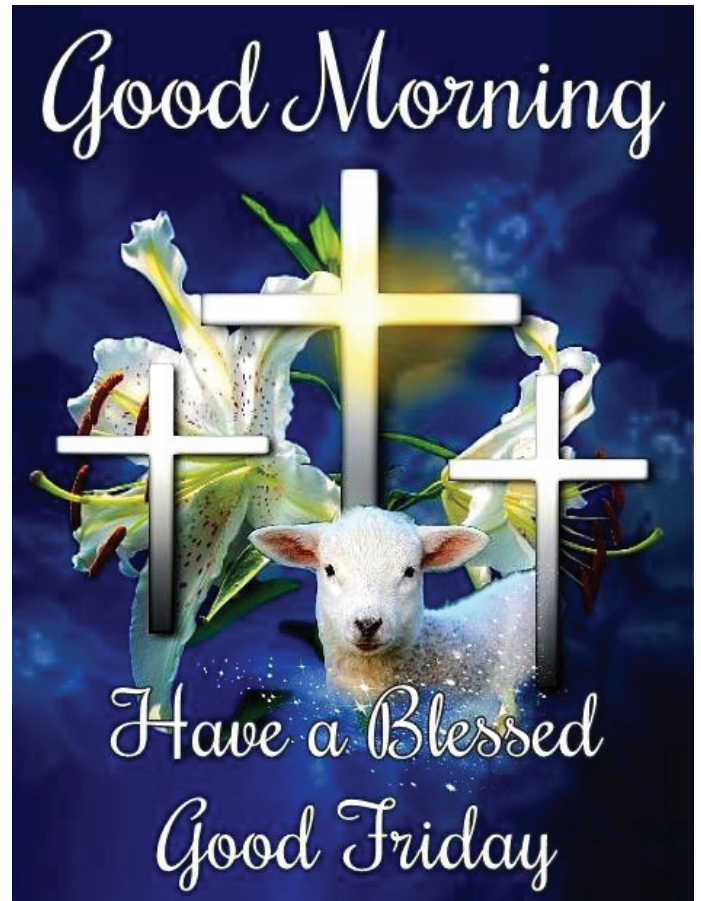


# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 1 of 82

[1- Upcoming Events](#)  
[2- 1440 News Headlines](#)  
[4- Newsweek Bulletin](#)  
[5- Spring Cleanup Ad](#)  
[5- Toby Erickson Celebration](#)  
[6- SD News Watch: Toby Doeden makes the political establishment nervous. So what's his next move?](#)  
[14- Groton Post #39 Legion Officers sworn into office](#)  
[15- Scooter for Sale](#)  
[16- Tracy, Tietz are double winners at Milbank](#)  
[17- Groton Area April Students of the Month](#)  
[18- Tina's Baskets](#)  
[20- SD SearchLight: Thune touches on Medicaid, town halls and tariffs during Watertown Rotary Club visit](#)  
[22- SD SearchLight: Millions spent to keep manure out of Big Sioux River paying off, speaker says](#)  
[24- SD SearchLight: Former South Dakota GOP director, now ICE deputy director, helped oversee Louisiana homeless sweeps](#)  
[27- SD SearchLight: Appeals court hears arguments on Trump restricting AP from White House spaces](#)  
[29- SD SearchLight: U.S. Supreme Court to hear case on Trump's birthright citizenship order](#)  
[30- SD SearchLight: Federal appeals court temporarily freezes multibillion-dollar Biden climate fund](#)  
[31- SD SearchLight: Federal education cuts leave states, teachers in limbo](#)  
[35- Weather Pages](#)  
[39- Daily Devotional](#)  
[40- Subscription Form](#)  
[41- Lottery Numbers](#)  
[42- Upcoming Groton Events](#)  
[43- News from the Associated Press](#)

**The Groton Transit Bus will be going to Madison on Friday, April 18, and Sunday, April 27 for baseball games. For more information contact the Transit at 605-397-8661.**



## Friday, April 18

GOOD FRIDAY

Groton C&MA: Service, 7 p.m.

NO SCHOOL - Easter Break

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 7 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Good Friday Service at St. John's, 7 p.m.

United Methodist: Good Friday service at Britton, 6 p.m.

## Saturday, April 19

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

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# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 2 of 82

# 1440

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

## Shooting at Florida State

At least two people were killed and six others wounded at Florida State University's Tallahassee campus yesterday after a student—identified as the son of a sheriff's deputy—opened fire near the student union. The two people killed in the attack were not students. Police are still investigating the shooter's motive.

Officials identified the suspect as 20-year-old Phoenix Ikner, a member of the sheriff's office's youth advisory council, whose mother is a Leon County sheriff's deputy. He was apprehended after being shot by law enforcement and is hospitalized with non-life-threatening injuries as of this writing. The suspect was carrying a shotgun and a handgun, the latter of which was purchased by his mother for personal use. University officials have canceled all classes and campus activities through the weekend.

The shooting is the second to occur at FSU since 2014, when a 31-year-old man shot and wounded three people—two students and a library employee—at a university library. He was later shot and killed by police.

## Google's Monopoly Ruling

A federal judge yesterday ruled Google violated antitrust laws by illegally dominating online advertising markets with its technology. The decision paves the way for US prosecutors to seek a breakup of the \$1.8T company's ad-tech business.

The court found Google unlawfully monopolized two parts of the online advertising market: publisher tools and the software connecting those publishers to advertisers. Google did so by forcing publishers to use both products together, making it difficult for rivals to compete. A second hearing will determine what Google must do to restore competition. The ruling comes after a judge in a separate case in August said Google illegally dominated online search and text advertising. The remedy in this case still needs to be determined, though the government wants Google to divest its Chrome web browser.

In related news, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg and former Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg testified this week in an antitrust trial on whether the Facebook owner monopolized personal social networking services by buying Instagram and WhatsApp in 2012 and 2014.

## Daily Weight Loss Pill

Pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly announced yesterday that the pill form of its popular weight-loss and diabetes injectables proved effective and safe in a clinical trial, pushing the company's shares up 14%. The industry has faced a surge in demand amid the popularity of drugs like Zepbound and Mounjaro and is seeking cheaper, easier-to-use alternatives to the weekly shot versions, which cost roughly \$1,300 a month without insurance.

Glucagon-like peptide-1 agonists mimic a gut hormone to activate insulin production and suppress appetite. Clinical trials and customer testimony have repeatedly indicated their efficacy, with the average user seeing weight loss of at least 10% (in addition to a slew of secondary benefits).

Eli Lilly's daily pill, known as orforglipron, resulted in average weight loss of nearly 8% over 40 weeks in hundreds of Type 2 diabetes patients, compared to a placebo decrease of 1.7%. Roughly 65% of patients also saw blood sugar levels reach a normal level. Orlorglipron has no food and water restrictions, unlike Rybelsus from Novo Nordisk (the maker of Ozempic and Wegovy), which requires fasting.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 3 of 82

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

NBA playoffs kick off in earnest tomorrow as the Play-In Tournament wraps tonight; see complete post-season bracket and schedule.

"Clueless" sequel TV series in development at Peacock with original star Alicia Silverstone reprising her starring role.

ESPN analyst Lee Corso to retire from "College GameDay" after Week 1 of the 2025 college football season after nearly 40 years leading the show. NHL Stanley Cup playoffs begin tomorrow.

## Science & Technology

Astronomers detect large amounts of dimethyl sulfide and dimethyl disulfide on K2-18b, a planet 124 light-years away, using the James Webb telescope; the molecules occur on Earth solely through biological activity, primarily marine phytoplankton.

Scientists confirm existence of first-ever "lone black hole" 5,000 light-years away; unlike all other identified black holes, this one does not have a noticeable star orbiting it.

Analysis of tree rings reveals three years of drought contributed to the Barbarian Conspiracy over 1,650 years ago, when Roman Britain was temporarily invaded on three fronts before Rome restored order.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close mixed (S&P 500 +0.1%, Dow -1.3%, Nasdaq -0.1%), with the Dow dragged down by UnitedHealth Group (-22%).

UnitedHealth shares sink in largest daily drop since 1998 after the insurance giant misses earnings estimates and slashes its 2025 earnings outlook.

European Central Bank cuts interest rates by 25 basis points, bringing key rate to 2.25%; bank warns of "deteriorated" growth outlook amid trade tensions.

President Donald Trump calls for termination of Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell over lack of recent interest rate cuts.

Chinese fast-fashion brands Shein and Temu to begin raising prices April 25 after the US closes trade loophole that had allowed imported shipments valued at less than \$800 to be exempt from tariffs.

## Politics & World Affairs

US Supreme Court agrees to hear arguments in May on whether to lift nationwide pause on Trump administration's executive order to end practice of birthright citizenship.

Puerto Rico experiences second island-wide blackout in four months, leaving as many as 1.4 million customers without power and 400,000 without water.

Judge delays resentencing hearing for Erik and Lyle Menendez to May 9, nearly 30 years after their conviction for the 1989 murders of their parents; hearing to determine whether their life sentences without parole should be reduced.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 4 of 82

## Newsweek

### The Bulletin

YOUR DAILY BRIEFING OF  
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

#### WORLD IN BRIEF

Democratic Sen. meets Kilmar Abrego Garcia: Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland says he finally met with Kilmar Abrego Garcia during his trip to El Salvador on Thursday.

Houthi warn Saudi Arabia and UAE: A member of Yemen's Ansar Allah, also known as the Houthi movement, has told Newsweek the group is prepared to fend off any enemy operations amid reports that government forces were readying a large-scale offensive.

List of nationwide anti-Trump protests: A series of nationwide protests against Trump and his policies are set to take place on April 19 in all 50 U.S. states, while other protests will take place in upcoming days.

Federal employee alleges stalking, threats: A federal employee who described DOGE's actions within the federal government has said he was stalked and threatened by an unknown person while he was compiling his disclosure on the department.

China accuses U.S. of interfering in its Latin America ties: The United States is increasingly interfering in China's relations with Chile, seeking to restrict Beijing's access to resources in the minerals-rich Latin American nation and pressuring it to curtail space cooperation with China, the Chinese embassy in Chile has said.

Who is FSU shooting suspect Phoenix Ikner? Law enforcement officials have identified 20-year-old Phoenix Ikner—the son of a Leon County deputy sheriff—as the suspect in a shooting at Florida State University on Thursday that left two people dead and at least five injured.

#### China Move Could Send US Mortgages Climbing

The rundown: The deepening of President Donald Trump's trade war with China could push the country—the second-largest holder of U.S. debt—to dump its Treasury holdings, sending mortgage rates skyrocketing for millions of Americans. Learn more.

Why it matters: Just weeks ago, the 10-year yield rose by 50 basis points to 4.49 percent, the biggest weekly jump since 2001. This happens when someone sells bonds—lots of them, in this case. While it is not known precisely where the spike in activity came from, its timing suggests that Beijing may have been behind it. China is the U.S.' second-largest foreign creditor after Japan. About a decade ago, China used to hold even more U.S. debt, at over \$1.3 trillion. As of early 2025, it is estimated to have about \$760 billion. Considering the ongoing trade war with the U.S., it is hard to predict what it could now do with them.

TL/DR: "China seems willing to sell U.S. treasuries, even if it means absorbing capital losses," Olivier Blanchard, the Robert M. Solow Professor of Economics emeritus at MIT, wrote in a post on X on April 10.

What happens now? For China, a sudden sell-off of U.S. Treasuries would also be extremely costly, increasing the value of its currency and, thus, the cost of Chinese exports even further. Meanwhile, the only keys to the exit door from this trade war "are in President Trump's desk drawer," said Steve H. Hanke, who served on President Ronald Reagan's Council of Economic Advisers.



## Toby Erickson Celebration

Celebration of life for Toby Erickson at Olive Grove Golf Course Clubhouse, Groton, SD

Saturday, April 19 from 1-4 PM.

Come prepared to share stories, laugh and reminisce with Toby's family.

## Groton Citywide 2025 Spring Cleanup

### April 28-May 2

**ALL ITEMS NEED TO BE DROPPED OFF  
BEFORE 10AM ON 5/2/25!!**



Bring anything you wish to dispose of to the City Shop-10 E Railroad Ave starting April 28<sup>th</sup>.

Please place items in the appropriate pile.

**RESIDENTIAL ONLY!!**

Keep Metal, Tires, Paint, Batteries & Chemicals Separate

**Pickup can be arranged for  
Monday, April 28<sup>th</sup> to Friday, May 2<sup>nd</sup> ENDING AT 10AM  
by calling City Hall 605-397-8422.**



**SOUTH DAKOTA  
NEWS WATCH**

Inform. Enlighten. Illuminate.

## Toby Doeden makes the political establishment nervous. So what's his next move?

BY STU WHITNEY

South Dakota News Watch

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Toby Doeden was in Sioux Falls on April 9 when the Brown County Republican Party posted on Facebook about its Lincoln Day Dinner the following night, promising a “formal candidate announcement for statewide office.”

Doeden, an Aberdeen businessman whose deep pockets and conservative activism have sparked speculation about a run for South Dakota governor in 2026, was the first person who came to mind for political enthusiasts.

“My phone started blowing up,” said Doeden, who was scheduled to speak at the event. “I called (Brown County GOP chair) Rich Hilgemann and asked him what was going on.”

It turned out that the post referred to a lower office, and even that announcement was called off at the last minute, removing some luster from the Lincoln Day gathering.

Still, tongues were wagging, a telling sign in South Dakota politics.

The fact that a social media message sent ripples of intrigue through the state Republican establishment shows how Doeden’s influence has risen over the past 15 months amid the party’s populist turn.

“He checks a lot of boxes for a candidate,” said Carl Perry, a Republican state senator from Aberdeen who served as assistant majority leader in 2025 and was endorsed by Doeden. “He’s an independent person who has done well financially and has a great family. I don’t know if his ideas will be the ones that the people of South Dakota choose to support, but he’s definitely going to get their attention.”

### Political newcomer means business

Some see Doeden’s ascent as a sign of deteriorating public discourse, given his penchant for inflammatory rhetoric and hardball tactics.



**Toby Doeden, a former football player and shot put standout at Groton High School, shows off the basketball court at his home and office complex in Aberdeen, S.D., on April 10, 2025.** (Photo: Stu

Whitney / South Dakota News Watch)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 7 of 82

Others view his profile as proof that outsiders can make an impact in an arena traditionally controlled by career politicians.

"He seems intent on being a major player," said Jon Schaff, a political science professor at Northern State University in Aberdeen. "That could be as a candidate or behind the scenes raising money and pushing a pugnacious agenda."

Doeden didn't commit either way during a recent interview with News Watch at his newly remodeled house and office on the rural outskirts of Aberdeen.

But he looked like a man who meant business, emboldened by the political tides in South Dakota and national tone-setting of President Donald Trump.

The property has the feel of a command center, with conference rooms and an office suite for Doeden, with plenty of front-facing windows so that he can "see people coming."

The 50-year-old Groton native also showed off a full-sized indoor court for basketball and pickleball, while a Polaris Ranger utility task vehicle sat waiting in the spacious driveway.

"Believe it not, we do have recreational activity around here," said Doeden, with a self-deprecating nod to his hulking physique, an extension of his days as a football player and shot put standout in high school.

## 'Mad and angry is not a public policy'

There is a Trumpian aspect to Doeden's methods.

He made waves in the business world before coming to politics as an outsider, latching onto a populist wave after "liberal nonsense," as he calls it, "started leaking into South Dakota."

His politics are personality-driven, not policy-focused, though he talks of lower property taxes, limited government and parental choice for schools.

He uses new media to his advantage, bypassing traditional outlets with paid social media posts, video snippets and a podcast called "Unfiltered," in which he rails against the establishment with his newfound interest in public affairs.

"Up until two years ago," Doeden told News Watch, "I was literally the least political person that you've ever met."

His influence so far has been channeled through the self-funded Dakota First Action political action committee, boosting Republicans viewed as "patriots" or "solid conservatives" and berating "RINOs" (Republicans in Name Only).

The PAC took aim at mainstream Republicans during the 2024 primaries and helped defeat 14 incumbents, with Doeden spending more than \$77,000 on targeted text messaging and mailers for 17 candidates.

Those efforts helped swing legislative leadership to the party's right flank, buoyed by grassroots opposition to carbon pipelines and the state's plan to build a prison in rural Lincoln County.



**Businessman Toby Doeden (right) holds a meeting at his home office on the rural outskirts on Aberdeen, S.D., on April 10, 2025. Doeden is considering a run for statewide political office.** (Photo: Stu Whitney / South Dakota News Watch)



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 8 of 82

"He was looking for candidates who were committed, Christian and conservative, as well as upholding landowners' rights," said Perry, who defeated Katie Washnok, president of Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, in the primary after Doeden dumped more than \$6,000 into the race.

The intraparty attacks, some of them mischaracterizing legislative votes or positions, rankled party traditionalists. Others noted the irony of Doeden calling people RINOs when his first vote in a Republican primary came in 2024.

"He's a very mad and angry person," said Lee Schoenbeck, a longtime GOP state senator who retired from office last year. "Mad and angry is not a public policy platform. It doesn't educate our children, create jobs or make our communities safer. He will need to set forth a policy platform that is more than just being mad and angry."



**Toby Doeden speaks to attendees at the Brown County Republican Party Lincoln Day Dinner at Engels Event Center in downtown Aberdeen, S.D., on April 10, 2025.** (Photo: Stu Whitney

/ South Dakota News Watch)

## Different kind of change agent

Doeden has been open about his interest in running for statewide office in 2026 as part of a "conservative revolution" in South Dakota, if past misdeeds and establishment resistance don't impede his path.

He flirted briefly with a U.S. House run in 2024 before reversing course and forming Dakota First Action, using resources from his car dealerships and real estate holdings, a portfolio built without generational wealth or a college degree.

The Aberdeen Chrysler owner has ruffled feathers with frequent takedowns of Republican standard-bearers, saying that U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson "acts like a liberal, talks like a liberal and, worst of all, votes like a liberal."

A campaign spokesperson for Johnson told News Watch that the congressman "has worked hard during President Trump's first 100 days to advance the Republican agenda of securing the border, getting tough on China and keeping men out of women's sports. South Dakota knows he's a conservative who gets things done. Toby peddles fear and anger. Luckily, there's a limited market for that in our state."

In speaking with News Watch, Doeden criticized the job performance of Gov. Larry Rhoden since taking office in February, citing that as a possible reason for Doeden to enter a high-profile gubernatorial race in the coming months.

