law and order have hindered the delivery of humanitarian aid, raising fears of famine, while widespread hunger has left people at greater risk of disease and death.

Tornadoes in Texas and Mississippi kill 2 and injure 6 as severe weather system moves east

HOUSTON (AP) — At least two people were killed and six more injured as several tornadoes touched down in Texas and Mississippi on Saturday, damaging homes and flipping vehicles as the storm system moved east across Alabama early Sunday.

The National Weather Service's severe storm tracker indicated the system was moving east through Alabama into Georgia shortly before 4 a.m. The agency issued severe thunder storm warnings with the possibility of tornadoes in western Georgia and the northwestern tip of Florida directly above the Gulf of Mexico.

One person died in the Liverpool area, located south of Houston, and four people suffered injuries that were not considered critical, according to Madison Polston of the Brazoria County Sheriff's Office.

There were "multiple touchdown points" in the county between Liverpool, Hillcrest Village and Alvin. Officials knew of around 10 damaged homes but were working to determine the extent of the damage, Polston said.

In Mississippi, one person died in Adams County and two people were injured in Franklin County, according to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency.

The National Weather Service said two tornadoes hit around Bude and the city of Brandon, ripping roofs from several buildings.

"These storms are probably going to get a lot worse this evening and overnight the further east you go," said Josh Litcher, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

It appeared at least six tornadoes touched down in the Houston area, though they may discover there were more when crews go out to survey the damage, and there was damage in the area from both tornadoes and straight-line winds, Litcher said.

North of Houston, mobile homes were damaged or destroyed in Katy and Porter Heights, where the doors of a fire station were blown in, the weather service said.

The storms also caused departure delays of over an hour Saturday afternoon at Houston's two main airports, Bush Intercontinental and Hobby, according to the website FlightAware.

About 71,000 utility customers were without power in Mississippi Saturday and the number was expected to rise, said Malary White, chief communications officer for the state's Emergency Management Agency.

Around 3:30 a.m. Sunday, nearly 81,000 customers were without power in the state, down from 93,000 around 1 a.m., according to electric utility tracking website PowerOutage.us.

The emergency management agency did not have official damage reports Saturday. First responders were focused on ensuring safety and making sure everyone was accounted for, White said.

"We do anticipate more thorough damage assessments starting in the early morning hours," she said.

The National Weather Service office in Birmingham, Alabama, issued overnight severe thunderstorm warnings for several areas in the southern part of the state, advising residents to seek shelter to avoid possible damaging winds up to 60 mph (96.5 kph).

Belgium will ban sales of disposable e-cigarettes in a first for the EU

By SYLVAIN PLAZY and MARK CARLSON Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Belgium will ban the sale of disposable electronic cigarettes as of Jan. 1 on health and environmental grounds in a groundbreaking move for European Union nations.

Health minister Frank Vandenbroucke said the inexpensive e-cigarettes had turned into a health threat

since they are an easy way for teenagers to be drawn into smoking and get hooked on nicotine.

"Disposable e-cigarettes is a new product simply designed to attract new consumers," he said in an interview.

"E-cigarettes often contain nicotine. Nicotine makes you addicted to nicotine. Nicotine is bad for your health. These are fact," Vandenbroucke added.

Because they are disposable, the plastic, battery and circuits are a burden on the environment. On top of that, "they create hazardous waste chemicals still present in what people throw away," Vandenbroucke said.

The health minister said he also targeted the disposable e-cigarettes because reusable ones could be a tool to help people quit smoking if they cannot find another way.

Australia outlawed the sale of "vapes" outside pharmacies earlier this year in some of the world's toughest restrictions on electronic cigarettes. Now Belgium is leading the EU drive.

"We are the first country in Europe to do so," Vandenbroucke said.

He wants tougher tobacco measures in the 27-nation bloc.

"We are really calling on the European Commission to come forward now with new initiatives to update, to modernize, the tobacco legislation," he said.

There is understanding about Belgium's decision, even in some shops selling electronic cigarettes, and especially on the environmental issue.

Once the cigarette is empty, "the battery is still working. That's what is terrible, is that you could recharge it, but you have no way of recharging it," said Steven Pomeranc, owner of the Brussels Vapotheque shop. "So you can imagine the level of pollution it creates."

A ban usually means a financial loss to the industry, but Pomeranc said he thinks it will not hurt too much.

"We have a lot of alternative solutions which are also very easy to use," he said. "Like this pod system, which are pre-filled with liquid, which can just be clipped into the rechargeable e-cigarette. So we will simply have a shift of clients towards this new system."

Bolivia's former leader Evo Morales seeks a political comeback from his stronghold in the tropics

By ISABEL DEBRE and JUAN KARITA Associated Press

LAUCA Ñ, Bolivia (AP) — Bolivia's former leader Evo Morales has a campaign pitch for 2025 that has worked elsewhere: Other politicians of recent years have brought you nothing but misery. It's time for a return to the past.

His supporters are looking to Morales for a rescue from the five tumultuous years since his 2019 resignation. The country's first Indigenous president, Morales is credited with spreading the wealth of a commodities boom and ushering in a rare stretch of social and economic stability during his nearly 14 years in office.

His detractors say Morales — who built an economy uncomfortably dependent on natural gas reserves and sought to stay in power longer than Bolivia's constitution allows — bears responsibility for much of the turmoil that followed his tenure.

An ally turned rival

A bitter political battle is looming between Morales, 65, and his former economy minister and once-protégé, President Luis Arce, over who will lead their long-dominant leftist Movement Toward Socialism, or MAS, into the August 2025 election.

Arce has unleashed allies in the judiciary against Morales, with the Constitutional Court disqualifying Morales' candidacy and ousting him from the leadership of MAS, a party he helped found in the 1990s.

Prosecutors in mid-December charged Morales with statutory rape for fathering a child with a 15-year-old girl when he was 56 and president. Morales didn't deny the relationship but accused Arce of deploying a "dirty, odious" campaign to undermine him.

Fighting from the tropics

Since talk of his arrest warrant surfaced in September, Morales has been holed up in Bolivia's coca-growing region of Chapare, ringed by loyal supporters.

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Here, the former coca farmer and fiery union leader — long considered one of the last of the so-called “pink wave” of leftist leaders who once dominated Latin American politics — is planning his comeback.

Few outsiders are allowed inside his stronghold in Bolivia’s steamy lowlands, but The Associated Press was invited last month for a look from behind the barricades.

“They don’t want me to be the candidate because they know I’ll win,” Morales told the AP. “We’re in a state of total siege, morally, legally and politically.”

The four-hour drive to Chapare from Bolivia’s third-biggest city of Cochabamba is steep and slick with mist.

A narcotics checkpoint from the U.S.-financed war on drugs that wreaked havoc across this jungle is far less intimidating than the makeshift checkpoints manned by Morales’ followers.

In the ‘Land of Evo’

As the van rumbled on, Pedro Cepita, a guide tasked with accompanying the AP, pointed out Morales’ accomplishments in the long-stigmatized Chapare — university buildings, cell towers, an airport, a 25,000-seat soccer stadium.

Morales’ face adorns murals alongside cult heroes like Che Guevara and Fidel Castro. “Evo 2025-2030” slogans blanket brick houses.

“We’re in la Tierra de Evo,” Cepita said — the Land of Evo.

At sandbagged checkpoints, Morales’ supporters — some with batons on their belts — waved the van through only after recognizing Cepita.

Security forces, chased out by Morales’ followers, rarely venture here. Door-knocking census workers — even emergency rescuers responding to a deadly landslide last month — said they were harassed and kicked out by Morales’ coca union activists.

Earlier this month and after 40 days of negotiations, police began trickling back.

Almost divine reverence

Coca farmers drying their leaves proudly recount how Morales kicked out U.S. anti-drug agents almost in the same breath as they extoll the benefits of the coca plant, cherished by Indigenous communities and maligned by the West as the raw material for cocaine.

“Brother Evo was in these fields with us,” said Jose Luis Calicho, 39, nodding toward Morales’ own plot of land. “He knows we’re not criminals, we’re not narco-traffickers.”

Since October, when gunmen opened fire at his convoy, Morales, who was unharmed, has slept inside the fortress-like compound of his coca-growing union. He says the shooting was an assassination attempt and blames Arce’s government, which denies involvement.

Outside the high walls, dozens of his followers lounge on tarps blocking the street. Some rest after all-night security shifts, others keep watch, their cheeks bulging with wads of coca — a mild stimulant.

“It’s our responsibility to Evo, we can’t take chances,” said Reyna Peñaloza, 44. “With us, he’ll return to power.”

A stark disconnect

Those who believe Morales’ comeback can close the door on years of political and economic paralysis are less clear about the kind of future he could bring.

“When I came to power in 2005, the nation was suffering, and I transformed it,” Morales said. “Now our crisis is even worse. We don’t have fuel, we don’t have dollars.”

Most Bolivians, stinging from surging inflation and waiting in long lines to fill their tanks, agree on that.

But attitudes toward Morales are starkly different in his remote redoubt in Chapare and the rest of the country of 12 million — especially when it comes to the 2016 statutory rape case that indelibly tarnished his reputation.

In the upscale districts of La Paz, the capital, residents say they’re repulsed by his actions. Freshly painted graffiti asks: “Would you vote for a pedophile?”

“The political damage to Evo’s good image is devastating,” said Romer Alejo, a criminal lawyer in La Paz.

Informal efforts to gauge public opinion in La Paz suggests that two or three out of every 10 Bolivians would vote for him.

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His critics condemn Morales' constitution-bending efforts to hold onto power longer than any leader in Bolivia's modern history.

"We're at a breaking point," said Martín Sivak, the author of a biography on Morales. "There's a verdict from Bolivians on this idea of staying in power for too long."

A long way to go

Legal troubles aside, whether Morales can reclaim his party and the country's top job is unclear. His supporters say he'll find a way around the court ban — perhaps by launching a new party.

But the packed crowds of 2014 are no longer there.

A recent MAS congress in Chapare declared Morales was the party's "only legitimate candidate," but a "Viva, Evo!" chant faded quickly in the half-full auditorium.

Still, Bolivia's right-wing opposition is fractured. Protests are mounting over Arce's failure to halt a currency collapse. Morales' supporters threaten to convulse the country if he's not on the ballot.

"We'll win through our struggle," Morales loyalist and lawmaker Alina Canaviri Sullcani said. "There's no alternative."

Even if Morales has become too divisive, without him, many fear the long unstable Andean nation could veer back toward chaos.

Morales' 2019 ouster elevated a right-wing interim president, Jeanine Áñez, who cracked down on her political opponents and sought to purge Morales' legacy.

On a hot, sticky morning last month, Morales emerged from his hideout with heavy security, to check on his fields. As he hunched over to cut weeds, his aides pulled out their smartphones to film him — a throwback to the early 2000s, when videos of the son of llama farmers in his humble alpaca sweater were a magnet for foreign media.

But Morales didn't seem to notice. When everyone had gone, he kept on working. He said he wasn't close to finishing.

2024 was a year of triumphs and setbacks for Russian leader Vladimir Putin. Here's how it unfolded

By The Associated Press undefined

In 2024, President Vladimir Putin further cemented his grip on power and sought to counter Russia's isolation from the West over the war in Ukraine. But he faced continuing challenges, with a deadly attack by gunmen in Moscow and an incursion by Kyiv's troops on his territory.

As Russia's nearly 3-year-old war in Ukraine enters a new, potentially pivotal phase amid a new U.S. administration and its uncertain support for Kyiv, here's a look back at how the year unfolded for Putin:

January: A presidential campaign with no real opponents

Putin ran for a fifth term in office with his top opponents either jailed or exiled abroad. But in a rare show of defiance, thousands of Russians queued in the January cold to sign petitions for an unlikely challenger. Boris Nadezhdin, a 60-year-old legislator and war critic, got the 100,000 signatures needed to put him on the ballot, but election authorities eventually barred him from running. Still, the support he received reflected anti-war sentiment and public longing for political competition in an embarrassment for Putin.

February: Alexei Navalny dies in prison

On Feb. 16, Putin's longtime foe Alexei Navalny died in an arctic prison colony while serving a 19-year sentence on charges widely seen as politically motivated. The news of his death at age 47 shocked the world and robbed the opposition of its most charismatic leader. No exact cause of death was given, and his family and allies blamed the Kremlin, which denied involvement. Tens of thousands of mourners attended his Moscow funeral two weeks later in a show of defiance.

March: A concert massacre darkens Putin's election win

On March 17, Putin secured his expected election triumph, which will keep him in office until 2030, following the harshest crackdown on dissent since Soviet times. Five days later, gunmen stormed a concert hall on Moscow's outskirts, killing over 140 people and setting the venue ablaze. An affiliate of the Islamic

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State group claimed responsibility, although the Kremlin, without evidence, tried to blame Ukraine for the deadliest attack on Russian soil in almost two decades. The assault stunned the capital and rekindled memories of other attacks in the early years of Putin's presidency.

June: Putin visits North Korea to forge stronger ties

Putin made a two-day visit to North Korea in June — his first in 24 years — as the countries deepened their ties in the face of intensifying confrontations with Washington. The pact signed by Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un envisions mutual military assistance if either country is attacked. The new agreement marked their strongest link since the end of the Cold War, adding to concerns in Washington and Seoul.

July: Reporter Gershkovich convicted in a trial denounced as a sham

Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, arrested in March 2023 and accused of espionage, was convicted and sentenced to 16 years in prison in a swift trial. His employers and the U.S. government denounced the process as a sham and rejected the charges as fabricated. Without presenting evidence, authorities claimed he was gathering secret information for the U.S. Gershkovich, the American-born son of Soviet immigrants, was the first Western reporter arrested on espionage charges in post-Soviet Russia, in a chilling signal to international journalists.

August: Mass prisoner swap and Ukraine's push into Kursk

On Aug. 1, Washington and Moscow completed the biggest East-West prisoner swap in post-Soviet history. Those released included Gershkovich and fellow American Paul Whelan, along with prominent Russian dissidents like Vladimir Kara-Murza and Ilya Yashin. The multinational deal freed two dozen people — including Vadim Krasikov, serving a life sentence in Germany for killing a former Chechen militant in Berlin.

Also in August, Ukraine launched a surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region in the largest cross-border raid by Kyiv's forces. It exposed Russia's vulnerabilities and dealt an embarrassing blow to the Kremlin, with tens of thousands of civilians fleeing the region. With the bulk of the Russian army engaged in eastern Ukraine, few troops were left to protect the Kursk region. Russia forces have since regained control over part of the territory but have so far failed to completely dislodge Kyiv's troops.

September: Putin visits Mongolia without fear of arrest

Putin traveled to regional ally Mongolia in September in a move widely seen as an attempt to counter Western efforts to isolate him over the Ukraine war. Mongolia was among the countries that ratified a treaty establishing the International Criminal Court, which in 2023 issued an arrest warrant for Putin for alleged war crimes in Ukraine. Mongolia ignored calls to arrest the Russian leader and gave him a red-carpet welcome, with both countries signing deals on energy supplies and power plant upgrades.

October: US says North Korean troops are in Russia

In October, the Pentagon announced North Korea sent about 10,000 troops to Russia to join the fighting against Ukraine — a move Western leaders said will intensify the war and jolt relations in Asia. Moscow and Pyongyang have remained tight-lipped about the claims of deployment.

Putin also hosted a summit of the BRICS bloc of nations, attended by leaders or representatives of 36 countries, in what many saw as an effort to highlight the failure of U.S.-led efforts to isolate Russia.

November: A Trump victory and a new lethal Russian missile

Former President Donald Trump won a new term in the White House in November, raising concerns that his administration would cut military support for Ukraine and force it to negotiate with Moscow. Current President Joe Biden allowed Kyiv to use U.S.-supplied longer-range weapons for deeper strikes on Russian soil.

Russia responded by firing a new hypersonic intermediate-range ballistic missile — called the Oreshnik — at a city in central Ukraine. Putin boasted the missile can't be intercepted by air defenses. He warned that Moscow could use it for more strikes on Ukraine and also potentially to hit military facilities of NATO countries giving military support to Ukraine.

December: An ally falls, a bomb rocks Moscow and a plane crash draws an apology

The government of Syrian leader Bashar Assad crumbled after a lightning offensive by rebels. Putin

granted asylum to Moscow's longtime ally Assad and his family, but the Kremlin's failure to prevent his downfall nine years after it intervened militarily to prop up his rule exposed the limits of Russia's power and dented its international clout at a pivotal stage of its war in Ukraine.