Rhoden and Johnson are widely expected to be in that 2026 primary contest, possibly joined by Attorney General Marty Jackley and South Dakota Speaker of the House Jon Hansen, a fellow populist and property rights advocate.

There will also be races for U.S. Senate, with Mike Rounds expected to run for re-election, and U.S. House, a seat currently occupied by Johnson.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 9 of 82

"We're looking ahead to 2026 and trying to figure out where I can be most effective," said Doeden, whose wife, Liz, a former Groton High School classmate, is a close confidant. The couple has two sons and two daughters ranging in ages from 22 to 28.

"My family and I have been having a lot of discussions, and we're still working through that big decision," Doeden added. "I've always been a fighter, and I don't get caught up in what everybody else is going to do."

## **Doeden 'saddened' by Rhoden stances**

Doeden said he would have thrown his support behind Rhoden if the governor had immediately joined the populist faction's opposition to the prison project and the use of eminent domain for carbon pipelines.

Instead, Rhoden initially championed a final funding bill for the prison and was noncommittal about the eminent domain legislation. He had to adjust his stances after hard-right legislative leaders foiled the prison funding plan and pushed through the eminent domain ban, clouding the pipeline vision.

Rhoden was former Gov. Kristi Noem's lieutenant governor and became chief executive after she was confirmed for a Cabinet position in the Trump administration.

"As soon as we heard that (Noem) was going to run Homeland Security, we thought that this could be a reset for our state," said Doeden. "Who Gov. Rhoden surrounds himself with, what he comes out for or against in the first week of his tenure, is going to tell us whether he's an extension of the previous administration or if he's going to stand on his own two feet. And I was very saddened to see who he surrounded himself with. And I was very saddened that he continued to want to build this Ritz-Carlton prison. You know, this isn't what the people of South Dakota want."

In a statement to News Watch, Rhoden said he is "proud of everything we accomplished in the Noem-Rhoden administration to build the freest, most conservative state in the nation," pointing to cutting taxes and regulations, pro-Second Amendment policies and low unemployment.

"I'm committed to defending this record of accomplishments from uninformed criticism," Rhoden added. "President Trump loved those accomplishments so much that he asked Kristi to join his administration."

Some of the backlash to Doeden's most forceful messages is bipartisan.

"There are two kinds of change agents," said South Dakota Democratic Party executive director Dan Ahlers. "A disruptor who is intentional and tries to change the status quo in a positive way, and a disrupter who throws Molotov cocktails and watches things burn to the ground. Toby is the latter."

## **Family circumstances shaped outlook**

Doeden is quick to note that he inherited life lessons, but not wealth, from his parents. As the youngest of four children, he learned through family circumstances the value and necessity of hard work.

His father, Doug, who managed a lumberyard in Groton, was diagnosed in his 30s with a degenerative bone disease that required numerous trips to the Mayo Clinic for surgeries on his neck, hips and knees.



"I don't know that (Laura Loomer) getting involved in South Dakota is as much about being pro-somebody as it is about her being anti-Dusty Johnson."

Matt Hurley, political operative based in Florida

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 10 of 82

"He was disabled and never able to work after that," Doeden said of his father, who died in 2020. "So my mom worked at 3M in Aberdeen and at a nursing home, in addition to teaching piano to 40 or 50 students. A lot of my fighting instinct comes from watching my mother sleep four hours a night for 20 straight years just to put food on the table."

Much of Doeden's time at Groton High School was spent envisioning future business schemes, at the expense of schoolwork. He was a standout shot put and discus thrower and played running back and linebacker on a football team that ended a long losing streak his senior year.

Later, when sons Jackson and Jonathan played for the Tigers, they made sure to point out that they made the Sioux Falls Argus Leader's annual Elite 45 all-star squad, while their father was merely an honorable mention.

## College experience 'an utter waste of time'

In a household where neither parent attended college, higher education was a goal. Doeden's three older siblings had all completed college and started careers by the time Toby graduated from high school in 1993.

Feeling outside pressures, he accepted a football and track scholarship to Minot State University in North Dakota, but his heart wasn't in it.

"I remember unloading my little hatchback car, getting everything moved into my dorm room, and the very night I moved in thinking I should not be here," Doeden said. "My feeling was, 'This is an utter waste of time.'"

He qualified for the national track meet as a freshman but had already transferred to Northern State University in Aberdeen, where he lasted about a semester before proposing to Liz and moving to nearby Groton to put business plans in motion.

"I was going to be a professional house painter, but the problem was that I was terrible at painting," said Doeden. "Then I started selling satellite dishes, and I had a snow removal business with my brother. I also bought a few rental properties and got some cash flow with that."

## Powers of persuasion in car business

A change in circumstances meant shifting priorities, similar to when his father's condition led Toby to move temporarily to the Mayo Clinic.

For Toby and Liz, there were complications in 1996 when their first child, Jackson, was born, creating a bind with medical bills.

Seeking a job with full benefits, Doeden landed at Aberdeen Chrysler, where his powers of persuasion served him well.

"I like connecting with people, so it was easy for me," he said of selling cars. "I worked three summers at 3M because my mother worked there, sitting in a facility with no windows. So just having windows and



"(Tony Doeden) is a very mad and angry person. Mad and angry is not a public policy platform. It doesn't educate our children, create jobs or make our communities safer."

Lee Schoenbeck, a longtime South Dakota GOP state senator who retired from office last year

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 11 of 82

being able to go outside while working was a motivator for me."

He joined Aberdeen Chrysler as a sales consultant in 1997 and worked his way up to sales manager and became general manager in 2011.

Soon after that, Doeden began the process of buying the company and completed the acquisition in 2020. He expanded his network last year by acquiring Harr's Redfield Ford in Redfield, about 40 miles south of Aberdeen.

## Rental rate increase called 'insane'

With his wife as business partner, Doeden has sought to expand his companies and community involvement in northeast South Dakota.

The Doeden Investment Group includes rental properties as well as retail establishments ranging from coffee shops to sports bars and fireworks outlets.

"Here's how to measure Toby's success," Hilgemann joked at the Brown County Lincoln Day Dinner. "When he buys up enough of Aberdeen that we get to name the town Aber-Doeden, that's when we know he's successful."

The Doedens started the 4J Foundation in 2020 with a personal donation of \$25,000, naming the philanthropic organization after their four children – Jackson, Josephine, Jennie and Jonathan.

The organization's stated focus is on the "safety and well-being" of children and domestic pets.

At the end of 2023, its most recent available tax filing, the foundation had \$14,257. Its single charitable endeavor that year was a community Thanksgiving meal held at Scotty's Diner in Aberdeen, with a cost of \$4,800.

Doeden's Plaza Rentals company was the subject of public scrutiny in 2022 when Aberdeen tenants took to a local Facebook page with complaints about rental rates being significantly raised.

Ashley Washagesic, a single mother, told Dakota News Now at the time that her rent for a two-bedroom house increased 48% from \$775 to \$1,150 a month after Plaza Rentals took over the property, which she called "insane."

Doeden said at the time that his company "paid fair market value for the house and because of that were forced to adjust the rent to market value."

## Using 'hate' as a political strategy

Doeden also referenced "President Biden and his administration's failed policies" in his response to rising rents, a sign of political instincts stirring.

The COVID-19 pandemic, combined with racial unrest after George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis and Trump's election defeat in 2020, ignited a populist backlash in rural conservative states, a movement that Doeden embraced.

"I saw all this national nonsense going on, and for the first time in my life, I started getting worried," he said. "People were frustrated. Property taxes were skyrocketing. People were making the same amount of money as they were five years ago but keeping much less of it. It was eye-opening for me. I decided to get involved so I could help people who didn't really know how to help themselves."

He entered the statewide political fray in January 2024 by forming an exploratory committee to challenge Johnson in the Republican primary, but the bid ended about a month later.

Some of Doeden's prior posts from X (formerly Twitter) found their way onto political blogs, showing that he called for shooting immigrants in gangs "between the eyes" and referred to Biden as a "bumbling f—tard."

At the time, Doeden insinuated that Johnson's team was responsible for spotlighting the social media posts and refused to apologize for them, though they were deleted.

In his interview with News Watch, Doeden said that assaults on his character are an indication of how Republican traditionalists are worried about losing influence.

"Career establishment politicians fear outsiders more than anything else, because they're unpredictable and they can't be bought," Doeden said.

Schoenbeck countered that browbeating South Dakota Republican officeholders is not a prudent path

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 12 of 82

to gaining a foothold in the party.

"I think it hurts (Doeden) that he has made it clear that he hates – strongly – many of the political figures that we South Dakotans really like and affirm that affection for at the ballot box regularly," said Schoenbeck, a Watertown lawyer.

## **'Nothing of substance to debate'**

One of the main drivers behind the Dakota First Action PAC was a 29-year-old political operative named Matt Hurley, whose Victory Insights firm is based in Naples, Florida.

His wife, Rachael, is listed as the PAC's treasurer on campaign finance reports.

Hurley, who attended the Lincoln Day Dinner in Aberdeen, told News Watch that the idea for the PAC came as Doeden was getting a lot of outside pressure to primary Johnson for the U.S. House seat in 2024.

"We make a good team because Toby's a big visionary guy and I think of myself as an operator," Hurley said. "Finally I said, 'Why don't we start up a political action group to provide cover and support for conservative candidates?'"

After Doeden's initial donation of \$115,000 to his own PAC was flagged for exceeding the \$10,000 limit, his team found a loophole and changed it to a loan, which could be forgiven under state law.

That loophole was closed for future campaigns by a 2025 law spearheaded by Republican state Sen. Michael Rohl, whose measure mandated that loans cannot exceed contribution limits.

Rohl, a small business manager in Aberdeen, was attacked by Doeden during the legislative process as a "RINO" and a "compromised politician." Rohl told News Watch that he has never met Doeden but stands by the provision.

"I don't believe that PACs are supposed to be shells for private checking accounts," said Rohl, who was first elected to office in 2020. "I just try to do my job and create good policy. I assume when people throw out generic, inaccurate attacks, it's usually because they have nothing of substance to debate."

## **Political consultant's rocky past**

Legal questions surrounding Dakota First Action were familiar ground for Hurley, who has been tied to financial malfeasance in Florida and North Carolina and was arrested in 2020 for contempt of court after failing to submit financial disclosures.

He has been the subject of lawsuits involving real estate development and auto racing ownership. The actions led to civil judgments that total at least \$2 million, according to an investigation done by a television station in Fort Myers, Florida.

Records show that owners of the Atrium Executive Center complex in Fort Myers were awarded nearly \$450,000 after they accused Hurley of planning to redevelop the complex but then failing to pay rent.

Hurley later founded H2 Motorsports, a NASCAR Xfinity Series racing team in North Carolina. His ownership involved borrowing \$1.5 million from the family of stock car racer Shane Lee, who was the team's driver in 2019 and sued Hurley for failure to repay the loan.

"We got five or six races into the season before stuff started blowing up," said Lee. "The bills weren't getting paid."

Lee was released from the team in August 2019, a decision Hurley said was based on "performance on and off the track." The H2 Motorsports team didn't race again and was shut down before the start of the 2020 season.

Contacted by News Watch, Lee said his family has reclaimed some of their race equipment based on a North Carolina court judgment but that Hurley "still owes us hundreds of thousands of dollars that we will never see."

In a statement to News Watch, Hurley said: "We believe the ongoing dispute between H2 Motorsports and Shane Lee Racing is a simple matter of a judgment being improperly granted without due process by a court that simply does not have jurisdiction over the case. When and if the opportunity arises to litigate the issue in the proper court, we would welcome the chance to do so."

## **Speaker for PAC event sparks friction**

Hurley was hired in September to serve as campaign manager for Mark Robinson, the North Carolina



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 13 of 82

lieutenant governor at the time whose campaign for governor was in trouble.

Most of Robinson's staff had quit after a CNN investigation alleged that the Republican had left messages on a pornography website calling himself a "black Nazi," that he expressed support for reinstating slavery, and that he called Martin Luther King Jr. "worse than a maggot."

Robinson, who denied the allegations, was booked as keynote speaker of a Dakota First Action Victory Gala in Sioux Falls in early October. Ticketing included a \$20,000 sponsorship that offered an option "to host the keynote speaker at your dinner table."

Robinson ended up sending a video message to be played at the gala due to the aftermath of Hurricane Helene in North Carolina. He was defended by Doeden, who claimed that CNN had no proof of the allegations in the story, though a defamation lawsuit filed by Robinson was later dropped.

"Many of the policies that Robinson championed were things that Dakota First Action agreed with – lower taxes, less government, more freedom," said Hurley. "Dakota First Action doesn't own every single action of every single elected official that it associates itself with."

Robinson lost the gubernatorial election with 40% of the vote and declared a few months later that he would not seek office in 2026, "nor do I have plans to seek elected office in the future."

## **Courting support from Loomer, Trump**

As tension builds about a possible gubernatorial run, Doeden has ramped up his social media presence with paid placements on X, amplifying his message beyond his 1,800 followers.

"If you have 2,000 followers, a post might get 300 impressions," said Doeden. "If you boost it for 10 or 15 bucks, it puts it in front of a few hundred more people. And if it gets in front of the right eight or 10 activists around the state, you might get 40,000 impressions for a very small amount of money. It's almost like how you get a fire started – you've got to put the kindling in and then you get a huge flame."

Doeden's message has also been amplified by Laura Loomer, a far-right political activist and Trump confidant who has 1.6 million followers on X. She held a meeting with Trump at the White House as recently as April 2.

The Florida-based Loomer, who describes herself as "pro white nationalism," has called Hurley "my friend" on X and declared in an April 6 post that Doeden is "shaping up to be a top contender for Governor of South Dakota!"

She has criticized Johnson for "trying to curry favor with Trump by creating legislation to take back the Panama Canal as a way to mask his anti-Trump past."

"I would say that Dusty Johnson is a prime suspect to get 'Loomered' (called out on social media by the activist)," said Hurley. "I don't know that her getting involved in South Dakota is as much about being pro-somebody as it is about her being anti-Dusty Johnson."

As for Trump endorsing a candidate for South Dakota governor, Hurley said that "anyone who tells you they know how to get a Trump endorsement is a liar." But he's not ruling anything out.

"He's a fan of people who show bold, aggressive leadership," Hurley said of the president. "It wouldn't surprise me at some point to see him endorse somebody who fits that profile in this state."

## **Keeping political people on edge**

When Doeden and his family entered the Engels Event Center in downtown Aberdeen for the Brown County Lincoln Day Dinner on April 10, everything looked familiar to him.

Not just the cocktail-hour gathering of South Dakota Republicans, including fellow speakers Jackley and Hansen, but the venue itself, which Doeden purchased a few years back when it was still known as Engel Music Supply.

When he took the stage early in the program, he spoke of his mother, Arlis, who died in 2021, recalling her love for piano and his childhood days spent at the music outlet.

"She didn't have much free time after my father became disabled, but when she did, she would sometimes bring me to this building," Doeden told the attendees. "Anybody that knew my mother knew how much she loved coming here. I remember standing right outside that door, on that sidewalk and her telling me, 'Don't break anything today because I don't have any money to pay for it.'"

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 14 of 82

Doeden paused at this recollection and scanned the room, preferring nostalgia to political platitudes, at least for a few moments.

"I can still see the drum sets in here," he said, walking the stage. "I can see all of the instruments. I can smell Engel Music."

Soon after, recalling his persona, the newly minted politician said that buying the building was "needless to say, the single worst business deal I ever made."

In Toby Doeden's South Dakota, it's important to get people talking or leave them guessing, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

*This story was produced by South Dakota News Watch, an independent, nonprofit organization. Read more stories and donate at [sdnewswatch.org](http://sdnewswatch.org) and sign up for an email every few days to get stories as soon as they're published. Contact Stu Whitney at [stu.whitney@sdnewswatch.org](mailto:stu.whitney@sdnewswatch.org).*



## Groton Post #39 Legion Officers sworn into office

Groton American Legion Post 39 held their annual Post election this past Monday. Sworn in for another year term are L-R Brent Wienk, (Finance Officer), Aaron Grant (Vice Commander), and Bruce Babcock (Commander). Not pictured Ben Smith (Adjutant) and Steve Dresbach (Chaplain).



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 15 of 82



## Scooter for Sale

For sale a Kymco scooter super 8 for sale. In good shape. Asking \$1,000 for it. Contact Tina at 605-397-7285. Cash only



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 16 of 82

## Tracy, Tietz are double winners at Milbank

Keegen Tracy and McKenna Tietz were double winners at the South Dakota National Guard Invitational Track Meet held Thursday in Milbank. Tracy won the 100m and 200m dash events while Tietz won both hurdle events. Laila Roberts won the 200m dash and the girls 4x800m relay team was also a winner.