Then, an embarrassing attack again brought the war to the streets of Moscow. Lt. Gen Igor Kirillov, the chief of Russia's Radiation, Biological and Chemical Protection Forces, was killed alongside an aide by a bomb planted outside his apartment building. Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by security agencies.

On the final weekend of the year, Putin apologized for what he called a "tragic incident" in Russian airspace involving the Dec. 25 crash of an Azerbaijani jetliner that killed 38 people in neighboring Kazakhstan. His statement came amid mounting allegations the plane was shot down by Russian air defenses trying to stop a Ukrainian drone attack near Grozny in the Russian republic of Chechnya. While Russian officials acknowledged that air defense systems were at work, Putin's apology to Azerbaijan's leader stopped short of saying Moscow took responsibility.

15 hurt in Florida when train hits fire truck that drove onto tracks after another train passed

By JOSH FUNK and JULIE WALKER Associated Press

Three firefighters and a dozen passengers were injured in Florida on Saturday when a fire truck with its lights flashing drove around rail crossing arms and into the path of a high-speed passenger train after waiting for another train to pass, according to video of the incident and a person briefed on what happened.

The crash happened at 10:45 a.m. in crowded downtown Delray Beach. In the aftermath the Brightline train was stopped on the tracks, its front destroyed, about a block away from the Delray Beach Fire Rescue truck. Its ladder was ripped off and in the grass several yards away, The Sun-Sentinel reported.

The Delray Beach Fire Rescue said in a social media post that three Delray Beach firefighters were in stable condition at a hospital. Palm Beach County Fire Rescue took 12 people from the train to the hospital with minor injuries.

The person familiar with the details of the crash, who was not authorized to disclose what happened because of the ongoing investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity, said the fire truck stopped at the crossing and waited for a freight train to go by before maneuvering around the lowered crossing arms.

Video of the collision shows the fire truck driving around cars stopped at the crossing with its lights flashing to cross the double tracks.

Emmanuel Amaral rushed to the scene on his golf cart after hearing a loud crash and screeching train brakes from where he was having breakfast a couple of blocks away. He saw firefighters climbing out of the front window of their damaged truck and pulling injured colleagues away from the tracks. One of their helmets came to rest several hundred feet away from the crash.

"The front of that train is completely smashed, and there was even some of the parts to the fire truck stuck in the front of the train, but it split the car right in half. It split the fire truck right in half, and the debris was everywhere," Amaral said.

A Brightline safety officer said the entire community is involved in ensuring railroad safety and drivers should never go around closed gates.

The Federal Railroad Administration will investigate. A spokesperson for the National Transportation Safety Board said in the afternoon that it was still gathering information about the crash and had not decided yet whether to investigate.

The NTSB is already investigating two crashes involving Brightline's high-speed trains that killed three people early this year at the same crossing in Melbourne along the railroad's route between Miami and Orlando.

More than 100 people have died after being hit by trains since Brightline began operations in July 2017 — giving the railroad the worst death rate in the nation. But most of those deaths have been either suicides, pedestrians who tried to run across the tracks ahead of a train or drivers who went around crossing gates

instead of waiting for a train to pass. Brightline has not been found to be at fault in those previous deaths.

Railroad safety has been a concern since a Norfolk Southern train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, in February 2023, spilling toxic chemicals that caught fire. Regulators urged the industry to improve safety and members of Congress proposed a package of reforms, but railroads have not made many major changes to their operations and the bill has stalled.

Earlier this month the two operators of a Union Pacific train were killed after it collided with a semitrailer truck that was blocking a crossing in the small West Texas town of Pecos. Three other people were injured, and the local Chamber of Commerce building was damaged. ____

Associated Press writers Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska, Chevel Johnson in New Orleans and Julie Walker in New York contributed.

Norwegian chess grandmaster Magnus Carlsen quits a tournament in a dispute over jeans

NEW YORK (AP) — Top ranked chess player Magnus Carlsen has left the World Rapid and Blitz Chess Championships after refusing to change out of the jeans he wore to the competition, the International Chess Federation said.

The federation said in a Friday statement that its regulations include a dress code that bars participants from wearing jeans at the event.

"The Chief Arbiter informed Mr. Carlsen of the breach, issued a \$200 fine, and requested that he change his attire," the federation said in the statement posted to its website. "Unfortunately, Mr. Carlsen declined, and as a result, he was not paired for round nine. This decision was made impartially and applies equally to all players."

The 34-year-old Norwegian chess grandmaster said in a video from his Take Take Take chess app that he posted on the social platform X that he accepted a \$200 fine. But he refused to change his pants before quitting the competition in New York.

"I said, 'I'll change tomorrow if that's OK,'" Carlsen said in the video. "But they said, 'Well, you have to change now.' At that point it became a bit of a matter of principle for me."

The federation said in its statement that the dress code is "designed to ensure professionalism and fairness for all participants."

It said fellow participant Ian Nepomniachtchi was also fined earlier Friday for breaching the dress code by wearing sports shoes.

"However, Mr. Nepomniachtchi complied, changed into approved attire, and continued to play in the tournament," the statement said. "These rules have been in place for years and are well-known to all participants and are communicated to them ahead of each event."

Winning ticket for \$1.22 billion lottery jackpot sold in California, Mega Millions says

By The Associated Press undefined

At least one Mega Millions player has plenty of dough to ring in the New Year after drawing the winning number. After three months without anyone winning the top prize in the lottery, a ticket worth an estimated \$1.22 billion was sold in California for the drawing Friday night, according to the Mega Millions website.

The California Lottery said the winning ticket was sold at Circle K (Sunshine Food and Gas) on Rhonda Road in Cottonwood, about 150 miles (240 kilometers) north of Sacramento. The winning ticket matched the white balls 3, 7, 37, 49, 55 and the gold Mega Ball 6. Ishaar Gill, a son of the store owner, said the winning ticket was "a blessing" for the small rural town of roughly 6,000 people. The identity of the winner or winners was not immediately known.

"We don't have the slightest clue of who may have won it or who may have sold it," Gill told The Associ-

ated Press. "But congratulations to the winner."

The total amount of the Mega Millions jackpot would only be distributed to a winner who chooses an annuity paid over 29 years. Nearly all grand prize winners opt to take a cash payout, which for Friday night's drawing is an estimated \$549.7 million.

Despite the game's long odds of 1 in 302.6 million, players continued to purchase tickets as the size of the grand prize grew. Until Friday, the last time a Mega Millions player hit the top prize was Sept. 10.

The largest-ever Mega Millions jackpot ticket worth \$1.6 billion was sold in Florida in August 2023. Two prizes for its compatriot Powerball lottery have been larger.

Mega Millions and Powerball are sold in 45 states, as well as Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Powerball also is sold in Puerto Rico.

Mega Millions ticket prices are set to rise from \$2 to \$5 in April. The increase will be one of many changes that officials say will result in improved jackpot odds, more frequent giant prizes and even larger payouts.

Trump appears to side with Musk, tech allies in debate over foreign workers roiling his supporters

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump appears to be siding with Elon Musk and his other backers in the tech industry as a dispute over immigration visas has divided his supporters.

Trump, in an interview with the New York Post on Saturday, praised the use of visas to bring skilled foreign workers to the U.S. The topic has become a flashpoint within his conservative base.

"I've always liked the visas, I have always been in favor of the visas. That's why we have them," Trump said.

In fact, Trump has in the past criticized the H-1B visas, calling them "very bad" and "unfair" for U.S. workers. During his first term as president, he unveiled a "Hire American" policy that directed changes to the program to try to ensure the visas were awarded to the highest-paid or most-skilled applicants.

Despite his criticism of them and attempts to curb their use, he has also used the visas at his businesses in the past, something he acknowledged in his interview Saturday.

"I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I've been a believer in H-1B. I have used it many times. It's a great program," Trump told the newspaper.

He did not appear to address questions about whether he would pursue any changes to the number or use of the visas once he takes office Jan. 20.

Trump's hardline immigration policies, focused mostly on immigrants who are in the country illegally, were a cornerstone of his presidential campaign and a priority issue for his supporters.