### Boy's Division

**100 Meters:** 1. Keegen Tracy, 11.26

**200 Meters:** 1. Keegen Tracy, 23.00; 11. Brevin Fliehs, 25.25; 16. Jordan Schwan, 25.53

**800 Meters:** 3. Blake Pauli, 2:17.36; 14. Kason Oswald, 2:43.07

**1600 Meters:** 2. Jayden Schwan, 5:08.22

12. Jace Johnson, 5:40.96

**300m Hurdles - 36":** 6. Tristin McGannon, 51.09

**4x100 Relay:** 3. (Brevin Fliehs, Jordan Schwan, Ethan Kroll, Lincoln Krause), 48.84.

**4x200 Relay:** 3. (Brevin Fliehs, Jordan Schwan, Lincoln Krause, Ethan Kroll), 1:42.53.

**4x800 Relay:** 2. (Jayden Schwan, Jace Johnson, Tristin McGannon, Blake Pauli), 9:09.30.

**Shot Put - 12lb:** 8. Karter Moody, 37' 10.5"

**Discus - 1.6kg:** 8. Karter Moody, 105' 1"

**Javelin - 800g:** 6. Karter Moody, 113' 11"; 11. TC Schuster, 98' 1"

**Long Jump:** 2. Ethan Kroll, 19' 3"; 14. Lincoln Krause, 16' 11.5"; 29. Kason Oswald, 14' 0.75"

### Girl's Division

**200 Meters:** 1. Laila Roberts, 27.60

**400 Meters:** 2. Taryn Traphagen, 1:09.69

**800 Meters:** 2. Ryelle Gilbert, 2:47.20

**1600 Meters:** 3. Ryelle Gilbert, 6:08.00; 4. Ashlynn Warrington, 6:15.63

**100m Hurdles - 33":** 1. McKenna Tietz, 17.59; 5. Ella Kettner, 19.63; 8. Hannah Sandness, 20.08; 9. Talli Wright, 20.18; 10. Emerlee Jones, 20.18; 11. Teagan Hanten, 20.33

**300m Hurdles - 30":** 1. McKenna Tietz, 52.91; 3. Emerlee Jones, 55.89; 9. Talli Wright, 1:00.47; 10. Ella Kettner, 1:01.51; 11. Teagan Hanten, 1:03.57; 14. Hannah Sandness, 1:07.28

**4x100 Relay:** 2. (Laila Roberts, Kella Tracy, McKenna Tietz, MaKenna Krause), 54.82.

**4x200 Relay:** 2. (Laila Roberts, Kella Tracy, McKenna Tietz, MaKenna Krause), 1:56.36.

**4x800 Relay:** 1. (Faith Traphagen, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Ryelle Gilbert), 10:35.65.

**SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800]:** 2. (Laila Roberts, MaKenna Krause, Taryn Traphagen, Faith Traphagen), 4:52.29

**Shot Put - 4kg:** 3. Emma Kutter, 32' 3.25"; 15. Avery Crank, 25' 6.5"; 17. Libby Cole, 25' 4.5"; 31. Aimee Heilman, 21' 7.25"

**Discus - 1kg:** 5. Avery Crank, 87' 9"; 6. Emma Kutter, 77' 5"; 22. Libby Cole, 56' 0"; 33. Aimee Heilman, 32' 7"

**Javelin - 600g:** 3. Emma Kutter 74' 8"; 4. Avery Crank 74' 3"; 12. Elizabeth Fliehs 66' 0"; 16. Libby Cole 63' 8"; 19. Addison Hoffman 57' 0"

**High Jump:** 7. Emerlee Jones J4' 4"

**Long Jump:** 3. MaKenna Krause 15' 1"; 29. Teagan Hanten 12' 3.25"; 33. Addison Hoffman 11' 10.25"; 35. Rylie Rose 11' 5.25"

**Triple Jump:** 11. Emerlee Jones, 28' 8.5"; 16. Teagan Hanten, 25' 6"



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 17 of 82

## *Groton Area April Students of the Month*



**The following have been selected as the Groton's MS/HS April Students of the month.**

**Back Left: Asher Zimmerman (7th), Logan Olson ( 8th), Keegen Tracy (11th), Breven Fliehs (12th)**

**Front Left: Gracie Pearson (9th), Emerlee Jones (10th), Amara El Salahy (6th)**

Groton Area School works to ensure that all levels of academic instruction also include the necessary life skills teaching, practicing, and modeling that encourages essential personal life habits that are universally understood to facilitate helping our students become good human beings and citizens.

It is learning with our heads, hearts, and hands to be caring and civil, to make healthy decisions, to effectively problem solve, to be respectful and responsible, to be good citizens, and to be empathetic and ethical individuals.

Students are selected based on individual student growth in the areas of: positive behavior, citizenship, good attendance, a thirst for knowledge, and high academic standards.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 18 of 82

**Tina's Baskets - for Easter**  
**605-397-7285**

**Cow basket - \$20**

**Rainbow basket - \$25**



Includes - green drink cup, light up football, play dough, dinosaur bubble, bubbles, and 4 filled eggs

Includes- two color books 7 filled eggs, pink drink cup crayons, Reese's candy , egg chalk, playdough, bubbles fan bubbles and a rabbit bubble



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 19 of 82

Pink basket - \$20



Includes a pink bear with hugs in it , bubble machine, bubbles, side chalk bunny book, 6 eggs filled Reese's pieces candy



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Thune touches on Medicaid, town halls and tariffs during Watertown Rotary Club visit

**Dozens outside event protest senator's work as majority leader, telling him 'do your job'**

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - APRIL 17, 2025 7:38 PM**

The scene outside Thursday's Watertown Rotary luncheon turned raucous in the presence of South Dakota's senior U.S. senator.

Not long after the event, staffers urged Republican U.S. Senate Majority Leader John Thune into a black sedan as protesters outside Watertown's Elks Lodge yelled "do your job."

Before he left, though, Thune said he didn't take issue with the people doing the yelling.

"We hear in our office on a fairly regular basis from people across the state on sort of all sides of the issues. Clearly these protesters are very anti-Trump policy, and so they have every right to make their voices heard," Thune said. "We welcome that."

The protesters want Thune to oppose several of the president's efforts, and for him to hold public town halls.

The noon event where Thune took questions was open to Rotary Club members and media, not the general public. Several protesters said they'd reached out to Thune's office through phone or email in recent months without a response.

"Our senator doesn't have the guts to stand up to what Trump is doing," said Kay Solberg, an organizer who said she plans to hold another protest in Watertown this weekend.

It was the second gathering of displeased citizens to greet Thune in as many days. More than 100 people protested outside a Thune event in Rapid City Wednesday.

Thune said he doesn't see how a public town hall "accomplishes anything that we don't accomplish on a daily basis." He maintains that he's "probably one of the most accessible politicians in South Dakota."



**Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., speaks to Watertown Rotary members on April 17, 2025 at the Elks Lodge.** (Makenzie Huber/

South Dakota Searchlight)



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 21 of 82

That's why Thune was behind schedule on Thursday, his staff said. He'd taken two too many questions from Watertown Rotarians, held a second press conference that wasn't scheduled, and stopped to shake hands again and again with Watertown residents who had lingering questions and concerns.

Wednesday marked Thune's third event in the state this week during Congress' April recess, following the Pennington County Republican Women's meeting in Rapid City and an appearance at Northern State University in Aberdeen on Tuesday. He's also spent hours visiting with the public at the state basketball tournament in Aberdeen in March, he said.

"If people have questions, we're available on a regular basis," Thune said.

Thune answered several questions during the Rotary meeting, addressing the uncertainty regarding foreign trade, immigration and cuts to entitlement programs.

## Thune encourages patience on tariffs

Thune has long been a critic of tariffs and supportive of free trade deals, but said South Dakotans should offer grace to Trump and his shifting tariff policy "to see what kind of deals he can strike."

At a town hall earlier this week, Augustana Economics Professor Reynold Nesiba said tariffs risk relationships with other countries. U.S. beef exports to China were halted, the former Democratic state lawmaker said, allowing Australia to fill the gap. The same can happen with China's soybean imports, Nesiba said, shifting from the United States to Brazil.

Trump's intention, Thune said Wednesday, is to negotiate better trade deals and create a "more level playing field," especially regarding China's trade practices. He said he's heard support from agricultural producers in the state on the plan.

America should explore partnerships with other countries in the meantime, Thune said. He supported the Trans-Pacific Partnership during the Obama administration, which would have opened up markets in countries like Japan and South Korea.

"We have a lot of national security interests in the region, and they're allies of ours and we can use that to isolate China," Thune said. "What you don't want is these countries running into China's orbit."

If Trump's trade policies are "used in a way that gets a trilateral deal in place, for example with Japan and South Korea, that would be a win."

## Medicaid's role in budget reconciliation

Republican U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson's plan to pass a budget reconciliation bill by Memorial Day is "certainly aspirational," Thune said.

Since Republicans control the House and Senate, they can unlock the reconciliation process to fast-track major spending legislation and bypass the Senate's 60-vote filibuster role with a simple majority.

Thune expects to iron out differences between budget resolutions from the House and Senate and send the finished product to Trump's desk "hopefully by the middle of summer to create some economic certainty."

Congress needs to "get it done right," Thune said.

"Whatever amount of time that takes, we're going to do the right thing," he said.

Republicans hope to leverage the process to extend and expand expiring tax cuts, increase border security and defense spending and cut federal spending throughout the budget.

Medicaid is on the chopping block, Thune said. The House budget envisions a Medicaid cut of \$880 million over a 10 year period, although the House Energy and Commerce Committee would have to hammer out how to save the money.

Medicaid is a federal-state health insurance program for people with low income. Medicaid spending is projected to cost \$7.4 trillion over the next decade.

Thune proposed Medicaid work requirements rather than cutting the program as a way to "achieve a significant level of savings that would strengthen the program and not harm people who are beneficiaries."

The change would generate more than \$100 billion in savings over a decade, he said.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 22 of 82

South Dakota voters approved a constitutional amendment during the 2024 general election to allow the state to implement Medicaid work requirements if the federal government allows them.

## Thune says he's 'not worried' about legal status of immigrants

Rotarian Don Goldhorn said he appreciated Thune's appearance, but said some responses left him disgruntled.

Goldhorn and his wife sponsored a work visa for a Ukrainian family, he said, helping them adjust to life in the United States during Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine. The two-year work visa will end in September, and Goldman is concerned the family won't receive an extension and be forced to return to their besieged home country.

"If they came here legally into this country," Thune said, "and they're law-abiding citizens here, I'm not worried."

Other Rotarians received similar responses from Thune about the detention of Pro-Palestine protesters because of allegedly antisemitic behavior.

"I'm not satisfied," Goldhorn told South Dakota Searchlight, "and it's nothing personal against Sen. Thune. I went to get some specific answers, and I didn't feel like there were specific answers."

Driving past protesters to enter the building before the luncheon began, though, Goldhorn wondered if a town hall would accomplish what the protesters might hope it would.

Thune could speak directly to all constituents, he said, and they could raise their concerns or dissatisfaction to him. But the Rotarian worries that larger, more public town halls could turn from peaceful to confrontational.

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

## Millions spent to keep manure out of Big Sioux River paying off, speaker says

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - APRIL 17, 2025 7:01 PM

SIOUX FALLS – Keeping cattle waste out of the river that runs through the state's largest city will cost about \$11 million over the next five years, and the city will pay more than half the price.

One of the designers of the water quality program that money pays for, however, told an audience in Sioux Falls that past investments have paid off.

The Big Sioux River is polluted with dissolved soils, agricultural chemicals and livestock waste beyond levels safe for uses like fishing and swimming. City, federal and state money has been used for a little over a decade to pay landowners to leave strips of tallgrass or other vegetation in the land along the banks of a river or a tributary. The root systems in those buffer strips catch and filter out pollutants before they enter the water, and also prevent erosion.

During Thursday's Big Sioux Stewardship Summit, program developer Barry Berg, said his team and partners have enrolled over 100 stream miles into their buffer strip program since its inception.

"We finally reached the century mark with the program," he said during a morning presentation.

The enrolled areas now total more than 4,000 acres, with an additional 250 to 300 slated for enrollment this spring, Berg said.

Under the primary model of the program, livestock are blocked from bank access from April through September. Farmers are allowed to cut the grass for hay after June 15. The idea is to keep cattle out of streams during hot summer months when they're most likely to wade in and defecate, spiking E. coli levels.

Berg said advancing the program is an arduous process that involves enrolling landowners in conservation

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 23 of 82

agreements, coordinating federal and state funding streams, and adapting grazing and haying practices to better protect streambanks and riparian vegetation.

A focal point of the effort is Skunk Creek, which flows about 70 miles from Brant Lake into the Big Sioux River near Sioux Falls. Skunk Creek now contributes over half of the water that flows over the falls at Falls Park and through the city, due to a diversion upstream on the Big Sioux near the airport.



**A grass buffer strip along the Big Sioux River.** (Courtesy of Big Sioux River Project)

Skunk Creek historically carries a lot of E. coli into the river. But today, he said 44% of its banks in the program's footprint and 48% of adjacent pastureland acres have been enrolled. And that's making a big difference, he said. It's possible, he said, for the state's integrated water quality report to take Skunk Creek off its list of impaired water bodies if the program keeps its momentum.

"Back in 2013 and 2014, we had samples on Skunk Creek with 50 to 70% exceeding standards," for permissible E. coli and suspended solids, he said. "Now we're down around 10 to 11% exceeding. If we get down below 10 and hold that for two years in the integrated report, they're gonna say, 'Hey, we're passing. Skunk Creek is no longer impaired.'"

For Skunk Creek, "no longer impaired" would mean its waters would be safe for non-immersion recreational activities like kayaking or canoeing. Because it feeds the Big Sioux, that would move the river's water quality within city limits closer to what advocates want: a swimmable river.

Participating farmers see financial benefits, Berg added. He described working with one landowner to calculate returns on haying the buffer land. The landowner made more through incentive payments and hay than he would have by planting corn or soybeans.

When the last five-year phase of the project wraps up this summer, the water quality investments will have supported 16 watering stations, over 4,000 feet of fencing, 12,000 feet of pipe, and four barns, built with manure-trapping pits beneath them. Additionally, the final phase also saw over 1,000 acres of cover crop planted and 900 more acres enrolled in the buffer program.

The next five years will continue that work, with \$11 million already earmarked. That includes about \$5.8 million from Sioux Falls, \$3.2 million in federal grants and funding, \$1.4 million in local cash and donations, \$465,000 from Dell Rapids, and \$263,000 from the East Dakota Water Development District.

Berg said his long-term goal is to enroll 75% of Skunk Creek's streambanks.

"If we can get there, I believe we'll see it delisted for E. coli," he said. "We're already close."



Travis Entenmann, director of Friends of the Big Sioux River, said the effort is not only about compliance and conservation, but the city's future. A clean river, he said, is one that people can use.

"It's a huge opportunity for us for tourism," he said. "The idea that it could be 90 degrees outside and there's not families recreating in the river; it is kind of sad. And we should want better."

A voluntary, incentive-based approach is how the state primarily tries to tackle the issue of E. Coli contamination in its waters, but he said more could be done.

"The three things that I believe will clean our river are regulation, enforcement of regulation, and land use change," he later said.

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

## Former South Dakota GOP director, now ICE deputy director, helped oversee Louisiana homeless sweeps

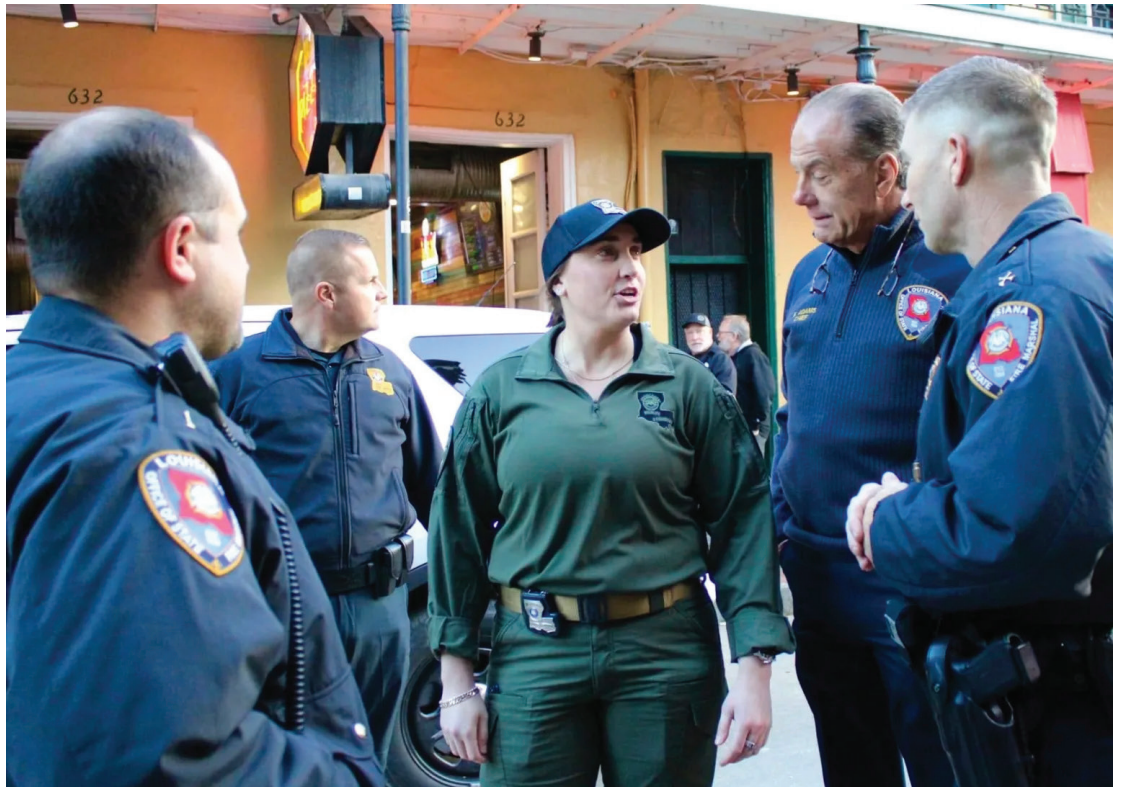
BY: DELANEY NOLAN - APRIL 17, 2025 6:46 PM

This story was originally published by The Appeal.

As U.S. homelessness rates reach record highs, President Donald Trump has pledged to ban street camping, relocate unhoused people to privately-managed "tent cities," and arrest anyone caught violating the new laws.

But while Trump's threats certainly sound draconian, they're not exactly novel. In recent years, several states have organized increasingly harsh homeless sweeps — perhaps most typified by Louisiana, where the governor recently oversaw a possible model for the sort of mass relocation that Trump has promised.

Federal officials seem to be taking note. According to a local official who spoke to The Appeal, in early February, Homeland Security Director Kristi Noem quietly visited a warehouse where Gov. Jeff Landry had relocated nearly 200 homeless people, sometimes under threat of



**President Donald Trump selected Madison Sheahan, center, to work as the deputy director for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.**

(Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries)

warehouse where Gov. Jeff Landry had relocated nearly 200 homeless people, sometimes under threat of

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 25 of 82

arrest. And in March, Trump appointed Madison Sheahan, a state official whose agency enforced Landry's crackdown, to become deputy director for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) did not respond to a request for comment.

Sheahan, who is 28, was appointed secretary of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) by Landry in 2023, though she had no background in conservation or ecology. She previously worked on Noem's campaign for South Dakota governor and was executive director of the Republican Party there, where she worked on banning trans athletes from college sports. Otherwise, her qualifications are questionable: besides issuing rules for sawfish harvesting and letting military veterans hunt bears, Sheahan's most relevant experience over the last year seems to be lending her officers to Landry to round up homeless residents.

Attorneys for the unhoused have now filed a class action suit against the state — including Sheahan's LDWF — to block Landry's crackdown. As the case unfolds in New Orleans' civil district court, Louisiana's situation could serve as a bellwether for how Trump 2.0 will address unsheltered homelessness—and even the detention of migrants.

Jesse Rabinowitz, communications director for the National Homelessness Law Center, called Sheahan's promotion "really concerning." He added that what's happening in New Orleans is "a real-life example of what could happen on a larger scale."

The sweeps by Louisiana state agencies are part of "how conservative electives can punish people living in more progressive parts of the state," warned Rabinowitz. "They did it with migrants, and they've said they're going to do it with homeless folks. And we have to believe them."

Louisiana's crackdown began during singer Taylor Swift's October tour dates in New Orleans. In the days leading up to the concerts, Landry directed Louisiana State Police (LSP) and LDWF officers to "sweep" downtown encampments of hundreds of unhoused people, pushing them all into one designated area a few blocks away. The sweeps drew national attention.

City council members and Mayor LaToya Cantrell condemned Landry's actions. One council member's chief of staff later said in an affidavit that, when she visited the government-run encampment, "one gentleman asked me where he could get a tent," because state officers had thrown his away.

As a result, she said, "he got bitten by rats the night before because he did not have a tent to go inside."

Lawyers representing unhoused people swiftly sued. But the ensuing court battle took a worrying turn in January, when the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled that cities cannot abridge the state's police power. LSP can now conduct sweeps without following city ordinances, meaning they don't have to provide sufficient warning beforehand. That ruling could signal to other red states that courts will let them send state agencies into blue cities, such as Austin or Nashville, and ignore any municipal-level protections in place.

A week after that ruling, LSP and DWF officers again descended on downtown New Orleans' encampments. This time, they sent more than 100 people to a warehouse seven miles away called the "Transition Center." Attorneys for the unhoused demanded another restraining order, but courts denied the request.

"Governor Landry's interest in moving the encampments was to provide warm shelter and a place for the unhoused to be secure from potential harm during the Super Bowl and Mardi Gras," a judge wrote.

The Transition Center sat in a former packaging warehouse alongside New Orleans' industrial canal. While the press was not allowed in, photos shared from within the Center show rows of cots separated by black cloths, and some couches facing a television, in a warehouse with no eye-level windows. Residents reportedly received three meals daily and could leave freely, though neither a bus stop nor sidewalk sits near the site. Access was restricted to those with authorization.

Several service organizations worked in the warehouse. After initial difficulties, some employees say the remaining residents were satisfied with conditions. A medical worker told The Appeal he appreciated seeing patients consistently, and "we were able to get people healthier than when they arrived."

Now that those events have finished, the warehouse has closed.

After the initial October sweeps, a judge ordered LSP and LDWF to "not destroy or dispose of the property of unhoused people without judicial process" and to provide notice of sweeps as set out in New

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 26 of 82

Orleans' municipal ordinances.

But the New Year's Day truck attack that killed 14 people in New Orleans, including a sleeping unhoused person, seems to have changed the calculus. Within hours, Landry issued an executive order giving him emergency powers to "direct and compel the evacuation of all or part of the population, from any stricken or threatened area." The following week, the Louisiana Supreme Court dissolved the preliminary injunction. One justice wrote that, in the wake of the Jan. 1 attack, the sweeps were "about public safety."

Court affidavits show how the case has already emboldened police to criminalize people experiencing homelessness.

According to the lawsuit, 12 LDWF officers and "five or six" LSP troopers approached 32-year-old plaintiff Raymond Scott when the major sweeps began in January. Scott is unhoused and has already lost valuables during sweeps. Last summer, a city worker reached into his tent and took a treasured owl figurine Scott inherited from his great-grandmother, then disposed of it even as Scott "begged them not to take it," according to a court affidavit he later filed.

"You have two choices," a trooper said. "Come willingly, or we cuff you, detain you, and bring you to the Transition Center."

Scott said he didn't want to go.

"You know you can be arrested for being homeless now?" a trooper allegedly replied. Scott then said he wanted to call his lawyer.

Scott's attorneys argue that the US Supreme Court's 2024 ruling in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* does not permit Landry's sweeps, since *Grants Pass* concerned whether arresting people for sleeping outside violates the 8th Amendment's protections against cruel and unusual punishments. In this case, the attorneys allege Louisiana violated unhoused residents' 4th and 14th Amendment rights.

Another resident, Michael Garner, asserts in the suit that seven or eight LSP troopers approached his camp and told him to pack up. When he asked if he could leave, a trooper said he was being detained.

"The troopers told me that I would not be free to leave until I was brought to the Transition Center," Garner wrote. He says he packed everything he owned into a box and got on the bus. When he later tried to fetch his belongings — including his social security card, birth certificate, and a bicycle — "officials told me that they could not find the box."

Last week, attorneys filed a motion to dismiss the suit voluntarily. The legal team declined to comment on that request, as the motion is pending.

Sheahan, who's set to begin her role at ICE in the coming weeks, ran the LDWF when its officers conducted the sweeps. In a March 11 Fraternal Order of Police statement celebrating her promotion, Patrick Yoes, National President of the FOP, celebrated that she'd "established a Special Operations Group within the enforcement division" for events like the Super Bowl. According to a November Facebook post, state police officers trained LDWF's new special-ops team. Sheahan also joined Landry and DHS Secretary Noem for a briefing on Super Bowl security measures when Noem visited in February.

LDWF agents typically enforce hunting, fishing, and boating regulations. An LDWF spokesperson did not answer questions about why the agency took part in homeless sweeps.

Advocates have decried the sweeps and "transition center" as both cruel and ineffective. But at the state level, officials have celebrated their success.

"We think this is absolutely going to be looked at as a success, because we were able to get people out of harm's way just weeks after a terror attack in that same area," a spokesperson for the Louisiana Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness (GOHSEP) told *The Appeal*. The state closed the Transition Center on March 21.

The spokesperson said that, from a peak of 183 people, 108, or about 60 percent, received permanent housing by the time the center closed.

An additional 59 people left on their own, while 15 others moved into a different shelter downtown. The center's final costs could exceed \$17.5 million.

But some housing advocates say the sweeps undermined the city-level housing efforts that have been



ongoing since 2023. Those programs have housed more than 822 people at a much lower cost per person. Critics also say the warehouse sweeps disrupted contact between unhoused people and their case workers and service providers. The National Homelessness Law Center's Rabinowitz stressed that the only real fix is affordable housing.

"There's consensus that housing solves homelessness, and throwing people in jail and forcing homeless people into camps is not the solution," he said. "But the people that are put in charge don't seem to be motivated by helping people. They seem to be motivated by this desire to police and punish people for struggling in a country where a lot of people are struggling to make ends meet."

*The Appeal is a nonprofit newsroom that exposes how the U.S. criminal legal system fails to keep people safe and perpetuates harm.*

## Appeals court hears arguments on Trump restricting AP from White House spaces

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - APRIL 17, 2025 7:09 PM

WASHINGTON — The Associated Press and the Trump administration faced tough questioning in court Thursday as the White House fights to block a lower court order mandating officials stop denying the wire outlet entry to spaces where other journalists are permitted.

A three-judge panel for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia grilled the parties at length on how the First Amendment applies to journalists in the Oval Office and other areas, and whether the president can decide which journalists follow him in the press pool and exclude others based on their viewpoint.

The case, playing out at the district court level as well, tests decades of established press access for the AP in the White House, which was curtailed after President Donald

Trump declared the term "Gulf of America" should be used rather than "Gulf of Mexico."

District Judge Trevor McFadden sided with the AP on April 8 on the grounds that the Trump administration violated the wire service's First Amendment rights when it publicly retaliated against the agency for an editorial decision to continue using "Gulf of Mexico" in its reporting and influential stylebook.



**A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit heard arguments at the E. Barrett Prettyman Federal Courthouse on April 17, 2025, over the White House denying The Associated Press journalists from certain spaces open to other journalists.** (U.S. General Services Administration photo)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 28 of 82

## Oval Office not for 'silent retreat'

Before the appeals court Thursday, Eric D. McArthur, representing the government, argued against McFadden's "unprecedented" preliminary injunction, saying it interferes with the president's "autonomy" in "highly restricted spaces."

Pointing out the AP was not demanding access "when the president wants to concentrate on his writing and his work," Judge Corenlia Pillard said "it's a little confusing to me when you say a place of 'autonomy.'"

"You make the Oval sound like a place of silent retreat," said Pillard, who was appointed to the appeals bench during President Barack Obama's second term.

Pillard also highlighted the expectation of privacy is different for people in "high public office."

"There's already a dozen people in there, so he's agreed to have a press pool," she said during McArthur's roughly 45-minute questioning.

The administration argued in its emergency appeal to block the ruling that Trump will be "irreparably injured" if the higher court doesn't stay the lower court order while it adjudicates the case.

Officials also countered that the First Amendment protects the president's right to choose which journalists enter the Oval Office, Air Force One or Mar-a-Lago based on the content of their coverage.

## Where's the distinction?

Charles Tobin, attorney for the AP, argued that the White House has "brazenly excluded" AP reporters and photographers from opportunities open to other journalists.

McFadden "appropriately and very narrowly tailored" his injunction, Tobin said. The lower judge ruled that, under the First Amendment, once the White House opens doors for all journalists to spaces including the Oval Office and East Room, it cannot then exclude them based on viewpoint.

McFadden explicitly wrote his ruling does not mandate journalists be given access to the president or that the president cannot choose which outlets to grant exclusive interviews.

Judge Neomi Rao said, "the AP concedes he could choose journalists based on viewpoint for exclusive interviews."

"When you're talking about 10 or 12 journalists in the Oval or on his plane or in his home at Mar-a-Lago, what is the distinction?" asked Rao, who was appointed during Trump's first presidency.

Tobin replied that the pool is a system that invites numerous journalists to participate on a rotating basis.

"That's exactly where the distinction lies," he said.

## Private invitations allowable

Judge Gregory Katsas presented other scenarios when the president could invite only "supportive" members of the public and press, for example in the Cabinet room for a policy rollout.

Tobin argued if the event is open to all press members, the president cannot discriminate based on viewpoint.

"Once you have a system of rotation, that's when the viewpoint becomes anathema," Tobin replied.

What if the president "tapped (certain reporters) on the shoulder" and invited only them into the Oval Office, asked Katsas, who was appointed during Trump's first term.

Tobin replied the president could handpick reporters for a private interview in the Oval Office, as long as it wasn't an event open to the wider press pool.

"This seems awfully close to what's happening here," Katsas said.

## Wire position axed

On Wednesday the White House announced a new media policy placing restrictions on all wire services' access to the Oval Office and other spaces. Other wire services include Bloomberg and AFP.

Despite McFadden's court order, the White House on Monday denied entry to an AP reporter and photographer to an Oval Office press conference between Trump and El Salvador President Nayib Bukele.

The AP filed a motion in district court Wednesday requesting McFadden to enforce his preliminary in-



junction.

McFadden has scheduled a hearing for Friday.

The White House began denying the AP entry to the Oval Office, East Room and other places on Feb. 11.

Trump's press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, announced in late February that White House officials would take over pool rotation decisions from the White House Correspondents Association, a member organization that has self-governed journalist rotations and briefing seats placement since the Eisenhower administration.

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

## U.S. Supreme Court to hear case on Trump's birthright citizenship order

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - APRIL 17, 2025 7:04 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Supreme Court announced Thursday it will hear oral arguments next month over President Donald Trump's efforts to restructure birthright citizenship, though the justices won't decide on the merits of the case just yet.

Instead, they will choose whether to leave in place nationwide injunctions from lower courts that so far have blocked the Trump administration from implementing the executive order.

The oral arguments, scheduled for May 15, will likely provide the first indication of whether any of the nine justices are interested in revisiting the Court's interpretation of the 14th Amendment, which was ratified in 1868 following the Civil War.

The amendment states that "all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside."

The Supreme Court ruled in 1898 in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* that the 14th Amendment guarantees any child born in the United States is entitled to U.S. citizenship, even if their parents are not citizens.

Trump disagrees with that ruling and signed an executive order on his first day in office seeking to change which babies born in the United States become citizens. If that order were implemented, babies whose parents were "unlawfully present in the United States" or whose parents' presence "was lawful but temporary" would not be eligible for citizenship.

Several organizations and Democratic attorneys general filed lawsuits seeking to block the executive



**The U.S. Supreme Court is pictured Oct. 9, 2024.** (Photo by Jane Norman/States Newsroom)



order, leading to nationwide injunctions against its implementation.

Last month, the Trump administration asked the Supreme Court to intervene in the lower court's nationwide injunctions, limiting them to the organizations and states that filed suit.

The three cases are Trump v. State of Washington, Trump v. CASA, Inc. and Trump v. State of New Jersey.

## Legislation

Nationwide injunctions by lower court judges have become an issue for Republicans in Congress as well as the Trump administration.

Iowa Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley introduced a bill in Congress that would bar federal district court judges from being able to implement nationwide injunctions.

"We all have to agree to give up the universal injunction as a weapon against policies we disagree with," Grassley said during a hearing earlier this month. "The damage it causes to the judicial system and to our democracy is too great."

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

## Federal appeals court temporarily freezes multibillion-dollar Biden climate fund

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - APRIL 17, 2025 3:04 PM

WASHINGTON — The legal battle over a Biden-era climate program ramped up late Wednesday when an appeals court halted a federal judge's ruling requiring the disbursement of those funds.

The ruling by a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit will keep funds frozen in Citibank accounts while a federal suit over the program is ongoing.

The appeals court order reversed a preliminary injunction that U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan of the District of Columbia issued Tuesday that temporarily barred the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency from "unlawfully suspending or terminating" grant awards.

The appeals panel said it had not had access to Chutkan's opinion explaining her order granting an in-



**Solar panels in Damariscotta, Maine.** (Photo by Evan Houk/ Maine Morning Star)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 31 of 82

junction — which came a day after the order itself — and the trial judge had therefore not met the high bar needed to issue a preliminary injunction. The panel's order "should not be construed in any way as a ruling on the merits," the judges said.

"The purpose of this order is to give the court sufficient opportunity to consider the district court's forthcoming opinion in support of its order granting a preliminary injunction together with" the government's appeal, the judges wrote.

Chutkan issued her opinion the day after granting the preliminary injunction, pointing out that "for weeks, despite repeated inquiries to Citibank and EPA, Plaintiffs received little to no communication from EPA or Citibank regarding their inability to access their funds."

"Overnight, billions of dollars appropriated by Congress were frozen. As a result, nationwide projects were halted, workplans were disrupted, and millions of dollars in approved transactions with committed partners could not be disbursed," she wrote.

On Thursday, the D.C. Circuit panel asked the government to refile its argument responding to Chutkan's opinion by 5 p.m. Eastern on Saturday.

## Fight over funding

Climate United Fund and other organizations sued President Donald Trump's administration and Citibank in March over money frozen in the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.

The \$27 billion initiative, which provides funding to organizations building for energy-efficient projects and other measures to tackle climate change, was authorized by Congress as part of the Inflation Reduction Act that Democrats passed along party lines and President Joe Biden signed into law in 2022.

Chutkan's order blocked the administration from "directly or indirectly impeding" Citibank or causing the bank to "deny, obstruct, delay, or otherwise limit access to funds in accounts established in connection with" the organizations' grants.

The Trump administration quickly challenged that ruling Wednesday in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

The higher court temporarily blocked Chutkan's decision "pending further order."

The appeals court's ruling halts Chutkan's preliminary injunction to the extent that it "enables or requires Citibank to release, disburse, transfer, otherwise move, or allow access to funds."

The higher court also prevented the Trump administration from having to file a status report with the district court within 24 hours of the preliminary injunction's entry that confirmed their compliance, as outlined in Chutkan's ruling.

The appeals court also ordered that "no party take any action, directly or indirectly, with regard to the disputed contracts, grants, awards or funds."

The EPA said in March it would be terminating \$20 billion in grants under the program, and the agency's administrator Lee Zeldin described the climate initiative as a "gold bar" scheme.

Climate United Fund did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday, and the EPA declined to comment.

*Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom's Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.*

## Federal education cuts leave states, teachers in limbo

**Many conservative-led states, including South Dakota, rely heavily on dollars from Washington**

**BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA - APRIL 17, 2025 8:00 AM**

Early this month, the U.S. Department of Education issued an ultimatum to K-12 public schools and state education agencies: Certify that you are not engaging in discrimination under the banner of diversity, equity and inclusion, or risk losing federal funding — including billions in support for low-income students.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 32 of 82

The backlash was immediate. Some states with Democratic governors refused to comply, arguing that the directive lacks legal basis, fails to clearly define what constitutes “illegal DEI practices,” and threatens vital equity-based initiatives in their schools.

After lawsuits from the National Education Association teachers union and the American Civil Liberties Union, the Department of Education agreed to delay enforcement until after April 24.

But states across the country, both liberal- and conservative-led, are worried about losing other aid: the pandemic-era money that in some cases they’ve already spent or committed to spending.

The Department of Education has long played a critical role in distributing federal funds to states for K-12 education, including Title I grants to boost staffing in schools with high percentages of low-income students, and emergency relief like that provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conservative-led states — particularly Mississippi, South Dakota and Arkansas — rely the most heavily on these funds to sustain services in high-need districts.

The 15 states with the highest percentage of their K-12 budget coming from federal funding in fiscal year 2022 — the latest year with data available from the National Center for Education Statistics — voted for Trump in the 2024 presidential election. Similarly, 10 of the 15 states receiving the highest amounts of Title I funding in fiscal year 2024 also voted for Trump.

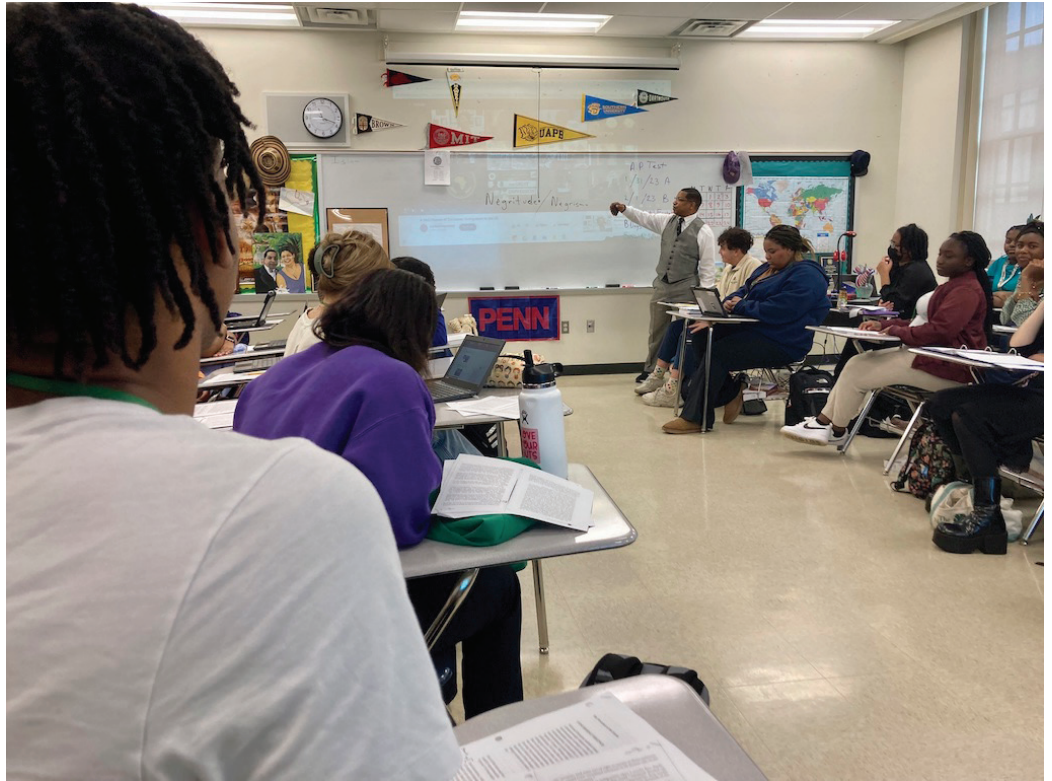
Mississippi and Kentucky have sent letters to the Department of Education expressing concern over halted pandemic aid.