But in recent days, his coalition has split in a public debate largely taking place online about the tech industry's hiring of foreign workers. Hard-right members of Trump's movement have accused Musk and others in Trump's new flank of tech-world supporters of pushing policies at odds with Trump's "America First" vision.

Software engineers and others in the tech industry have used H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers and say they are a critical tool for hard-to-fill positions. But critics have said they undercut U.S. citizens who could take those jobs. Some on the right have called for the program to be eliminated.

Putin apologizes for 'tragic incident' but stops short of saying Azerbaijani plane was shot down

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologized to his Azerbaijani counterpart for what he called a "tragic incident" following the crash of an Azerbaijani airliner in Kazakhstan that killed 38 people, but stopped short of acknowledging that Moscow was responsible.

Putin's apology came as allegations mounted that the plane had been shot down by Russian air defenses attempting to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of

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Chechnya.

An official Kremlin statement issued Saturday said that air defense systems were firing near Grozny airport as the airliner "repeatedly" attempted to land there on Wednesday. It did not explicitly say one of these hit the plane.

The statement said Putin apologized to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev "for the fact that the tragic incident occurred in Russian airspace."

The readout said Russia has launched a criminal probe into the incident, and Azerbaijani state prosecutors have arrived in Grozny to participate. The Kremlin also said that "relevant services" from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan are jointly investigating the crash site near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan.

The plane was flying from Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, to Grozny when it turned toward Kazakhstan, hundreds of kilometers (miles) across the Caspian Sea from its intended destination, and crashed while making an attempt to land. There were 29 survivors.

According to a readout of the call provided by Aliyev's press office, the Azerbaijani president told Putin that the plane was subject to "external physical and technical interference," although he also stopped short of blaming Russian air defenses.

Aliyev noted that the plane had multiple holes in its fuselage and that the occupants had sustained injuries "due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight."

He said that a team of international experts had begun probing the incident at Azerbaijan's initiative, but provided no details. Earlier this week, the Azerbaijani Prosecutor General's office confirmed that investigators from Azerbaijan are working in Grozny.

On Friday, a U.S. official and an Azerbaijani minister made separate statements blaming the crash on an external weapon, echoing those made by aviation experts who blamed the crash on Russian air defense systems responding to a Ukrainian attack.

President Joe Biden, responding on Saturday to a reporter asking whether he thought Putin should take responsibility for the crash, said: "Apparently he did but I haven't spoken to him." Biden made the comment after leaving church in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands.

Passengers and crew who survived the crash told Azerbaijani media that they heard loud noises on the aircraft as it was circling over Grozny.

Dmitry Yarov, head of Russia's civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia, said Friday that as the plane was preparing to land in Grozny in deep fog, Ukrainian drones were targeting the city, prompting authorities to close the area to air traffic.

Yarov said that after the captain made two unsuccessful attempts to land, he was offered other airports but decided to fly to Aktau.

Earlier in the week, Rosaviatsia had cited unspecified early evidence as showing that a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

In the days following the crash, Azerbaijan Airlines blamed "physical and technical interference" and announced the suspension of flights to several Russian airports. It didn't say where the interference came from or provide any further details.

If proven that the plane crashed after being hit by Russian fire, it would be the second deadly civil aviation accident linked to fighting in Ukraine. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed with a Russian surface-to-air missile, killing all 298 people aboard, as it flew over the area in eastern Ukraine controlled by Moscow-backed separatists in 2014.

Russia has denied responsibility, but a Dutch court in 2022 convicted two Russians and a pro-Russia Ukrainian man for their role in downing the plane with an air defense system brought into Ukraine from a Russian military base.

Following Wednesday's suspension of flights from Baku to Grozny and nearby Makhachkala, Azerbaijan Airlines announced Friday that it would also halt service to eight more Russian cities.

Several other airlines have made similar announcements since the crash. Kazakhstan's Qazaq Air on Friday said it would stop flying from Astana to the Russian city of Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains for a month.

Turkmenistan Airlines, the Central Asian country's flagship carrier, on Saturday halted flights to Moscow for at least a month, citing safety concerns. Earlier this week, Israel's El Al carrier suspended service from Tel Aviv to the Russian capital, citing "developments in Russia's airspace."

Nasty norovirus is back in full force with US cases of the stomach virus surging

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

Cases of a wretched stomach bug are surging in parts of the United States this winter, according to government data.

The most recent numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show there were 91 outbreaks of norovirus reported during the week of Dec. 5, up from 69 outbreaks the last week of November.

Numbers from the past few years show a maximum of 65 outbreaks reported during that first week of December.

A norovirus infection is characterized by sudden vomiting and diarrhea. Outbreaks are often seen on cruise ships, in congregate living situations like nursing homes and jails, as well as schools and places where people are close together.

Here are a few things to know about the virus.

What is norovirus?

Norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne illness in the United States, responsible for 58% of such infections acquired in the country each year, according to the CDC.

Norovirus infections are caused by a group of viruses that spread easily, with as few as 10 viral particles having the ability to make someone sick, health experts say.

There are about 2,500 norovirus outbreaks reported annually in the United States. The outbreaks can occur throughout the year but are most common from November to April.

Along with vomiting and diarrhea, common symptoms include nausea, stomach pain, body ache, headache and fever.

How do you get it?

Most norovirus outbreaks occur when people who are already infected spread the virus to others by direct means, such as through sharing food or eating utensils. Outbreaks can also be spread through food, water or contaminated surfaces.

How long do you stay sick?

Illness caused by norovirus typically starts suddenly, with symptoms developing 12 to 48 hours following exposure to the virus. Most people get better within one to three days and recover fully.

But with 19 to 21 million illnesses each year in the United States, norovirus nevertheless causes on average 900 deaths and 109,000 hospitalizations annually, mostly among adults aged 65 and older. It also leads to 465,000 emergency department visits, mostly involving young children.

Who's at risk?

People of all ages can get infected and fall sick from norovirus. Young children, older people and those with weakened immune systems are most at risk, with dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea the top concern.

There is no medication to treat norovirus. Rehydration is recommended by drinking water and other liquids, with the exception of coffee, tea and alcohol.

Anyone suffering from dehydration should seek medical help. Symptoms of dehydration include a decrease in urination, dry mouth and throat, and feeling dizzy when standing. Dehydrated children may be unusually sleepy or fussy and cry with few or no tears.

How can I protect myself?

Rigorous and frequent handwashing is the best defense against norovirus during the peak winter season,

scrubbing the hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before meals.
Scrubbing surfaces with household disinfectants can also help.

Israel detains the director of one of northern Gaza's last functioning hospitals during a raid

By WAFAA SHURAFI and SAM MEDNICK Associated Press

DEIR AL BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israel's army detained the director of one of northern Gaza's last functioning hospitals as overnight strikes elsewhere in the territory killed nine people, including children, Palestinian medical officials said Saturday. Israel's military alleged that Hamas militants were using the facility and said over 240 people were detained.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, director of Kamal Adwan Hospital, was arrested Friday along with dozens of other staff and taken to an interrogation center. The ministry said Israeli troops stormed the hospital and forced many staff and patients outside and told them to strip in winter weather, according to the ministry.

Israel's military on Saturday confirmed it detained the hospital director for questioning and called him a suspected Hamas operative while providing no evidence. It said it encircled the hospital and special forces entered and found weapons in the area. It said militants fired on its forces and they were "eliminated." An Israeli military spokesman, Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani, later asserted to journalists that most of those detained are Hamas operatives.

On Friday, the military denied it had entered or set fire to the hospital complex but acknowledged it had ordered people outside. The military repeated claims that Hamas militants operate inside Kamal Adwan, which hospital officials have denied.

The hospital has been hit multiple times over the past three months by Israeli troops waging an offensive in largely isolated northern Gaza against Hamas fighters it says have regrouped. The health ministry said a strike on the hospital earlier this week killed five medical personnel.

MedGlobal, the humanitarian organization for which Abu Safiya worked, said Friday it was gravely concerned about him. It said the incident follows the October detention of five other staff, calling it an "alarming and egregious pattern of targeting medical personnel and spaces."

Israel's nearly 15-month-old campaign of bombardment and ground offensives has devastated Gaza's health sector. The World Health Organization has said the raid on Kamal Adwan has put northern Gaza's last major health facility "out of service" after growing restrictions on access, adding that "this horror must end and health care must be protected."