The clash over federal funding comes even as the future of the Department of Education is murky, given President Donald Trump’s pledge to dismantle the department.

## DEI-related cuts

In letters to the Department of Education, state officials and superintendents in Illinois, New York and Wisconsin pushed back against the DEI directive.

New York officials said they would not provide additional certification beyond what the state already has done, asserting that there “are no federal or State laws prohibiting the principles of DEI.” Illinois Superintendent Tony Sanders wrote that he was concerned that the Department of Education was changing the conditions of federal funding without a formal administrative process. Wisconsin Superintendent Jill



**A teacher instructs a group of high school students in Baton Rouge, La. States across the country are worried about losing pandemic aid that in some cases they’ve already spent or committed to spending.** (Stephen Smith/The Associated Press)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 33 of 82

Underly questioned the legality of the order.

New York State Department of Education Counsel and Deputy Commissioner Daniel Morton-Bentley noted that the federal department's current stance on DEI starkly contrasts with its position during Trump's first term, when then-Education Secretary Betsy DeVos supported such efforts.

Colorado and California also confirmed they would not comply with the Department of Education's order. While some states with liberal leaders are gearing up for legal battles and possible revocation of funding, conservative-led states such as Florida have embraced the federal directive as part of a broader push to reshape public education.

In Florida, anti-DEI laws have been in place dating back to 2023. In fact, many school districts and the state education department say they plan to follow the federal department's directives, noting the similar state laws.

## Pandemic aid cancellations

In March, the Department of Education abruptly rescinded previously approved extensions of pandemic-era aid, ending access to funds months ahead of the original March 2026 deadline.

When the Massachusetts governor's office voiced concern over that decision, the federal department's reply on social media was blunt: "COVID is over."

Sixteen mostly Democratic-led states and the District of Columbia filed a federal lawsuit against the Department of Education and Secretary Linda McMahon, challenging the abrupt rescission of previously approved extensions for spending COVID-19 education relief funds.

But backlash against abrupt federal cuts to education has not been limited to blue states.

Mississippi's Department of Education warned the cuts would jeopardize more than \$137 million in already obligated funds, slated for literacy initiatives, mental health services and infrastructure repairs. "The impact of this sudden reversal is detrimental to Mississippi students," state Superintendent Lance Evans wrote in a letter to McMahon.

The letter also outlines the state's repeated — but unsuccessful — efforts to draw down millions in approved funds since February.

Shanderia Minor, a spokesperson for the Mississippi education department, told Stateline the agency is awaiting next steps and direction about the funds and federal directives.

In Kentucky, state Education Commissioner Robbie Fletcher told districts — which stand to lose tens of millions in pandemic aid — that abrupt federal changes leave them "in a difficult position," with schools already having committed funds to teacher training and facility upgrades.

According to Kentucky Department of Education spokesperson Jennifer Ginn, the state has about \$18 million in unspent pandemic aid funds left to distribute to districts. And districts have about \$38 million in unspent funds, for a total \$56 million that could be lost.

Lauren Farrow, a former Florida public school teacher, told Stateline that schools that receive Title I money are already underfunded — and the federal threat only widens the gap.

"Florida is pouring billions into education — but where is it going? Because we're not seeing it in schools, especially not in Title I schools," said Farrow. "I taught five minutes away from a wealthier school, and we didn't even have pencils. Teachers were buying shoes for students. Why is that still happening?"

## Effects in the classroom

Tafshier Cosby, senior director of the Center for Organizing and Partnerships at the National Parents Union, a parents advocacy group, told Stateline that while most families don't fully understand the various school funding systems, they feel the impact of cuts in the classroom.

Cosby said parents are worried about the loss of support services for students with disabilities, Title I impacts, and how debates about DEI may deflect from more urgent needs like literacy and teacher support.

"We've been clear: DEI isn't the federal government's role — it's up to states," she said. "But the confusion is real. And the impact could be devastating."



# Groton Daily Independent

**Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 34 of 82**

Today, as a consultant working with teachers across Florida's Orange County Public Schools — one of the largest districts in the country — Farrow says many educators are fearful and confused about how to support their students under changing DEI laws.

"Teachers are asking, 'Does this mean I can't seat a student with glasses at the front of the room anymore?' There's so much fear around what we're allowed to do now."

"There's no one giving teachers guidance or even basic acknowledgment. We're just left wondering what we're allowed to say or do — and that's dangerous."

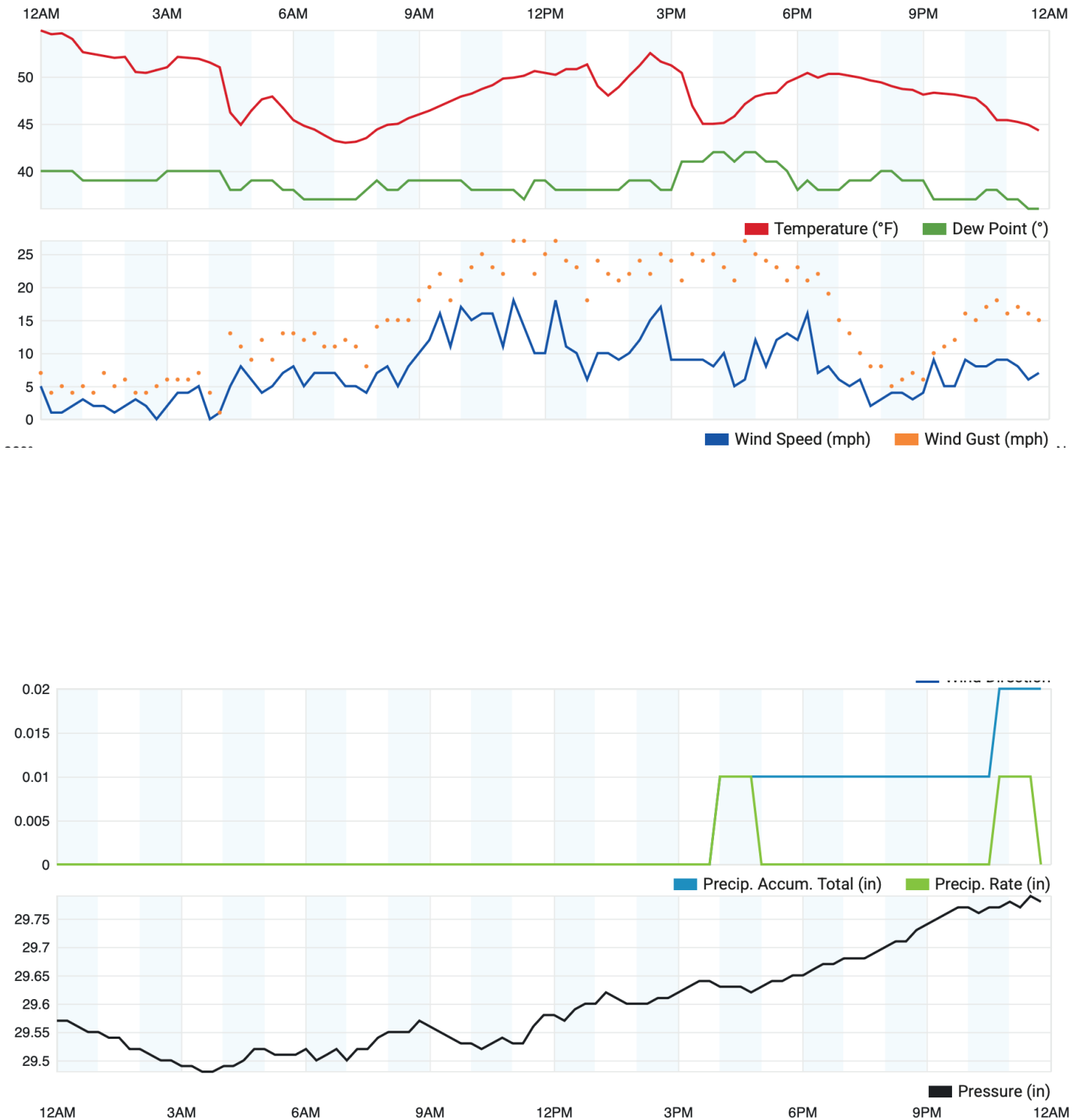
*Amanda Hernández contributed to this report. Stateline reporter Robbie Sequeira can be reached at [rsequeira@stateline.org](mailto:rsequeira@stateline.org).*

*Robbie Sequeira is a staff writer covering housing and social services for Stateline.*

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 35 of 82

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 36 of 82

Today



High: 52 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: 27 °F

Decreasing  
Clouds

Saturday



High: 58 °F

Sunny

Saturday Night



Low: 33 °F

Mostly Clear

Sunday



High: 64 °F

Mostly Sunny



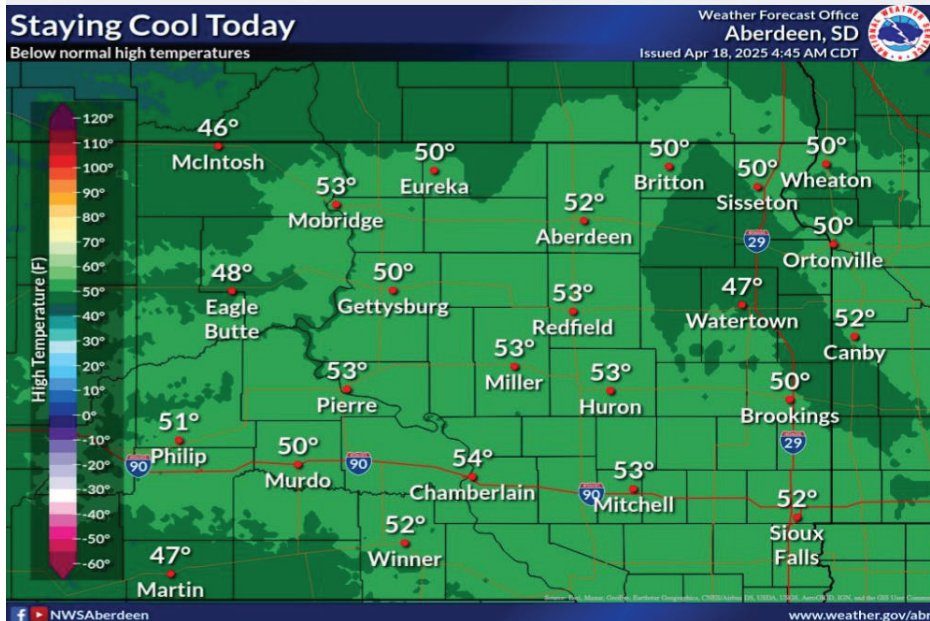
## Today's High Temperature Forecast

April 18, 2025  
5:03 AM

5 to 10 Degrees Below Normal

### Staying Cool Today

Below normal high temperatures



### Warming Temperatures

#### This Weekend/Next Week

- Highs in the 50s/60s (near 70 at times)
- Lows in the 30s/40s

#### A Few Systems but Limited Potential for Moisture...

- Late Monday - Tuesday (generally < 0.25 in.)
- Thursday - Friday (Too far out for details)



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Cooler than normal temperatures will remain in place today, along with breezy north winds. Patches of light rain are still possible this morning over portions of south central and east central South Dakota. Temperatures will be on a warming trend into the weekend, with more widespread 60s developing.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 37 of 82

## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 55 °F at 12:00 AM**

**Low Temp: 43 °F at 7:05 AM**

**Wind: 28 mph at 5:02 PM**

**Precip: : 0.02**

Day length: 13 hours, 45 minutes

## Today's Info

Record High: 89 in 1985

Record Low: 13 in 1953

Average High: 59

Average Low: 32

Average Precip in April.: 0.91

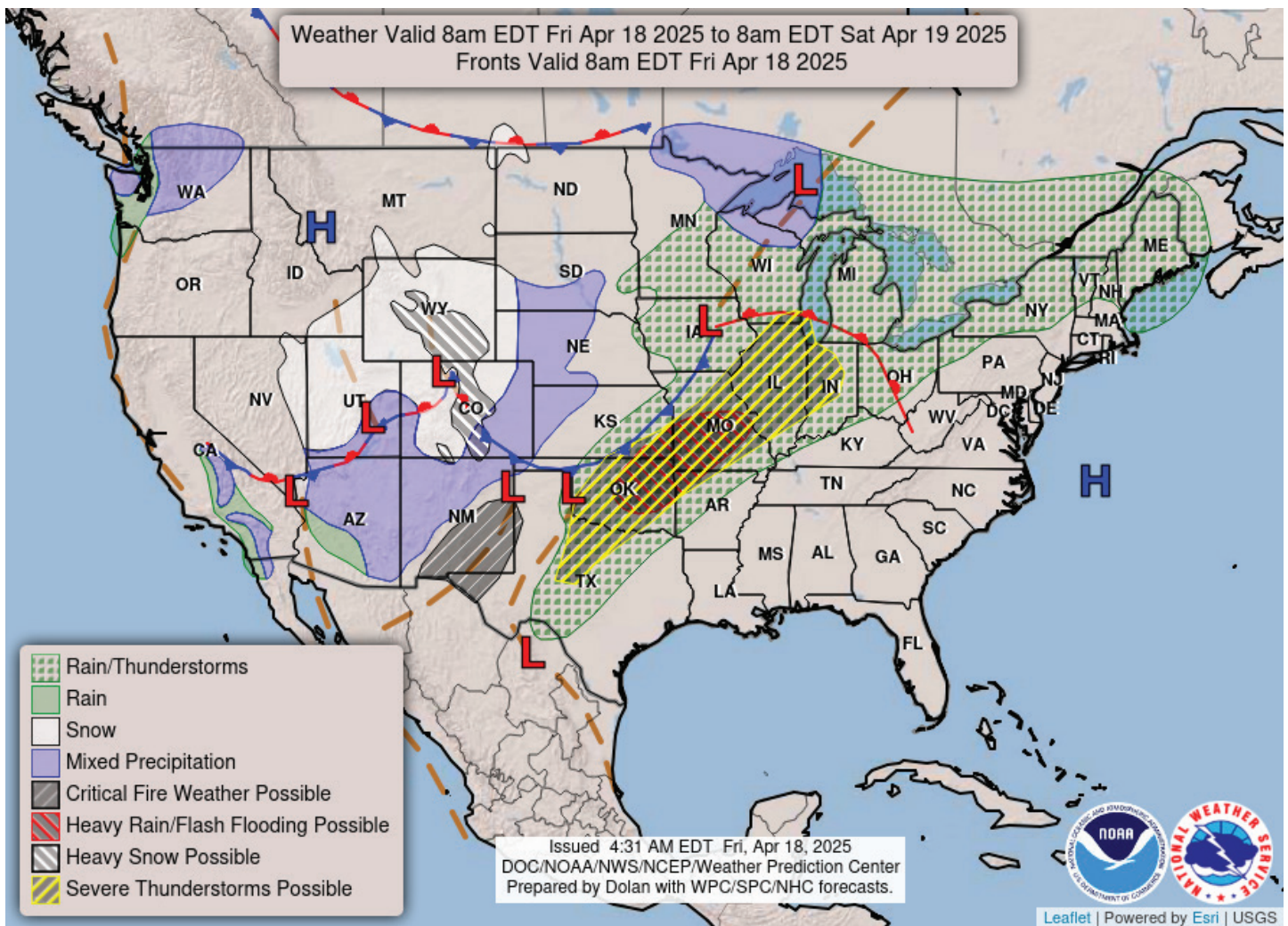
Precip to date in April.: 1.09

Average Precip to date: 2.97

Precip Year to Date: 1.72

Sunset Tonight: 8:24:10 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:37:20 am





# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 38 of 82

## Today in Weather History

April 17-18th, 1995: Eight inches to two feet of snow fell in central South Dakota in two days from the 17th to the 18th. Many businesses, schools, and roads closed on the 18th. Hundreds of power poles were downed due to the heavy snow and high winds in Faulk, Hughes, Sully, Hyde, Hand, Lyman, and Buffalo Counties, leaving thousands of people without power. Some significant calf losses also occurred (around 10 to 20 percent in some areas), especially in Hand County. Snowfall amounts included 24.0 inches at Vivian, Ree Heights, and in the Murdo area; 23.0 inches at Kennebec, 18.0 inches at Highmore, 16.0 inches at Blunt, 15.0 inches at Miller and Faulkton, and 8.0 inches at Gettysburg.

1880 - More than two dozen tornadoes were reported from Kansas and Arkansas to Wisconsin and Michigan. More than 100 persons were killed, including 65 persons at Marshfield MO. (David Ludlum)

1906 - A severe earthquake shook San Francisco, and unusual easterly winds spread fires destroying the city. (David Ludlum)

1944 - California experienced its worst hailstorm of record. Damage mounted to two million dollars as two consecutive storms devastated the Sacramento Valley destroying the fruit crop. (The Weather Channel)

1957 - A dust devil near Dracut MA lifted a small child three feet into the air, and rolled two other children on the ground. Fortunately none of the three were hurt. The dust devil was accompanied by a loud whistling sound as it moved westward. (The Weather Channel)

1970 - Rapid City, SD, received a record 22 inches of snow in 24 hours. (17th-18th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thirty-one cities in the central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including International Falls MN with a reading of 88 degrees, and Bismarck ND with a high of 92 degrees. A sharp cold front produced high winds in the western U.S. Winds in Utah gusted to 99 mph at the Park City Angle Station, and capsized a boat on Utah Lake drowning four persons. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Afternoon and evening thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in the southeastern U.S. A strong (F-2) tornado severely damaged seventeen mobile homes near Bainbridge GA injuring three persons. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. A thunderstorm in Pecos County of southwest Texas produced wind gusts to 90 mph at Imperial. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Heavy snow blanketed the west central valleys and southwest mountains of Colorado with up to 18 inches of snow. Nine cities from the Mid Mississippi Valley to the Middle Atlantic Coast Region reported record low temperatures for the date, including Fort Wayne IND with a reading of 23 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 39 of 82



Daily Devotion

## Living Expectantly

**Because of Christ's sacrifice, we can live with a sense of hope and anticipation.**

### Mark 15:42-46: English Standard Version

#### Jesus Is Buried

<sup>42</sup> And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, <sup>43</sup> Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>44</sup> Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. <sup>45</sup> And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. <sup>46</sup> And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.

After the crucifixion, a wealthy Jewish leader named Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body (Mark 15:43). Not only did Joseph understand the risk of requesting Rome's permission to bury a criminal convicted of treason; he also knew his reputation and status in the religious community would be jeopardized. Why did he have the courage to come forward while the Lord's closest friends stepped back in fear? The reason is that Joseph had been living expectantly, on the lookout for God.

Christ's sacrifice changes everything—it affects both our eternal destination and daily life, allowing us to live with a sense of hope and anticipation. Yet sometimes we don't recognize God's presence and fail to live expectantly in "the already but not yet."

Consider Peter, John, and the women who saw the empty tomb. Though Jesus had told them what to expect, they didn't anticipate His death. Their shock and disbelief tell us clearly what they had thought would happen. Like them, we must remember that where Jesus appears, how He thinks, and what He says may not always be what we expect.

Without Christ's sacrifice, there would be no hope. Though it may not be easy to live expectantly between present and future realities, it's the best approach to the Christian life.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 40 of 82

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# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 41 of 82



## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.15.25

6 10 13 24 63 2

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$112,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 29 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.16.25

2 5 45 47 48 8

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$31,400,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 44 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.17.25

4 18 22 26 44 15

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 59 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.16.25

5 9 11 18 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$113,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 59 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.16.25

7 36 40 47 59 9

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 28 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 04.16.25

20 24 42 43 49 19

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$131,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 28 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 42 of 82

## Upcoming Groton Events

03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm  
03/29/2025 Men's Singles Bowling Tournament at the Jungle 10am, 1pm & 4pm  
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  
04/12/2025 Groton Firemens Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)  
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
05/12/2025 High School Girls Golf Meet at Olive Grove  
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm  
06/07/2025 Day of Play  
06/13/2025 SDSU 4 Person Scramble at Olive Grove  
06/21/2025 Groton Triathlon  
06/23/2025 Ladies 2 Person Scramble at Olive Grove  
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm  
07/11-13/25 2025 VFW 12U Class B State Baseball Tournament  
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm  
07/16/2025 Men's Pro Am Golf at Olive Grove  
07/25/2025 Ferney Open Scramble Golf at Olive Grove  
08/01/2025 Wine on Nine Fundraiser at Olive Grove  
08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm  
08/14/2025 Family Fun Fest, Downtown Main Street 5:30-7:30pm (2nd Thursday)  
08/23/2025 Glacial Tournament at Olive Grove  
09/05/2025 Homecoming Parade 1pm  
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm  
09/07/2025 Sunflower Classic Couples Scramble at Olive Grove  
10/10/2025 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am  
10/11/2025 Pumpkin Fest 10am-3pm City Park  
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm  
12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser



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

### **Trump administration seeks explosive expansion of nation's immigration detention system**

By SARA CLINE and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

JENA, La. (AP) — Amid rural Louisiana's crawfish farms, towering pine trees and cafes serving po'boys, nearly 7,000 people are waiting at immigration detention centers to learn whether they will be expelled from the United States.

If President Donald Trump's administration has its way, the capacity to hold tens of thousands more migrants will soon be added around the country as the U.S. seeks an explosive expansion of what is already the world's largest immigration detention system.

Trump's effort to conduct mass deportations as promised in the 2024 campaign represents a potential bonanza for private prison companies and a challenge to the government agencies responsible for the orderly expulsion of immigrants. Some critics say the administration's plans also include a deliberate attempt to isolate detainees by locking them up and holding court proceedings far from their attorneys and support systems.

The acting director of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, Todd Lyons, said at a border security conference in Phoenix last week that the agency needs "to get better at treating this like a business" and suggested the nation's deportation system could function "like Amazon, trying to get your product delivered in 24 hours."

"So trying to figure out how to do that with human beings and trying to get them pretty much all over the globe is really something for us," Lyons said.

ICE takes steps to add more immigration beds

This month, ICE invited companies to bid on contracts to operate detention centers at sites around the country for up to \$45 billion as the agency begins to scale up from its current budget for about 41,000 beds to 100,000 beds.

The money isn't yet there, but contracts are already being awarded. The House narrowly approved a broad spending bill that includes \$175 billion for immigration enforcement, about 22 times ICE's annual budget. The agency's 100-plus detention centers nationwide currently hold about 46,000 people, causing overcrowding in locations including Miami.

ICE last week awarded a contract worth up to \$3.85 billion to Deployed Resources LLC to operate a detention camp at the Fort Bliss Army base in Texas. The little-known company is shifting its business from Border Patrol tent encampments for people arriving in the United States — most of which are now closed — to ICE facilities for people being deported.

The Geo Group Inc. got a contract for 1,000 beds in Newark, New Jersey, valued at \$1 billion over 15 years and another for 1,800 beds in Baldwin, Michigan. CoreCivic Inc., won a contract to house 2,400 people in families with young children in Dilley, Texas, for five years.

The stock market has rewarded both of these private corrections companies. Geo's stock price has soared 94% since Trump was elected. Shares of CoreCivic have surged 62%.

Louisiana ranks No. 2 in the nation in immigration detention space

Louisiana, which has relatively few immigrants and doesn't border Mexico, may not seem like an obvious choice to establish an immigration detention hub. But circumstances converged toward the end of the last decade that allowed ICE to take over five former criminal jails in the state in 2019 alone.

Now the state is second only to Texas in the amount of bed space it offers for detained immigrants. ICE was drawn to the state in part by relatively low labor costs, a generally favorable political environment and a ready supply of recently emptied jails.

State laws in 2017 lowered criminal penalties, reducing the need for jail and prison beds. In rural areas, where a corrections facility is often a main driver of the local economy, officials were eager to sign con-

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 44 of 82

tracts for immigration detention.

"Because Louisiana was a top incarcerator in the world, it's not as though you have local legislators who are against prisons or against having a for-profit prison industrial complex come in and actually ensure that these continue to run," said Nora Ahmed, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana.

Conservative federal courts in the Western District of Louisiana and at the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals make it tougher for people in Louisiana immigration jails to challenge detention conditions or to appeal immigration court rulings, said Mary Yanik, a professor and co-director of the Immigrant Rights Clinic at Tulane University Law School.

"ICE gets to choose, basically, the courts where their cases are heard by locating detention centers in particular places," she said.

Detention centers are often hours away from cities and lawyers

Louisiana's nine immigration detention centers are in the rural north or western parts of the state. That means a drive of several hours from its largest cities, where immigration advocates and lawyers are clustered. Detainees have long complained of isolation.

Being held in "deplorable conditions" and isolated from their families and support networks can cause people to stop fighting their deportation and make it easier for ICE to remove them, said Carly Pérez Fernández, spokesperson for Detention Watch Network, which helped organize nationwide protests against ICE detention on Thursday.

"Detention really plays a crucial role in enabling Trump's cruel mass deportation agenda," she said. "Increased detention capacity will exacerbate the detention conditions that we already know are inhumane."

Most detention facilities are a relatively short distance from Alexandria, where ICE converted a former military base into a 400-bed, short-term holding center with an adjacent airstrip for deportation flights.

One facility is in Jena, which is home to 4,200 people, about 220 miles (355 kilometers) from New Orleans. The community has only a single advertised hotel called the Townsman Inn.

The Jena detention center, operated under contract with the Geo Group, is surrounded by "no trespassing" signs, fencing with layers of razor wire and armed guards.

Homero Lopez, a lawyer at Immigration Services and Legal Advocacy, which provides free representation in Louisiana detention centers, said the faraway location "makes it a lot more difficult to protest and organize."

The introduction of video links for immigration court has softened — but not eliminated — criticism that ICE is deliberately trying to distance detainees from their families, attorneys and other forms of support.

Lopez said he's happy to use video conferencing for quick preliminary matters, but he prefers to make the drive to appear in person for substantive hearings. He said video links can be "dehumanizing" and may lead judges to fail to appreciate what's at stake when they are not facing immigrants in person.

## Fear and panic at Florida State as deadly shooting sends students fleeing

By KATE PAYNE and DAVID FISCHER Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — When a 20-year-old opened fire at Florida State University, terrified students barricaded doors and fled across campus, abandoning chemistry notes and even shoes, in a shooting that investigators said killed two men and wounded at least six others.

By early Friday, memorials of candles and flowers dotted the campus and a school-wide vigil had been scheduled as students and faculty tried to start healing from the previous day's shooting, which sent shockwaves of fear across the campus.

"I heard some gunshots and then, you know, just blacked out after," said Carolina Sena, a 21-year-old accounting student who was inside the student union when the shooting started. "Everyone was crying and just panicking. We were trying to barricade ourselves in a little corner in the basement, trying to protect ourselves as much as we could."

The shooter, identified by police as Phoenix Ikner, is believed to be a Florida State student and the son

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 45 of 82

of a sheriff's deputy who opened fire with his mother's former service weapon, investigators said. Authorities have not yet revealed a motive for the shooting, which began around lunchtime Thursday just outside the student union.

Officers quickly arrived and shot and wounded the gunman after he refused to comply with commands, said Tallahassee Police Chief Lawrence Revell.

The two men who were killed were not students, said Florida State University Police Chief Jason Trumbower, adding that he would not release additional information about the victims.

The shooter obtained access to a weapon that belongs to his mother, who has been with the sheriff's office for over 18 years and has been a model employee, said Leon County Sheriff Walt McNeil. Police said they believed Ikner shot the victims using his mother's former service handgun, which she had kept for personal use after the force upgraded to new weapons.

Five people who were wounded were struck by gunfire, while a sixth was hurt while trying to run away, Revell said in a statement Thursday night. They were all in fair condition, a spokesperson for Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare said.

The shooter was a long-standing member of the sheriff's office's youth advisory council, the sheriff said. "He has been steeped in the Leon County Sheriff's Office family, engaged in a number of training programs that we have," McNeil said. "So it's not a surprise to us that he had access to weapons."

As of Thursday night, Ikner was in the hospital with "serious but non-life-threatening injuries," according to Revell.

Witness says the suspect's shotgun jammed

Ambulances, fire trucks and patrol vehicles from multiple law enforcement agencies raced toward the campus just west of Florida's capital after the university issued an active shooter alert.

Aidan Stickney, a 21-year-old studying business management, was running late to class when he said he saw a man get out of a car with a shotgun and aim at another man in a white polo shirt.

The gun jammed, Stickney said, and the shooter rushed back to his car and emerged with a handgun, opening fire on a woman. Stickney ran, warning others as he called 911.

"I got lucky today. I really did. I really, really did," he said.

Trumbower said investigators have no evidence that anyone was shot with the shotgun.

Shots sent students scattering

Holden Mendez, a 20-year-old student studying political science and international affairs, said he had just left the student union when he heard a series of shots. He ran into a nearby campus building, where he said his previous emergency response training kicked in.

"There was a lot of fear. There was a lot of panic. There was a lot of misinformation that was being spread around. I was doing my best to kind of combat that," he said. "I told people, 'Take a deep breath. This building is secure. Everything is going to be ok.'"

Andres Perez, 20, was in a classroom near the student union when the alarm sounded for a lockdown. He said his classmates began moving desks in front of the door and police officers came to escort them out.

"I always hang out in the student union," Perez said. "So the second I found out that the threat was there, my heart sank and I was scared."

Shooting shocks campus and the nation

President Donald Trump said from the Oval Office that he had been fully briefed on the shooting.

"It's a horrible thing. It's horrible that things like this take place," he said.

But Trump also suggested that he would not be advocating for any new gun legislation, saying, "The gun doesn't do the shooting, the people do."

University President Richard McCullough said he was heartbroken by the violence. "Our hearts go out to our students and the victims of this terrible tragedy," he said.

Another shooting a decade ago at Florida State

Florida State is one of Florida's 12 public universities, with its main campus in Tallahassee. About 44,000 students are enrolled in the university, per the school's 2024 fact sheet.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 46 of 82

In 2014, the main library was the site of a shooting that wounded three people. Officers shot and killed the gunman, 31-year-old Myron May.

The university canceled classes for the rest of the week and canceled home athletic events through Sunday.

## Strange sell-off in the dollar raises the specter of investors losing trust in the US under Trump

By BERNARD CONDON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Among the threats tariffs pose to the U.S. economy, none may be as strange as the sell-off in the dollar.

Currencies rise and fall all the time because of inflation fears, central bank moves and other factors. But economists worry that the recent drop in the dollar is so dramatic that it reflects something more ominous as President Donald Trump tries to reshape global trade: a loss of confidence in the U.S.

The dollar's dominance in cross-border trade and as a safe haven has been nurtured by administrations of both parties for decades because it helps keep U.S. borrowing costs down and allows Washington to project power abroad — enormous advantages that could possibly disappear if faith in the U.S. was damaged.

"Global trust and reliance on the dollar was built up over a half century or more," says University of California, Berkeley, economist Barry Eichengreen. "But it can be lost in the blink of an eye."

Since mid-January, the dollar has fallen 9% against a basket of currencies, a rare and steep decline, to its lowest level in three years.

Many investors spooked by Trump don't think the dollar will be pushed quickly from its position as the world's reserve currency, instead expecting more of a slow decline. But even that is scary enough, given the benefits that would be lost.

With much of world's goods exchanged in dollars, demand for the currency has stayed strong even as the U.S. has doubled federal debt in a dozen years and does other things that would normally send investors fleeing. That has allowed the U.S. government, consumers and businesses to borrow at unnaturally low rates, which has helped speed economic growth and lift standards of living.

Dollar dominance also allows the U.S. to push around other countries like Venezuela, Iran and Russia by locking them out of a currency they need to buy and sell with others.

Now that "exorbitant privilege," as economists call it, is suddenly at risk.

"The safe haven properties of the dollar are being eroded," said Deutsch Bank in a note to clients earlier this month warning of a "confidence crisis." Added a more circumspect report by Capital Economics, "It is no longer hyperbole to say that the dollar's reserve status and broader dominant role is at least somewhat in question."

Traditionally, the dollar would strengthen as tariffs sink demand for foreign products.

But the dollar not only failed to strengthen this time, it fell, puzzling economists and hurting consumers. The dollar lost more than 5% against the euro and pound, and 6% against the yen since early April.

As any American traveler abroad knows, you can buy more with a stronger dollar and less with a weaker one. Now the price of French wine and South Korean electronics and a host of other imports could cost more not only due to tariffs but a weaker currency, too.

And any loss of safe-haven status could hit U.S. consumers in another way: Higher rates for mortgages and car financing deals as lenders demand more interest for the added risk.

More worrisome is possible higher interest rates on the ballooning U.S. federal debt, which is already at a risky 120% of U.S. annual economic output.

"Most countries with that debt to GDP would cause a major crisis and the only reason we get away with it is that the world needs dollars to trade with," says Benn Steil, an economist at the Council on Foreign Relations. "At some point people are going to look seriously at alternatives to the dollar."

They already have, with a little help from a U.S. economic rival.

China has been striking yuan-only trading deals with Brazil for agricultural products, Russia for oil and

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 47 of 82

South Korea for other goods for years. It has also been making loans in yuan to central banks desperate for cash in Argentina, Pakistan and other countries, replacing the dollar as the emergency funder of last resort.

Another possible U.S. alternative in future years if their market grows: cryptocurrencies.

Said BlackRock Chairman Larry Fink in his annual shareholder letter about dollar dominance, "If deficits keep ballooning, America risks losing that position to digital assets like Bitcoin."

Not everyone is convinced that a big reason the dollar is falling is because of lost faith in the U.S.

Steve Ricchiuto, an economist at Mizuho Financial, says dollar weakness reflects anticipation of higher inflation due to tariffs. But even if investors aren't as comfortable holding dollars, he says, they really don't have much of a choice. No other currency or other asset, like yuan or bitcoin or gold, is vast enough to handle all the demand.

"The U.S. will lose the reserve currency when there is someone out there to take it away," Ricchiuto says. "Right now there isn't an alternative."

Maybe so, but Trump is testing the limits.

It's not just the tariffs, but the erratic way he's rolled them out. The unpredictability makes the U.S. seem less stable, less reliable, and a less safe place for their money.

There are also questions about his logic justifying the policy. Trump says the U.S. needs tariffs to drive down its trade deficits with other countries. But most economists believe those deficits, which measure trade in goods, not services, are a bad measure of whether a country is "ripping off" America, as Trump puts it.

Trump has also repeatedly threatened to chip away at the independence of the Federal Reserve, raising fears that he will force interest rates lower to boost the economy even if doing so risks stoking runaway inflation. That is a sure fire way to get people to flee the dollar. After Fed Chair Jerome Powell said Wednesday that he would wait to make any rate moves, Trump blasted him, saying "Powell's termination cannot come fast enough!"

Economists critical of Trump's April 2 tariff announcement recall another event, the Suez Crisis of 1956, that broke the back of the British pound. The military attack on Egypt was poorly planned and badly executed and exposed British political incompetence that sank trust in the country. The pound fell sharply, and its centuries-long position as the dominant trading and reserve currency crumbled.

Berkeley's Eichengreen says Liberation Day, as Trump called it, could be remembered as a similar turning point if the president isn't careful.

"This is the first step down a slippery slope where international confidence in the U.S. dollar is lost."

## Rubio says the US will drop Ukraine-Russia peace efforts if no progress within days

By ANGELA CHARLTON and HANNA ARHIROVA Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Friday that the U.S. may "move on" from trying to secure a Russia-Ukraine peace deal if there is no progress in the coming days, after months of efforts have failed to bring an end to the fighting.