The Health Ministry said conditions for Kamal Adwan patients who were relocated to the damaged Indonesian Hospital nearby — also raided in the past — were "extremely difficult."

The Israeli military statement Saturday said 350 patients along with medical personnel had been evacuated from Kamal Adwan in recent weeks, and another 95 patients, caregivers, and medical personnel were evacuated to the Indonesian Hospital during the operation. It also said it had provided fuel and medical supplies to both hospitals.

The war has killed more than 45,400 Palestinians, over half of them women and children, and wounded more than 108,000 others, according to the Health Ministry. Its count does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Since October, Israel's offensive has virtually sealed off the northern Gaza areas of Jabaliya, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahiya and leveled large parts of them. Tens of thousands of Palestinians were forced out but thousands are believed to remain in the area where Kamal Adwan and two other hospitals are located.

Israel has vowed to destroy Hamas after the militants' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel in which they killed around 1,200 people and abducted some 250 others. Some 100 Israelis remain captive in Gaza, and around a third are believed to be dead.

Israel continued attacks across Gaza on Saturday. An overnight strike killed at least nine people in Maghazi, including women and children, according to staff at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital where they were

taken and an Associated Press reporter who saw the bodies.

Men cried as the bodies, wrapped in bloodied white plastic, lay on the floor of the morgue.

The Health Ministry said Saturday that 48 people had been killed in the past 24 hours by Israeli fire.

Meanwhile, Israel said its troops had begun operating in the northern city of Beit Hanoun, citing intelligence that fighters and Hamas infrastructure were in the area.

Strikes also continued in Israel. Air raid sirens sounded early Saturday and the military said it intercepted a missile fired by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

Israeli warplanes bombed key infrastructure in Yemen again on Thursday. The Houthis also have been attacking shipping in the Red Sea and say they won't stop until Israel agrees to a ceasefire in Gaza.

Syria's embassy in Lebanon suspends services as Lebanon hands over former Syrian army officers

By ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Syria's embassy in Lebanon suspended consular services Saturday, a day after two relatives of deposed Syrian President Bashar Assad were arrested at the Beirut airport with allegedly forged passports.

Also on Saturday, Lebanese authorities handed over dozens of Syrians — including former officers in the Syrian army under Assad — to the new Syrian authorities after they were caught illegally entering Lebanon, a war monitor and Lebanese officials said.

The embassy announced on its Facebook page that consular work was suspended "until further notice" at the order of the Syrian foreign ministry. The announcement did not give a reason for the suspension.

Two Lebanese security officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly, said the suspension was ordered because the passports belonging to Assad's relatives — the wife and daughter of one of his cousins — were believed to have been forged at the embassy.

Assad's uncle, Rifaat Assad — who has been indicted in Switzerland on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity — had flown out the day before on his real passport and was not stopped, the officials said.

The U.K.-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported Saturday that 70 Syrians, including former army officers, were handed over by a Lebanese security delegation to the security forces of the new Syrian government, led by the former insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. Three Lebanese judicial officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the report.

Regional countries have been quick to establish ties with Syria's new rulers. Delegations of Libyan and Bahraini officials arrived in Damascus on Saturday on official visits.

HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has largely succeeded in calming fears within and outside of Syria that his group would unleash collective punishment against communities that supported Assad's rule or attempt to impose strict Islamic law on the country's religious minorities.

However, in recent days, sporadic clashes have broken out between the HTS-led security forces and pro-Assad armed groups. The country's new security forces have launched a series of raids targeting officials affiliated with Assad and have set up checkpoints in areas with significant populations of the Alawite religious minority to which the former president belongs to search for weapons.

There have also been ongoing tensions and clashes in northeastern Syria between Kurdish-led forces and armed groups backed by Turkey. Many Kurds have viewed the new order in Damascus, which appears to have strengthened Turkey's hand in Syria, with anxiety.

Ankara sees the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces — a key U.S. ally in the fight against the Islamic State group — as an affiliate of its sworn enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, which it classifies as a terrorist organization.

The U.S. State Department said Saturday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken had spoken with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to "discuss the latest developments in Syria."

"Secretary Blinken emphasized the need to support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political process that upholds human rights and prioritizes an inclusive and representative government," the statement said, adding that they "also discussed the shared goal of preventing terrorism from endangering the security" of Turkey and Syria.

On Saturday, hundreds of protesters convened by Kurdish women's groups participated in a demonstration in the northeastern city of Hasaka to demand women's rights in the new Syria.

Perishan Ramadan, a participant from Hasaka, said the new government "is worse than Bashar" and that its leaders are Islamist extremists who "don't accept any role for women."

While the country's new leaders have not attempted to impose Islamic dress or other conventions, it remains to be seen what role women will have in the new order and whether they will hold political or government positions.

"Women must be present in the new constitution for Syria," said Rihan Loqo, spokeswoman for the Kongra Star women's organization. "... Women's rights should not be ignored."

Abortions are up in the US. It's a complicated picture as women turn to pills, travel

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and KEVIN S. VINEYS Associated Press

Abortion has become slightly more common despite bans or deep restrictions in most Republican-controlled states, and the legal and political fights over its future are not over yet.

It's now been two and a half years since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade and opened the door for states to implement bans.

The policies and their impact have been in flux ever since the ruling in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization.

Here's a look at data on where things stand:

Abortions are slightly more common now than before Dobbs

Overtaking Roe and enforcing abortion bans has changed how women obtain abortions in the U.S.

But one thing it hasn't done is put a dent in the number of abortions being obtained.

There have been slightly more monthly abortions across the country recently than there were in the months leading up to the June 2022 ruling, even as the number in states with bans dropped to near zero.

"Abortion bans don't actually prevent abortions from happening," said Ushma Upadhyay, a public health social scientist at the University of California San Francisco.

But, she said, they do change care.

For women in some states, there are major obstacles to getting abortions — and advocates say that low-income, minority and immigrant women are least likely to be able to get them when they want.

For those living in states with bans, the ways to access abortion are through travel or abortion pills.

Pills become a bigger part of equation — and the legal questions

As the bans swept in, abortion pills became a bigger part of the equation.

They were involved in about half the abortions before Dobbs. More recently, it's been closer to two-thirds of them, according to research by the Guttmacher Institute.

The uptick of that kind of abortion, usually involving a combination of two drugs, was underway before the ruling.

But now, it's become more common for pill prescriptions to be made by telehealth. By the summer of 2024, about 1 in 10 abortions was via pills prescribed via telehealth to patients in states where abortion is banned.

As a result, the pills are now at the center of battles over abortion access.

This month, Texas sued a New York doctor for prescribing pills to a Texas woman via telemedicine. There's also an effort by Idaho, Kansas and Missouri to roll back their federal approvals and treat them as "controlled dangerous substances," and a push for the federal government to start enforcing a 19th-century federal law to ban mailing them.

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Travel for abortion has increased

Clinics have closed or halted abortions in states with bans.

But a network of efforts to get women seeking abortions to places where they're legal has strengthened and travel for abortion is now common.

The Guttmacher Institute found that more than twice as many Texas residents obtained abortion in 2023 in New Mexico as New Mexico residents did. And as many Texans received them in Kansas as Kansans.

Abortion funds, which benefitted from "rage giving" in 2022, have helped pay the costs for many abortion-seekers. But some funds have had to cap how much they can give.

The abortion map has been in flux

Since the downfall of Roe, the actions of lawmakers and courts have kept shifting where abortion is legal and under what conditions.

Here's where it stands now:

The ban that took effect in Florida this year has been a game-changer

Florida, the nation's third most-populous state, began enforcing a ban on abortions after the first six weeks of pregnancy on May 1.

That immediately changed the state from one that was a refuge for other Southerners seeking abortion to an exporter of people looking for them.

There were about 30% fewer abortions there in May compared with the average for the first three months of the year. And in June, there were 35% fewer.

While the ban is not unique, the impact is especially large. The average driving time from Florida to a facility in North Carolina where abortion is available for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy is more than nine hours, according to data maintained by Caitlin Myers, a Middlebury College economics professor.

Clinics have opened or expanded in some places

The bans have meant clinics closed or stopped offering abortions in some states.