He spoke in Paris after landmark talks among U.S., Ukrainian and European officials produced outlines for steps toward peace and appeared to make some long-awaited progress. A new meeting is expected next week in London, and Rubio suggested that could be decisive in determining whether the Trump administration continues its involvement.

"We are now reaching a point where we need to decide whether this is even possible or not," Rubio told reporters upon departure. "Because if it's not, then I think we're just going to move on."

"It's not our war," Rubio said. "We have other priorities to focus on." He said the U.S. administration wants to decide "in a matter of days."

His comments came as the U.S. and Ukraine are nearing a long-delayed deal granting the U.S. access to

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 48 of 82

Ukraine's vast mineral resources, which has been intertwined with President Donald Trump's peace push. Trump said Thursday, "We have a minerals deal," and Ukraine's economy minister said Friday that the two countries signed a memorandum of intent ahead of a possible fuller agreement later.

The framework of the mineral deal had stalled in February following a contentious Oval Office meeting between Trump, U.S. Vice President JD Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Negotiations have since resumed.

Despite apparent growing U.S. impatience with the peace efforts, Rubio called Thursday's Paris talks constructive. "Nobody rejected anything, nobody got up from the table or walked away."

Rubio didn't single out Russia or Ukraine as blocking peace efforts. He said he informed Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about the outlines that emerged when they spoke after the Paris talks, but wouldn't say how Lavrov reacted.

After weeks of tensions with European allies, Rubio said the European negotiators proved helpful. "The UK and France and Germany can help us move the ball on this."

The talks came as European concerns grow about Trump's readiness to draw closer to Russia. They marked the first time since Trump's inauguration that top American, Ukrainian and European officials met to discuss an end to the war, which has posed the biggest security challenge to Europe since World War II.

The meetings addressed security guarantees for Ukraine in the future, but Rubio wouldn't discuss any possible U.S. role in that. Some kind of U.S. support for Ukraine is seen as crucial to ensuring that Russia would not attack again after a peace deal is reached.

Rubio and presidential envoy Steve Witkoff have helped lead U.S. efforts to seek peace, and Witkoff has met three times with Putin, Rubio said. Several rounds of negotiations have been held in Saudi Arabia.

Moscow has effectively refused to accept a comprehensive ceasefire that Trump has pushed and Ukraine has endorsed. Russia has made it conditional on a halt in Ukraine's mobilization efforts and Western arms supplies, which are demands rejected by Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Russia kept up a series of deadly strikes on Ukrainian cities, according to officials there, wounding scores of civilians days after missiles killed at least 34 during Palm Sunday celebrations in the northern city of Sumy.

One person died and over 60 others were hurt as Russia hit Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, early in the day, Ukraine's Emergency Service reported. Mayor Ihor Terekhov said cluster munitions struck a "densely populated" neighborhood four times.

Russian drones also targeted a bakery in Sumy, less than a week after the deadly Palm Sunday strike there, killing a customer and wounding an employee, the regional prosecutor's office said. Photos released by the agency showed rows of Easter cakes stacked inside a devastated building, covered in thick dust, as a huge hole gaped in the wall behind them and rubble piled up on the floor.

Last Sunday's strike on Sumy, resulting in mass casualties, was the second large-scale missile attack to claim civilian lives in just over a week. Some 20 people, including nine children, died on April 4 as missiles struck Zelenskyy's hometown of Kryvyi Rih.

The U.S.-Ukraine minerals agreement, which Ukrainian Economy Minister Yuliia Svyrydenko said she signed with U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, is expected to pave the way for significant investments, infrastructure modernization, and long-term cooperation.

## **US lawmakers' bipartisan Taiwan visit signals support despite harsh words and tariffs from Trump**

By CHRISTOPHER BODEEN, ELLEN KNICKMEYER and SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Republican and Democratic lawmakers made their first trip to Taiwan under the new Trump administration a bipartisan one, aiming to show both Taiwan and China that U.S. support for Taiwan's defense remains broad, despite the harsh words and heightened tariffs President Donald Trump has imposed for the Taiwanese.

Taiwan's leaders, in turn, have assured the Republican U.S. administration that they have taken in Trump's



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 49 of 82

complaints and are acting on them.

Many Asia-Pacific nations are eschewing the retaliatory criticism and tariffs of some of the U.S.'s European allies after Trump earlier this month slapped broad tariffs on many countries around the world, including a 32% one for Taiwan.

Despite that hit, conversations in Taiwan this week were "optimistic and forward-looking," said Democratic Sen. Chris Coons, who was visiting Taipei alongside two Republican senators. "I'm optimistic that we're going to see a strong next chapter in U.S.-Taiwan relations," he said.

The Taiwanese have said they are working fast to strike new trade and investment deals that suit the Trump administration, on top of the advanced-semiconductor giant's \$100 billion investment this year alone in chip production in the U.S..

The U.S. lawmakers also said that Taiwan was taking lessons from Ukraine in its defense against Russia and criticism from Trump, and is investing fast to make their military stronger, nimbler and less dependent on the U.S. as the island's strongest deterrent against China. That includes seeking investment with Americans on drone warfare.

Sens. Pete Ricketts and Coons, the ranking Republican and Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's East Asia subcommittee, spoke ahead of scheduled talks Friday with President Lai Ching-te, Defense Minister Wellington Koo and national security adviser Joseph Wu. Republican Sen. Ted Budd also is on the trip.

The mission comes at a time that an economy-shaking trade war between the U.S. and China has some warning that China could strike out at Taiwan, a self-governed island with a vibrant democracy and the world's top production of the most advanced semiconductors. China claims Taiwan as its territory, to be retaken by force if necessary.

Trump has repeatedly accused Taiwan of "stealing" the United States' computer chip industry. His criticism of Taiwan, and his insistence last year that "Taiwan should pay us" for its defense, have heightened concern that the U.S., Taiwan's strongest military partner, might decide not to get too involved if China were ever to attack Taiwan.

The 32% tariffs on Taiwan included in Trump's sweeping new tariffs on trade partners this month surprised many Taiwanese, who thought that their government had shown itself a true ally to Washington.

"Look past the rhetoric and look at the action," Ricketts said, repeating a watchword of the Republicans on Trump's statements.

After saying he was in no rush to finish trade deals, the president said he thought he could wrap up talks "over the next three or four weeks."

Another key Asian U.S. partner, Japan, held its first round of tariff talks between top negotiators in Washington Friday, where both sides agreed to try to reach an agreement as quickly as possible and hold a second round of meetings later this month. However, experts say reaching a full range of agreements with the dozens of nations now waiting on the Trump administration could take months or longer.

Ricketts cited the priority that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has placed on helping the Asia-Pacific secure itself against China. That included making the region one of the first he visited in office, Ricketts said.

Ricketts said Taiwan's leaders already had reached out to Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick for negotiations, moving quickly in the 90-day pause that Trump announced before the United States starts enforcing the new tariffs on most countries.

Lai, Taiwan's president, has pledged to increase Taiwan's military spending to 3% of its gross domestic product, up from about 2.5%, bringing it up to nearly a fifth of its overall budget.

Taiwan's own defense industry is also producing advanced weapons from submarines to small arms and anti-air missiles.

"Of course, there is the possibility that Xi Jinping would decide that this is the right time for the Chinese Communist Party to take aggressive action," Coons said of the Chinese president.

"I think it's exactly the wrong thing for them to do," Coons said. "I think they would find a forceful and united response."

## Israeli strikes kill at least 17 in Gaza and Huckabee makes first appearance as US ambassador

By WAFAA SHURAFU and FATMA KHALED Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Israeli airstrikes across Gaza killed at least 17 people early Friday including children, hospital workers said, as the new U.S. ambassador to Israel made his first public appearance in Jerusalem.

Among the dead were 10 people in the urban Jabaliya refugee camp, including eight from the same house, according to the Indonesian Hospital, which received the bodies. In the southern city of Khan Younis, seven people were killed, one of them a pregnant woman, according to Nasser Hospital, where the bodies were brought.

The strikes came a day after more than two dozen people died in Gaza as Israel ramps up attacks, pressuring Hamas to return the hostages and disarm.

U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee on Friday appeared at the Western Wall, the holiest Jewish prayer site in Jerusalem's Old City. Huckabee inserted a prayer into the wall, which he said was handwritten by U.S. President Donald Trump. "Those are his initials, D.T.," said Huckabee while showing the note to the media.

In his first act as ambassador, Huckabee said Trump told him to take his prayer and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, he said. Huckabee also said every effort was being made to bring the remaining hostages held by Hamas home. A one-time presidential hopeful, Huckabee has acknowledged his past support for Israel's right to annex the West Bank and incorporate its Palestinian population into Israel but said it would not be his "prerogative" to carry out that policy.

During his first term, Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital over Palestinian objections and moved the embassy from Tel Aviv. Palestinians seek the eastern part of the city that Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war as their future capital.

Huckabee's arrival comes at a pivotal time in the 18-month war, as international mediators including the U.S. are trying to get a broken ceasefire back on track.

Israel is demanding that Hamas release more hostages at the start of any new ceasefire and ultimately agree to disarm and leave the territory. Israel has said it plans occupy large "security zones" inside Gaza.

Khalil al-Hayya, head of Hamas' negotiating delegation, said Thursday the group had rejected Israel's latest proposal along those lines. He reiterated Hamas' stance that it will return hostages only in exchange for the release of more Palestinian prisoners, a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a lasting truce, as called for in the now-defunct ceasefire agreement reached in January.

Hamas currently holds 59 hostages, 24 of whom are believed to be alive.

The war began when Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducting 251. Most of the hostages have since been released in ceasefire agreements or other deals.

Israel's offensive has since killed over 51,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between civilians and combatants. The war has destroyed vast parts of Gaza and most of its food production capabilities. The war has displaced around 90% of the population, with hundreds of thousands of people living in tent camps and bombed-out buildings.

On Thursday, aid groups raised the alarm over Israel's blockade of Gaza, where it has barred entry of all food and other goods for more than six weeks. Thousands of children have become malnourished, and most people are barely eating one meal a day as stocks dwindle, the United Nations said.

Israel's Defense Minister says the blockade is one of the "central pressure tactics" against Hamas, which Israel accuses of siphoning off aid to maintain its rule. Aid workers deny there is significant diversion of aid, saying the U.N. closely monitors distribution. Rights groups have called it a "starvation tactic."

## US strikes on a Yemeni oil port kill 38 people, Houthis say, in single-deadliest attack under Trump

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — U.S. airstrikes targeting an oil port held by Yemen's Houthi rebels killed 38 people and wounded 102 others, the group said Friday, marking the single-deadliest known attack under President Donald Trump's new campaign targeting the rebels.

Assessing the toll of Trump's campaign, which began March 15, has been incredibly difficult as the U.S. military's Central Command so far has not released any information on the campaign, its specific targets and how many people have been killed. Meanwhile, Yemen's Houthi rebels strictly control access to areas attacked and don't publish information on the strikes, many of which likely have targeted military and security sites.

But the strike on the Ras Isa oil port, which sent massive fireballs shooting into the night sky, represented a major escalation for the American campaign. The Houthis also immediately released graphic footage of those killed in the attack.

In a statement, Central Command said that "U.S. forces took action to eliminate this source of fuel for the Iran-backed Houthi terrorists and deprive them of illegal revenue that has funded Houthi efforts to terrorize the entire region for over 10 years."

"This strike was not intended to harm the people of Yemen, who rightly want to throw off the yoke of Houthi subjugation and live peacefully," it added. It did not acknowledge any casualties and declined to comment when asked by The Associated Press regarding civilians reportedly being killed.

The Iranian-backed Houthis later Friday launched a missile toward Israel that was intercepted, the Israeli military said. Sirens sounded in Tel Aviv and other areas.

The war in Yemen, meanwhile, further internationalized as the U.S. alleged a Chinese satellite company was "directly supporting" Houthi attacks, something Beijing did not immediately acknowledge.

US strikes spark massive fireball, kill those at port

The Ras Isa port, a collection of three oil tanks and refining equipment, sits in Yemen's Hodeida governorate along the Red Sea. NASA satellites that track forest fires showed an intense blaze early Friday morning at the site just off Kamaran Island, targeted by intense U.S. airstrikes over the past few days.

The Houthis' al-Masirah satellite news channel aired graphic footage of the aftermath, showing corpses strewn across the site. It said paramedic and civilians workers at the port had been killed in the attack, which sparked a massive explosion and fires.

The Ras Isa port also is the terminus of an oil pipeline stretching to Yemen's energy-rich Marib governorate, which remains held by allies of Yemen's exiled government. The Houthis expelled that government from Yemen's capital, Sanaa, back in 2015. However, oil exports have been halted by the decadelong war and the Houthis have used Ras Isa to bring in oil.

The Houthis denounced the U.S. attack.

"This completely unjustified aggression represents a flagrant violation of Yemen's sovereignty and independence and a direct targeting of the entire Yemeni people," the Houthis said in a statement carried by the SABA news agency they control. "It targets a vital civilian facility that has served the Yemeni people for decades."

On April 9, the U.S. State Department issued a warning about oil shipments to Yemen.

"The United States will not tolerate any country or commercial entity providing support to foreign terrorist organizations, such as the Houthis, including offloading ships and provisioning oil at Houthi-controlled ports," it said.

The attack follows Israeli airstrikes on the Houthis which previously hit port and oil infrastructure used by the rebels after their attacks on Israel.

Oil depot attack deadliest so far known in Trump's Yemen campaign

The attack represented the single-deadliest known attack so far in the campaign, analysts said. However,



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 52 of 82

"it's been so difficult to assess the fatalities," said Luca Nevola, the senior analyst for Yemen and the Gulf at the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project.

"Since they are targeting civilian areas, there's a lot more victims but it's also difficult to assess how many because the Houthis are releasing these umbrella statements that cover all the victims ... or tend to stress only the civilian victims," Nevola said.

Further complicating the situation is the U.S. strikes hitting military targets, said Mohammed al-Basha, a Yemen expert at the Basha Report risk advisory firm. He pointed to an American attack that Trump highlighted online with black-and-white strike footage, that may have killed some 70 fighters.

"Although the Houthis claimed it was a tribal gathering, they neither released any footage nor named a single casualty, strongly suggesting the victims were not civilians but affiliated fighters," al-Basha said. "However, the overnight strike on the Ras Isa Fuel Port marks the first mass-casualty incident the Houthis have openly acknowledged and publicized."

Chinese satellite firm accused by US of aiding Houthi attacks

Meanwhile, U.S. State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce in a briefing with journalists accused Chang Guang Satellite Technology Co. Ltd., a commercial satellite image provider, of "directly supporting Iran-backed Houthi terrorist attacks on U.S. interests."

Bruce did not elaborate in detail, but acknowledged a story by The Financial Times that quoted anonymous American officials saying the firm linked to the People's Liberation Army has provided images allowing the rebels to target U.S. warships and commercial vessels traveling through the Red Sea corridor.

"Beijing's support, by the way, of that company, the satellite company, even after we've engaged in discussions with them about this ... certainly contradicts their claims of being peace supporters," Bruce said.

Chinese officials and the company could not be reached for comment. Chinese state media did not acknowledge the accusation. The U.S. Treasury sanctioned Chang Guang in 2023 for allegedly providing satellite images to the Russian mercenary force the Wagner Group as it fought in Ukraine as part of Russia's full-scale invasion.

However, it remains unclear just how linked, if at all, Chang Guang is to the Chinese government. The U.S. government in the past has used images taken by American commercial satellite companies to share with allies, like Ukraine, to avoid releasing its own top-secret pictures.

US strikes come as part of monthlong intense campaign

An AP review has found the new U.S. operation against the Houthis under President Donald Trump appears more extensive than that under former President Joe Biden, as Washington moves from solely targeting launch sites to firing at ranking personnel and dropping bombs on cities.

The new campaign of airstrikes started after the rebels threatened to begin targeting "Israeli" ships again over Israel blocking aid entering the Gaza Strip. The rebels have loosely defined what constitutes an Israeli ship, meaning many vessels could be targeted.

The Houthis targeted more than 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones, sinking two of them and killing four sailors from November 2023 until January of this year. That has greatly reduced the flow of trade through the Red Sea corridor, which typically sees \$1 trillion of goods move through it. The Houthis also launched attacks targeting American warships without success.

The U.S. campaign shows no signs of stopping, as the Trump administration has also linked its airstrikes on the Houthis to an effort to pressure Iran over its rapidly advancing nuclear program. A second round of negotiations between Iran and the U.S. is due to happen Saturday in Rome.

## Iran-US talks over Tehran's nuclear program hinge on a billionaire and a seasoned diplomat

By JON GAMBRELL and AMIR VAHDAT Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — As far as biographies go, the two men in charge of the delicate negotiations between Iran and the United States over Tehran's rapidly advancing nuclear program couldn't be more different.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 53 of 82

On the American side, billionaire real estate magnate Steve Witkoff leads the effort by President Donald Trump's administration to restrict Tehran's atomic program, which they fear could allow Iran to build a nuclear weapon. The Bronx-born developer finds himself tapped by Trump to deliver on the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war as well — two conflicts that show no signs of stopping.

Representing Iran is Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, who like many of his generation is a veteran of the bloody Iran-Iraq war. He rose through the ranks of Iran's diplomatic corps and served as a trusted negotiator during the talks that led to Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Whether the two men find common ground in the high-stakes negotiations, with a second round due to take place Saturday in Rome, could mean success or failure in the talks. At risk is a possible American or Israeli military strike on Iran's nuclear sites, or the Iranians following through on their threats to pursue an atomic weapon.

Abbas Araghchi, 62

Arriving in Tokyo as Iran's new ambassador in 2008, Araghchi received the equivalent of a diplomatic rave review — from the U.S. Embassy of all places.

"Araghchi is a young, personable, polished and accomplished diplomat. ... Anyone with a limited understanding of the facts would walk away after hearing him with the idea that Iran has bent over backwards and tried everything possible to please the West without result," a March 2008 cable on Araghchi released by WikiLeaks reads.

"Even when he expressed Iran's willingness to defy the international community his message was delivered evenly and in a rational tone. He exudes an air of understated yet passionate belief in the position he is arguing."

The low-key style has been a trademark of Araghchi, who has carefully walked the line between hard-liners and reformists within Iran's theocracy. It starkly contrasts with the more emotional style of then-Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who reached the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and struck a close relationship with then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

Araghchi, who handled some negotiations for the deal, remarked on the magnitude of their work the closer the deal came to fruition, describing the accord as "one of the most important documents in Iran's history."