But some states where abortion remains legal until viability – generally considered to be sometime past 21 weeks of pregnancy, though there's no fixed time for it – have seen clinics open and expand.

Illinois, Kansas and New Mexico are among the states with new clinics.

There were 799 publicly identifiable abortion providers in the U.S. in May 2022, the month before the Supreme Court reversed Roe v. Wade. And by this November, it was 792, according to a tally by Myers, who is collecting data on abortion providers.

But Myers says some hospitals that always provided some abortions have begun advertising it. So they're now in the count of clinics – even though they might provide few of them.

Lack of access to abortions during emergencies is threatening some patients' lives

How hospitals handle pregnancy complications, especially those that threaten the lives of the women, has emerged as a major issue since Roe was overturned.

President Joe Biden's administration says hospitals must offer abortions when they're needed to prevent organ loss, hemorrhage or deadly infections, even in states with bans. Texas is challenging the administration's policy and the U.S. Supreme Court this year declined to take it up after the Biden administration sued Idaho.

More than 100 pregnant women seeking help in emergency rooms and were turned away or left unstable since 2022, The Associated Press found in an analysis of federal hospital investigative records.

Among the complaints were a woman who miscarried in the lobby restroom of Texas emergency room after staff refused to see her and a woman who gave birth in a car after a North Carolina hospital couldn't offer an ultrasound. The baby later died.

"It is increasingly less safe to be pregnant and seeking emergency care in an emergency department," Dara Kass, an emergency medicine doctor and former U.S. Health and Human Services official told the AP earlier this year.

Abortion rights are popular with voters

Since Roe was overturned, there have been 18 reproductive rights-related statewide ballot questions.

Abortion rights advocates have prevailed on 14 of them and lost on four.

In the 2024 election, they amended the constitutions in five states to add the right to abortion. Such measures failed in three states: In Florida, where it required 60% support; in Nebraska, which had competing abortion ballot measures; and in South Dakota, where most national abortion rights groups did support the measure.

AP VoteCast data found that more than three-fifths of voters in 2024 supported abortion being legal in all or most cases – a slight uptick from 2020. The support came even as voters supported Republicans to control the White House and both houses of Congress.

What is known about a plane crash in Kazakhstan after Putin apologized for a “tragic incident”?

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologized to his Azerbaijani counterpart for what he called a “tragic incident” following the crash of an Azerbaijani airliner in Kazakhstan that killed 38 people, but stopped short of acknowledging that Moscow was responsible.

Putin’s apology to President Ilham Aliyev came as allegations mounted that the plane had been shot down by Russian air defense systems attempting to fend off a Ukrainian drone strike near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, where the plane was heading.

Here are some things to know about the crash that killed 38 out of the 67 people on board:

How did the plane crash?

Azerbaijan Airlines’ Embraer 190 was en route from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku to Grozny in the North Caucasus on Wednesday when it was diverted. It crashed while trying to land near the city of Aktau, Kazakhstan, after flying hundreds of kilometers (miles) east across the Caspian Sea.

The plane went down near the coast about 3 kilometers (2 miles) from Aktau. Cellphone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before hitting the ground and exploding in a fireball.

Rescuers rushed 29 survivors to hospitals.

What have officials said about a possible cause?

Kazakhstani, Azerbaijani and Russian authorities say they are investigating the crash. Initial theories put forward by various officials included possibilities of a bird strike, bad weather and an oxygen canister exploding aboard the plane.

Embraer told The Associated Press in a statement that the company is “ready to assist all relevant authorities.”

Dmitry Yadrov, head of Russia’s civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia, said Friday that as the plane was preparing to land in Grozny in deep fog, Ukrainian drones were targeting the city, prompting authorities to close the area to air traffic.

Yadrov said that after the captain made two unsuccessful attempts to land, he was offered other airports but decided to fly to Aktau.

Later on Friday, senior officials in the U.S. and Azerbaijan made separate statements suggesting the plane may have been brought down by weapons fire, echoing those made by aviation experts who blamed the crash on Russian air defense systems responding to a Ukrainian attack.

Rashan Nabiyeu, Azerbaijan’s digital development and transportation minister, told Azerbaijani media that “preliminary conclusions by experts point at external impact,” as does witness testimony.

“The type of weapon used in the impact will be determined during the probe,” Nabiyeu said.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said that the U.S. has “seen some early indications that would certainly point to the possibility that this jet was brought down by Russian air defense systems,” but refused to elaborate, citing an ongoing investigation.

Those statements echoed assessments by outside aviation experts and raised pressure on Russia.

Why have some experts blamed Russian air defenses?

Some aviation experts have said the holes seen in the plane’s tail section after the crash indicate that it

could have come under fire from Russian air defense systems fending off a Ukrainian drone attack.

Mark Zee of OPSGroup, which monitors the world's airspace and airports for risks, said that the analysis of the fragments of the crashed plane indicates a 90-99% probability that it was hit by a surface-to-air missile.

Osprey Flight Solutions, an aviation security firm based in the United Kingdom, warned its clients that the "Azerbaijan Airlines flight was likely shot down by a Russian military air-defense system."

Osprey CEO Andrew Nicholson said that the company had issued more than 200 alerts regarding drone attacks and air defense systems in Russia since Moscow launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

FlightRadar24 said in an online post that the aircraft had faced "strong GPS jamming" that interfered with flight tracking data allowing it to monitor the plane's flight path. Russia has extensively used sophisticated jamming equipment to fend off drone attacks.

Yan Matveyev, an independent Russian military expert, noted on Thursday that the images of the crashed plane's tail show damage compatible with shrapnel from the Russian Pantsyr-S1 air defense system.

It's unclear why the pilots decided to fly across the Caspian Sea instead of trying to land in Russia after the plane was hit, he said, adding that they probably faced restrictions on landing at a closer venue and may have thought that the damage was not critical.

In Azerbaijan, Caliber online newspaper also claimed that the airliner was fired upon by a Russian Pantsyr-S air defense system and also had its systems affected by jamming equipment as it was approaching Grozny.

How did Russia's and Azerbaijan's leaders respond?

Putin on Saturday apologized to his Aliyev "for the fact that the tragic incident occurred in Russian airspace."

An official Kremlin statement issued Saturday said that air defense systems were firing near Grozny airport as the airliner "repeatedly" attempted to land there on Wednesday, but did not explicitly say if one of them brought the plane down.

According to a readout of the call provided by Aliyev's press office, the Azerbaijani leader told Putin that the plane was subjected to "external physical and technical interference," although he also stopped short of explicitly blaming Russian air defenses.

Aliyev noted that the plane had multiple holes in its fuselage and that the occupants had sustained injuries "due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight."

Azerbaijan observed a nationwide day of mourning on Thursday. National flags were at half-staff, traffic across the country stopped at noon, and sirens were sounded from ships and trains.

Both Putin and Aliyev said Saturday that experts from Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan had begun probing the incident, and were launching inquiries in both Grozny and Aktau. Moscow has launched a criminal investigation into the crash.

Bloodied Ukrainian troops risk losing more hard-won land in Kursk to Russia

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Five months after their shock offensive into Russia, Ukrainian troops are bloodied and demoralized by the rising risk of defeat in Kursk, a region some want to hold at all costs while others question the value of having gone in at all.

Battles are so intense that some Ukrainian commanders can't evacuate the dead. Communication lags and poorly timed tactics have cost lives, and troops have little way to counterattack, seven front-line soldiers and commanders told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity so they could discuss sensitive operations.

Since being caught unaware by the lightning Ukrainian incursion, Russia has amassed more than 50,000 troops in the region, including some from its ally North Korea. Precise numbers are hard to obtain, but

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Moscow's counterattack has killed and wounded thousands and the overstretched Ukrainians have lost more than 40% of the 984 square kilometers (380 square miles) of Kursk they seized in August.

Its full-scale invasion three years ago left Russia holding a fifth of Ukraine, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has hinted that he hopes controlling Kursk will help force Moscow to negotiate an end to the war. But five Ukrainian and Western officials in Kyiv who spoke on condition of anonymity to freely discuss sensitive military matters said they fear gambling on Kursk will weaken the whole 1000-kilometer (621-mile) front line, and Ukraine is losing precious ground in the east.

"We have, as they say, hit a hornet's nest. We have stirred up another hot spot," said Stepan Lutsiv, a major in the 95th Airborne Assault Brigade.

The border raid that became an occupation

Army chief Oleksandr Syrskyi has said that Ukraine launched the operation because officials thought Russia was about to launch a new attack on northeast Ukraine.

It began on Aug. 5 with an order to leave Ukraine's Sumy region for what they thought would be a nine-day raid to stun the enemy. It became an occupation that Ukrainians welcomed as their smaller country gained leverage and embarrassed Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Gathering his men, one company commander told them: "We're making history; the whole world will know about us because this hasn't been done since World War II.

Privately, he was less certain.

"It seemed crazy," he said. "I didn't understand why."

Shocked by the success achieved largely because the Russians were caught by surprise, the Ukrainians were ordered to advance beyond the original mission to the town of Korenevo, 25 kilometers (16 miles) into Russia. That was one of the first places where Russian troops counterattacked.

By early November the Russians began regaining territory rapidly. Once in awe of what they accomplished, troops' opinions are now shifting as they come to terms with losses. The company commander said half of his troops were dead or wounded.

Some front-line commanders said conditions are tough, morale is low and troops are questioning command decisions, even the very purpose of occupying Kursk.

Another commander said that some orders his men have received don't reflect reality because of delays in communication. Delays occur especially when territory is lost to Russian troops, he said.

"They don't understand where our side is, where the enemy is, what's under our control, and what isn't," he said. "They don't understand the operational situation, we so act at our own discretion."

One platoon commander said higher-ups have repeatedly turned down his requests to change his unit's defensive position because he knows his men can't hold the line.

"Those people who stand until the end are ending up MIA," he said. He said he also knows of at least 20 Ukrainian soldiers whose bodies had been abandoned over the last four months because the battles were too intense to evacuate them without more casualties.

No option to retreat as Russia doubles down

Ukrainian soldiers said they were not prepared for the aggressive Russian response in Kursk, and cannot counterattack or pull back.

"There's no other option. We'll fight here because if we just pull back to our borders, they won't stop; they'll keep advancing," said one drone unit commander.

Ukraine's General Staff told The Associated Press in a written response to questions that Ukrainian combat units are inflicting losses to Russian personnel and military equipment on a daily basis, and are provided with "everything necessary" to carry out combat duties.

"Troops are managed in accordance to situational awareness and operational information, taking into the account the operational situation in areas where tasks are performed," the response said.

American longer-range weapons have slowed the Russian advance and North Korean soldiers who joined the fighting last month are easy targets for drones and artillery because they lack combat discipline and often move in large groups in the open, Ukrainian troops said.

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On Monday, Zelenskyy said 3,000 North Korean soldiers had been killed and wounded. But they appear to be learning from their mistakes, soldiers added, by becoming more adept at camouflaging near forested lines.

One clash took place last week near Vorontsovo tract, a forested area between the settlements of Kremenne and Vorontsovo.

Until last week, the area was under Ukraine's control. This week part of it has been lost to Russian forces and Ukrainian troops fear they will reach a crucial logistics route.

Eyeing frontline losses in the eastern region known as the Donbas — where Russia is closing on a crucial supply hub — some soldiers are more vocal about whether Kursk has been worth it.

"All the military can think about now is that Donbas has simply been sold," the platoon commander said. "At what price?"

Olivia Hussey, star of the 1968 film 'Romeo and Juliet,' dies at 73

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Olivia Hussey, the actor who starred as a teenage Juliet in the 1968 film "Romeo and Juliet," has died, her family said on social media Saturday. She was 73.

Hussey died on Friday, "peacefully at home surrounded by her loved ones," a statement posted to her Instagram account said.

Hussey was 15 when director Franco Zeffirelli cast her in his adaptation of the William Shakespeare tragedy after spotting her onstage in the play "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie," which also starred Vanessa Redgrave.

"Romeo and Juliet" won two Oscars and Hussey won a Golden Globe for best new actress for her part as Juliet, opposite British actor Leonard Whiting, who was 16 at the time.

Decades later Hussey and Whiting brought a lawsuit against Paramount Pictures alleging sexual abuse, sexual harassment and fraud over nude scenes in the film.

They alleged that they were initially told they would wear flesh-colored undergarments in a bedroom scene, but on the day of the shoot Zeffirelli told the pair they would wear only body makeup and that the camera would be positioned in a way that would not show nudity. They alleged they were filmed in the nude without their knowledge.

The case was dismissed by a Los Angeles County judge in 2023, who found their depiction could not be considered child pornography and the pair filed their claim too late.

Whiting was among those paying tribute to Hussey on Saturday. "Rest now my beautiful Juliet no injustices can hurt you now. And the world will remember your beauty inside and out forever," he wrote.

Hussey was born on April 17, 1951, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and moved to London as a child. She studied at the Italia Conti Academy drama school.

She also starred as Mary, the mother of Jesus, in the 1977 television series "Jesus of Nazareth," as well as the 1978 adaptation of Agatha Christie's "Death on the Nile" and horror movies "Black Christmas" and "Psycho IV: The Beginning."

She is survived by her husband, David Glen Easley, her three children and a grandson.

Sweden embarks on a sober search for more cemetery space in case of war

By MIMMI MONTGOMERY Associated Press

GOTHENBURG, Sweden (AP) —

Burial associations in Sweden are looking to acquire enough land for something they hope they'll never have to do: bury thousands of people in the event of war.

The search follows recommendations from the Church of Sweden's national secretariat, which reflect crisis preparedness guidelines from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) and the Swedish Armed

Forces.

The preparedness guidelines have been put in a new light by Sweden's decision to join NATO and tensions with Russia in the Baltic Sea region.

According to the Church of Sweden provisions, supported by legal paragraphs in Sweden's Burial Act, burial associations are responsible for ensuring the availability of enough land to bury roughly 5 percent of the population within a parish, if needed.

The Goteborg Burial Association, which operates in Sweden's second-largest city, is currently trying to navigate the challenge of acquiring at least 10 acres (40,470 square meters) of land to ensure it can handle urgent casket burials for some 30,000 dead in case of war. That is in addition to another 15 acres (60,700 square meters) of land needed for building graveyards for regular use in Goteborg.

"The (recommendations) mean that we need more land for burial grounds and this is a phenomenon in the big cities, and a problem in the big cities, where land resources are scarce to begin with and not always sufficient to meet burial ground needs even in times of calm and peace," said Katarina Evenseth, senior advisor at the Goteborg Burial Association.

Together with the local municipality, which has a monopoly in making decisions about land usage in Goteborg, the burial association has identified a vast area appropriate for building a large-scale cemetery for the intended purpose.

But a lengthy approval and building process means it could take approximately 10 years to complete, posing further challenges in uncertain times.

Meanwhile, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) continues to stress the importance of crisis preparedness and highlights the efforts of the Church of Sweden.

"Already back in 2015 the Government assigned various authorities to once again start engaging in civil defense planning, and many organizations have started planning, with the Church of Sweden being at the forefront of that planning," said Jan-Olof Olsson, Critical Infrastructure Protection (CIP) expert at MSB.

"Unfortunately it is the case that we are reminded to a greater degree that war could happen and that we simply need to be prepared for that," Olsson said.

Sweden pursued a policy of neutrality from the early 19th Century, including during World War II.

But public opinion shifted sharply in 2022 after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, leading to Sweden and Finland applying to join the transatlantic alliance out of concern about the threat from their newly aggressive Russian neighbor across the Baltic Sea.

Sweden and Finland sent out updated civil preparedness guides in November with instructions on how to survive in war. The guides are similar to those in Denmark and Norway, though they don't mention Russia by name.

Drought, fires and deforestation battered Amazon rainforest in 2024

By STEVEN GRATTAN Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — 2024 was a brutal year for the Amazon rainforest, with rampant wildfires and extreme drought ravaging large parts of a biome that's a critical counterweight to climate change.

A warming climate fed drought that in turn fed the worst year for fires since 2005. And those fires contributed to deforestation, with authorities suspecting some fires were set to more easily clear land to run cattle.

The Amazon is twice the size of India and sprawls across eight countries and one territory, storing vast amounts of carbon dioxide that would otherwise warm the planet. It has about 20% of the world's fresh water and astounding biodiversity, including 16,000 known tree species. But governments have historically viewed it as an area to be exploited, with little regard for sustainability or the rights of its Indigenous peoples, and experts say exploitation by individuals and organized crime is rising at alarming rates.

"The fires and drought experienced in 2024 across the Amazon rainforest could be ominous indicators that we are reaching the long-feared ecological tipping point," said Andrew Miller, advocacy director at

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Amazon Watch, an organization that works to protect the rainforest. "Humanity's window of opportunity to reverse this trend is shrinking, but still open."

There were some bright spots. The level of Amazonian forest loss fell in both Brazil and Colombia. And nations gathered for the annual United Nations conference on biodiversity agreed to give Indigenous peoples more say in nature conservation decisions.

"If the Amazon rainforest is to avoid the tipping point, Indigenous people will have been a determinant factor," Miller said.

Wildfires and extreme drought

Forest loss in Brazil's Amazon — home to the largest swath of this rainforest — dropped 30.6% compared to the previous year, the lowest level of destruction in nine years. The improvement under leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva contrasted with deforestation that hit a 15-year high under Lula's predecessor, far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro, who prioritized agribusiness expansion over forest protection and weakened environmental agencies.

In July, Colombia reported historic lows in deforestation in 2023, driven by a drop in environmental destruction. The country's environment minister Susana Muhamad warned that 2024's figures may not be as promising as a significant rise in deforestation had already been recorded by July due to dry weather caused by El Niño, a weather phenomenon that warms the central Pacific. Illegal economies continue to drive deforestation in the Andean nation.

"It's impossible to overlook the threat posed by organized crime and the economies they control to Amazon conservation," said Bram Ebus, a consultant for Crisis Group in Latin America. "Illegal gold mining is expanding rapidly, driven by soaring global prices, and the revenues of illicit economies often surpass state budgets allocated to combat them."

In Brazil, large swaths of the rainforest were draped in smoke in August from fires raging across the Amazon, Cerrado savannah, Pantanal wetland and the state of Sao Paulo. Fires are traditionally used for deforestation and for managing pastures, and those man-made blazes were largely responsible for igniting the wildfires.

For a second year, the Amazon River fell to desperate lows, leading some countries to declare a state of emergency and distribute food and water to struggling residents. The situation was most critical in Brazil, where one of the Amazon River's main tributaries dropped to its lowest level ever recorded.

Cesar Ipenza, an environmental lawyer who lives in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, said he believes people are becoming increasingly aware of the Amazon's fundamental role "for the survival of society as a whole." But, like Miller, he worries about a "point of no return of Amazon destruction."

It was the worst year for Amazon fires since 2005, according to nonprofit Rainforest Foundation US. Between January and October, an area larger than the state of Iowa — 37.42 million acres, or about 15.1 million hectares of Brazil's Amazon — burned. Bolivia had a record number of fires in the first ten months of the year.

"Forest fires have become a constant, especially in the summer months and require particular attention from the authorities who don't know how to deal with or respond to them," Ipenza said.

Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Guyana also saw a surge in fires this year.

Indigenous voices and rights made headway in 2024

The United Nations conference on biodiversity — this year known as COP16 — was hosted by Colombia. The meetings put the Amazon in the spotlight and a historic agreement was made to give Indigenous groups more of a voice on nature conservation decisions, a development that builds on a growing movement to recognize Indigenous people's role in protecting land and combating climate change.

Both Ebus and Miller saw promise in the appointment of Martin von Hildebrand as the new secretary general for the Amazon Treaty Cooperation Organization, announced during COP16.

"As an expert on Amazon communities, he will need to align governments for joint conservation efforts. If the political will is there, international backers will step forward to finance new strategies to protect the world's largest tropical rainforest," Ebus said.

Ebus said Amazon countries need to cooperate more, whether in law enforcement, deploying joint emergency teams to combat forest fires, or providing health care in remote Amazon borderlands. But they need help from the wider world, he said.

"The well-being of the Amazon is a shared global responsibility, as consumer demand worldwide fuels the trade in commodities that finance violence and environmental destruction," he said.

Next year marks a critical moment for the Amazon, as Belém do Pará in northern Brazil hosts the first United Nations COP in the region that will focus on climate.

"Leaders from Amazon countries have a chance to showcase strategies and demand tangible support," Ebus said.

Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who instituted economic reforms, cremated in New Delhi

By AIJAZ HUSSAIN Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Manmohan Singh, the former Indian prime minister widely regarded as the architect of the country's economic reform program, was cremated after a state funeral on Saturday as politicians and the public mourned his death.

The veteran leader, who was also credited for a landmark nuclear deal with the United States, died late Thursday at age 92.

Singh's body was taken Saturday morning to the headquarters of his Congress party in New Delhi, where party leaders and activists paid tributes to him and chanted "Manmohan Singh lives forever."

Abhishek Bishnoi, a party leader, said Singh's death was big loss for the country. "He used to speak little, but his talent and his actions spoke louder than his words," he said.

Later, Singh's body was transported to a crematorium ground for his last rites as soldiers beat drums.

Government officials, politicians and family members paid their last respects to Singh, whose casket was adorned with flowers and wrapped in the Indian flag. Security personnel honored him with a ceremonial gun salute.

Indian President Draupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who called Singh one of the country's "most distinguished leaders," and several Cabinet ministers participated in the funeral ceremony.

Singh's body was then transferred to a pyre and cremated as religious hymns played.

Authorities declared a seven-day mourning period and canceled all cultural and entertainment events during that time. Government buildings across India are flying the national flag at half-staff.

A mild-mannered technocrat, Singh was prime minister for 10 years and leader of the Congress party in Parliament's upper house, earning a reputation as a man of great personal integrity. He was chosen to be prime minister in 2004 by Sonia Gandhi, the widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

Singh was reelected in 2009, but his second term was clouded by financial scandals and corruption charges over the organization of the 2010 Commonwealth Games. This led to the Congress party's crushing defeat in 2014 national elections by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

Singh adopted a low profile after relinquishing the post of prime minister.

As finance minister, Singh in 1991 instituted reforms that moved India away from a socialist-patterned economy and toward a capitalist model in the face of a huge balance of payments deficit, skirting a potential economic crisis.

Singh was the first Sikh to hold the country's top post and made a public apology in Parliament for the 1984 Sikh Massacre in which some 3,000 Sikhs were killed after then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards.

In a move hailed as one of his biggest achievements apart from economic reforms, Singh ended India's nuclear isolation by signing a deal with the U.S. that gave India access to American nuclear technology.

But the deal hurt his coalition government, with Communist allies withdrawing their support and criticism of the agreement growing within India in 2008 when it was finalized.

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U.S. President Joe Biden in a condolence statement called Singh a true statesman and a dedicated public servant who “charted pathbreaking progress that will continue to strengthen our nations — and the world — for generations to come.”

“The unprecedented level of cooperation between the United States and India today would not have been possible without the prime minister’s strategic vision and political courage,” Biden said.

Today in History: December 29, the Wounded Knee Massacre

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Sunday, Dec. 29, the 364th day of 2024. There are two days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 29, 1890, the Wounded Knee massacre took place in South Dakota as more than 250 Lakota people were killed by U.S. troops sent to disarm them.

Also on this date:

In 1170, Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was slain in Canterbury Cathedral by knights loyal to King Henry II.

In 1940, during World War II, Germany dropped incendiary bombs on London, setting off what came to be known as “The Second Great Fire of London.”

In 1978, during the Gator Bowl, Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes punched Clemson player Charlie Bauman, who had intercepted an Ohio State pass. (Hayes was fired the next day.)

In 1989, dissident and playwright Vaclav Havel (VAHTS’-lahv HAH’-vel) assumed the presidency of Czechoslovakia.

In 2021, British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell was convicted in New York of helping lure teenage girls to be sexually abused by the late Jeffrey Epstein; the verdict capped a monthlong trial featuring accounts of the sexual exploitation of girls as young as 14. (Maxwell would be sentenced to 20 years in prison.)

Today’s Birthdays: Actor Jon Voight is 86. Singer Marianne Faithfull is 78. Actor Ted Danson is 77. Actor Patricia Clarkson is 65. Filmmaker Lilly Wachowski is 57. Actor Jennifer Ehle is 55. Actor Jude Law is 52. Actor Mekhi Phifer (mih-KY’ FY’-fuhr) is 50. Actor Diego Luna is 45. Actor Jane Levy is 35.