"Two and a half years of intense negotiations had reached their nerve-wracking final moments," Araghchi wrote in a portion of "A Sealed Secret: The JCPOA: A Great Effort for the Rights, Security and Development of Iran," a book in Farsi on the talks. "Our nightly sleep was reduced to about one hour. Hundreds of millions of people around the world were watching, and 80 million Iranians were anxious and waiting."

Born in Isfahan into a wealthy, religious merchant family, Araghchi bears the the honorific "seyed," marking him as a direct descendant of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. He was a teenager when the 1979 Islamic Revolution overthrew the shah and installed the country's theocracy.

Araghchi joined the Revolutionary Guard and fought in the 1980-88 war against Iraq, though details about his service aren't publicly known. The Guard then was not the massive organization it is today, a paramilitary arm of Iran overseeing its ballistic missile arsenal with deep interests in the country's economy.

While broadly avoiding controversy, politics have affected his career in the past. Under hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Araghchi found himself posted to Japan in the first place as part of a power struggle within the government over nuclear negotiations at the time.

"Put Araghchi aside, Mr. Ahmadinejad had told" Iran's foreign minister at the time, Araghchi recounted in "Iran-Taishi: Memoirs of Seyed Abbas Araghchi, Ambassador of Iran to Japan," a memoir of his time in Tokyo. "Not only from the negotiators' team but also from the position of deputy foreign minister in charge of international affairs."

Steve Witkoff, 68

Speaking before the Republican National Convention in July 2024, Witkoff found himself fully catapulted from the world of real estate into politics. But it was talking about his son Andrew, who died in 2011, that humanized him to delegates.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 54 of 82

"When I lost my boy Andrew to an opioid overdose, the pain was unbearable," Witkoff told the thousands there. "But as usual, Donald Trump showed up."

That long, close relationship with Trump includes being with the president on a Florida golf course when he was targeted in an assassination attempt in September. And the president since has entrusted Witkoff with some of the most-challenging situations he faces when it comes to global geopolitics.

To Trump, whose whole identity as a businessman and politician has revolved around making deals, Witkoff represents someone he can understand. Forbes estimates Witkoff's wealth at around \$2 billion, made through his Witkoff Group, which has developed apartment buildings, golf courses and hotels in the U.S. and internationally. He's also done business with Mideast sovereign wealth funds — which often serve as direct vehicles of the region's autocratic rulers.

After Trump won the election, Witkoff worked with the outgoing Biden administration to secure a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip in January. Witkoff, who is Jewish, worked on convincing Israel to agree to the terms. Israel is Iran's archenemy in the Mideast and has threatened to destroy it repeatedly over the years.

The ceasefire collapsed, however, on March 18 after Israel launched a wave of airstrikes that killed hundreds of Palestinians across Gaza. Both Israel and the U.S. blamed the renewed hostilities on Hamas' refusal to release more hostages before negotiations on ending the war proceed — which was not part of the ceasefire agreement.

Then there's the high-level negotiations over Russia's war on Ukraine. So far, that war has yet to end despite Trump's diplomatic campaign, particularly a series of talks held in Saudi Arabia. Witkoff has met Russian President Vladimir Putin himself as part of that push. Witkoff attended talks on the war in Ukraine with European allies just before the second round of negotiations with Iran.

While successfully making it through the first round of negotiations with Araghchi — and meeting him face to face — Witkoff has faced the challenge of negotiating over Iran. He made a television appearance in which he suggested 3.67% enrichment for Iran could be something the countries could agree on. But that's exactly the terms set by the 2015 nuclear deal struck under U.S. President Barack Obama, from which Trump unilaterally withdrew America.

Witkoff hours later issued a statement underlining something: "A deal with Iran will only be completed if it is a Trump deal."

"Iran must stop and eliminate its nuclear enrichment and weaponization program," Witkoff added. That immediately drew rounds of criticism from Iran, which long has maintained it should have access to enrichment.

## **Protest letters from former Israeli soldiers lay bare profound rifts over the ongoing war**

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — When nearly 1,000 Israeli Air Force veterans signed an open letter last week calling for an end to the war in Gaza, the military responded immediately, saying it would dismiss any active reservist who signed the document.

But in the days since, thousands of retired and reservist soldiers across the military have signed similar letters of support.

The growing campaign, which accuses the government of perpetuating the war for political reasons and failing to bring home the remaining hostages, has laid bare the deep division and disillusionment over Israel's fighting in Gaza.

By spilling over into the military, it has threatened national unity and raised questions about the army's ability to continue fighting at full force. It also resembles the bitter divisions that erupted in early 2023 over the government's attempts to overhaul Israel's legal system, which many say weakened the country and encouraged Hamas' attack later that year that triggered the war.

"It's crystal clear that the renewal of the war is for political reasons and not for security reasons," Guy



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 55 of 82

Poran, a retired pilot who was one of the initiators of the air force letter, told The Associated Press.

A return to war

The catalyst for the letters was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision on March 18 to return to war instead of sticking to a ceasefire that had facilitated the release of some hostages.

Netanyahu says the military pressure is needed to force Hamas to release the remaining hostages. Critics, including many families of the hostages, fear that it will get them killed.

One month after Netanyahu resumed the war, none of the 59 hostages held by Hamas have been freed or rescued, of whom 24 are believed to still be alive.

In their letters, the protesters have stopped short of refusing to serve. And the vast majority of the 10,000 soldiers who have signed are retired in any case.

Nonetheless, Poran said their decision to identify themselves as ex-pilots was deliberate — given the respect among Israel's Jewish majority for the military, and especially for fighter pilots and other prestigious units. Tens of thousands of academics, doctors, former ambassadors, students and high-tech workers have signed similar letters of solidarity in recent days, also demanding an end to the war.

"We are aware of the relative importance and the weight of the brand of Israeli Air Force pilots and felt that it is exactly the kind of case where we should use this title in order to influence society," said Poran.

Elusive war goals

The war erupted on Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas carried out a surprise cross-border attack, killing about 1,200 people in southern Israel and taking 251 others hostage.

Throughout the war, Netanyahu has set two major goals: destroying Hamas and bringing home the hostages.

Israel's offensive has reduced much of Gaza to rubble and killed more than 51,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza health officials, who don't differentiate between civilians and combatants.

While Israel has come under heavy international criticism over the devastation in Gaza, the domestic opposition to the conflict reflects a widespread belief that Netanyahu's war goals are not realistic.

Nearly 70% of Israelis now say bringing home the hostages is the most important goal of the war, up from just over 50% in January 2024, according to a study conducted by the Jerusalem think tank Israel Democracy Institute. Nearly 60% of respondents said Netanyahu's two goals cannot be realized together.

The survey interviewed nearly 750 people and had a margin of error of 3.6 percentage points.

Netanyahu's opponents have also accused him of resuming the war to pander to his hardline coalition partners, who have threatened to topple the government if he ends the fighting.

Steering clear of politics

Many people were surprised by the military's snap decision to dismiss air force reservists who signed the protest letter.

The army, which is mandatory for most Jewish men, has long served as a melting pot and unifying force among Israel's Jewish majority. Many key units rely heavily on reservists, who often to serve well into their 40s.

In a statement, the military said it should be "above all political dispute."

As the protest movement has grown, a military official said the army is taking the letters "very seriously."

He said it joins a list of challenges to calling up reservists and that the army is working to support them. A growing number of reservists have stopped reporting for duty, citing exhaustion, family reasons, and the financial burden of missing work.

"Any civilian can have his opinions. The problems come when people use the army as a tool promoting their opinions, whatever they may be," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity under military guidelines.

The army's dilemma

Eran Duvdevani, who organized a letter signed by 2,500 former paratroopers, told the AP that the army faces a dilemma.

"If it will keep on releasing from service the pilots, what about all the others who signed the letters? Will

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 56 of 82

they be discharged from service as well?" he said.

He said he organized the letter to show "the pilots are not alone." Their concern over the war's direction "is a widespread opinion, and you have to take it into consideration."

Although only a few hundred of the signatories are still actively serving, the Israeli military has been stretched by 18 months of fighting and isn't in any position to be turning away anyone from reserve duty. Many Israelis are also furious that as reservists repeatedly get called up for action, the government continues to grant military exemptions to Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox governing partners.

The number of Israelis continuing to report for reserve duty has dropped so low that the military has taken to social media to try to recruit people to keep serving.

Protest letters illuminate widespread divisions

Eran Halperin, an expert in social psychology at Jerusalem's Hebrew University, called the letters "the most important indication of the erosion of the ethos in this particular war."

Though the war enjoyed widespread support at the outset, doubts have grown as so many hostages continue to languish in captivity and the Israeli death toll mounts. Nearly 850 soldiers have been killed since the war started.

"It's very, very difficult to maintain and manage a war in such violent conflict when there are such deep disagreements about the main questions pertaining to the war," Halperin said.

In recent days, Netanyahu's office has published a flurry of messages touting meetings with families of the hostages, stressing he is doing everything he can to hasten their return.

On Tuesday, he and his defense minister toured northern Gaza, where Netanyahu praised the "amazing reservists" doing "marvelous work."

Netanyahu's office released videos of him marching through the sandy dunes surrounded by dozens of soldiers.

"We are fighting for our existence," he said. "We are fighting for our future."

## Maine's hidden 'Sistine Chapel' inspires artists with 70-year-old frescoes

By PATRICK WHITTLE Associated Press

SOLON, Maine (AP) — From the outside, it looks like any other New England church building: a boxy, white structure with a single steeple surrounded by an old stone wall, set against rolling hills and pine forest.

Inside, though, the South Solon Meeting House has a secret unknown even to some who drive through the tiny Maine town every day. The interior of the building is covered in 70-year-old fresco murals that encourage some in the state's art community to describe it as "Maine's Sistine Chapel."

The murals were painted by artists in the 1950s and, while they have long been appreciated by visitors, the recent creation of a website dedicated to them by students at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, has generated new interest in the paintings.

Véronique Plesch, a Colby professor of art, hopes the building inspires more appreciation of frescoes.

"I fell in love with the place, because I have studied frescoes all my life," said Plesch, who is a member of the board of the historical society that cares for the meeting house. She added that the paintings should stay in public places and not be in private institutions.

The meeting house was built in 1842 and hosted church services until the 1940s, though there were periods of closure, such as times of war. A decade later, Margaret Day Blake found the building in a state of disuse and the former student at the nearby Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture put out a call for young artists to paint frescoes under the school's supervision in 1951.

The artists were given creative freedom and told there would be no limits to subject matter, but that Biblical scenes would "offer rich and suitable" imagery. The interior was covered in such scenes from 1952 to 1956 and the walls remain adorned with frescoes, including one that references Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper."

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 57 of 82

Another fresco depicts the binding of Isaac, in which a hooded Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son on God's orders. The Great Flood is depicted as it was by Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican.

Two of the 13 artists — Sigmund Abeles of New York City and Sidney Hurwitz of Newton, Massachusetts — both in their 90s, are still living. Both spoke fondly about their time at the meeting house.

"We would go out there and paint and then take a lunch break in the cemetery behind the building. It was a very idyllic time," Hurwitz said. "I very much enjoyed it."

Today, the meeting house, which is open to the public without locks on its doors, serves as a community gathering and performance space. Many of its old features, including box pews made for smaller people of a different time, are still intact.

Abeles recalled painting the scene of Jacob wrestling with the angel from the Book of Genesis.

"It's a very, very special place, and it was a unique experience" to work on the frescoes, Abeles said.

On a recent Sunday morning, Plesch gave a lecture at the meeting house before a group of members of the Maine Art Education Association as part of the group's spring conference. Long ago, attendants of the building might have been preparing for an Easter service, but on this day it was full of teachers fascinated by the frescoes.

Suzanne Goulet, an art teacher at a nearby high school, said she was previously aware of the frescoes and confessed she had peered into the windows of the old building, adding that it's great the paintings are still inspiring art lovers decades later.

"The inspiration is that we bring it back to our students," Goulet said.

## **The US has a single rare earths mine. Chinese export limits are energizing a push for more**

By JOSH FUNK AP Business Writer

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — America's only rare earths mine heard from anxious companies soon after China responded to President Donald Trump's tariffs this month by limiting exports of those minerals used for military applications and in many high-tech devices.

"Based on the number of phone calls we're receiving, the effects have been immediate," said Matt Sloustcher, a spokesperson for MP Materials, the company that runs the Mountain Pass mine in California's Mojave Desert.

The trade war between the world's two biggest economies could lead to a critical shortage of rare earth elements if China maintains its export controls long-term or expands them to seek an advantage in any trade negotiations. The California mine can't meet all of the U.S. demand for rare earths, which is why Trump is trying to clear the way for new mines.

Rare earth elements are important ingredients in electric vehicles, powerful magnets, advanced fighter jets, submarines, smartphones, television screens and many other products. Despite their name, the 17 elements aren't actually rare, but it's hard to find them in a high enough concentration to make a mine worth the investment.

Tariffs will impact ore supply and costs

MP Materials, which acquired the idle Mountain Pass site in 2017, said Thursday it would stop sending its ore to China for processing because of the export restrictions and 125% tariffs on U.S. imports China imposed. The company said it would continue processing nearly half of what it mines on site and store the rest while it works to expand its processing capability.

"Selling our valuable critical minerals under 125% tariffs is neither commercially rational nor aligned with America's national interests," MP Materials said in a statement.

Experts say the manufacturers that rely on rare earth elements and other critical minerals will see price increases, but there is likely enough of a global supply available to keep factories operating for now.

The California mine yields neodymium and praseodymium, the light rare earths that are the main components of the permanent rare earth magnets in EVs and wind turbines. But small amounts of some of the heavy rare earths that China has restricted, such as terbium and dysprosium are key to helping the



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 58 of 82

magnets withstand high temperatures.

Already, the price of terbium has jumped 24% since the end of March to reach \$933 per kilogram.

"Our estimate suggests that there is enough stockpile in the market to sustain demand for now," Benchmark Mineral Intelligence rare earths analyst Neha Mukherjee said, adding that shortages may emerge later this year.

China holds power over the market

China has tremendous power over the rare earths market. The country has the biggest mines, producing 270,000 metric tons (297,624 tons) of minerals last year compared to the 45,000 tons (40,823 metric tons) mined in the U.S. China supplies nearly 90% of the world's rare earths because it also is home to most of the processing capacity.

The restrictions Beijing put in place on April 4 require Chinese exporters of seven heavy rare earths and some magnets to obtain special licenses. The retaliatory controls reinforced what the Trump administration and manufacturers see as a dire need to build additional U.S. mines and reduce the nation's dependence on China.

Trump has tried, so far unsuccessfully, to strong-arm Greenland and Ukraine into providing more of their rare earths and other critical materials to the United States. Last month, he signed an executive order calling for the federal government to streamline permit approvals for new mines and encourage investments in the projects.

Two companies are trying to develop mines in Nebraska and Montana. Officials at NioCorp and U.S. Critical Minerals said they hoped the push from the White House would help them raise money and obtain the necessary approvals to start digging. NioCorp has worked for years to raise \$1.1 billion to build a mine in southeast Nebraska.

"As I sit and I think about how can we deal with this enormous leverage that China has over these minerals that nobody even knows how to pronounce for the most part, we have to deal with this leverage situation," NioCorp CEO Mark Smith said. "And the best way, I think, is that we need to make our own heavy rare earths here in the United States. And we can do that."

MP Materials is working to quickly expand its processing capability, partly with the help of some \$45 million the company received coming out of the first Trump administration. But after investing nearly \$1 billion since 2020, the company doesn't currently have the ability to process the heavy rare earths that China is restricting. MP Materials said it was working expeditiously to change that.

Big U.S. automakers declined to comment about how dependent they are on rare earths and the impact of China's export curbs. Major defense contractors like Boeing and Lockheed Martin, which were specifically targeted in China's restrictions along with more than a dozen other defense and aerospace companies, also remained circumspect.

Military technology is a smaller but important user of rare earths. Trump issued an executive order on Tuesday calling for an investigation into the national security implications of being so reliant on China for the elements.

A spokesperson for Lockheed, which makes the F-22 fighter jet, said the company continuously assesses "the global rare earth supply chain to ensure access to critical materials that support our customers' missions."

Manufacturers prepare for price increases

Some battery makers could start to run short of key elements within weeks, according to Steve Christensen, executive director of the Responsible Battery Coalition, an association representing battery and automakers and battery sellers.

Already, manufacturers have seen the price of antimony, an element used to extend the life of traditional lead-acid batteries, more than double since China restricted exports of it last year. The element isn't one of the 17 rare earths but is among the critical minerals that Trump wants to see produced domestically.

Initially, automakers will likely try to absorb any increase in the cost of their batteries without raising vehicle prices, but that may not be sustainable if China's restrictions remain in place, Christensen said. A 25% tariff Trump put on all imported automobiles and auto parts cars already was expected to increase

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 59 of 82

costs, although the president hinted this week that he might give the industry a temporary reprieve.

The U.S. fulfilled its rare earths needs with domestic sources until the late 1990s. Production largely ended after low-cost Chinese ores flooded global markets. Robots, drones and other new technologies have rapidly increased demand for the raw materials.

NioCorp recently signed a contract to do more exploratory drilling on its site this summer to help prove to the Export-Import Bank that enough rare earth minerals rest underground near Elk Creek, Nebraska, to justify an \$800 million loan to help finance the project.

But a new rare earths mine is years away from operating in the U.S. NioCorp estimates if all goes well with its fundraising, the site where it hopes to mine and process niobium, scandium, titanium and an assortment of rare earths possibly might be running by the end of Trump's presidency.

U.S. Critical Minerals plans to dig up several tons of ore in Montana this summer so it can test out processing methods it has been developing. The Sheep Creek project isn't as far along as the Nebraska project, but U.S. Critical Minerals Director Harvey Kaye said the site has promising ore deposits with high concentrations of rare earths.

## Thousands of pilgrims trek through New Mexico desert to historic adobe church for Good Friday

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A unique Holy Week tradition is drawing thousands of Catholic pilgrims to a small adobe church in the hills of northern New Mexico, in a journey on foot through desert badlands to reach a spiritual wellspring.

For generations, people of the Upper Rio Grande Valley and beyond have walked to reach El Santuario de Chimayó to commemorate Good Friday.

Pilgrims, some walking for days, were on track to arrive Friday amid a forecast of cool temperatures and sprinkles of rain.

Some travelers are lured by an indoor well of dirt believed to have curative powers. Throughout the year, they leave behind crutches, braces and canes in acts of prayer for infirm children and others, and as evidence that miracles happen.

Easter week visitors file through an adobe archway and narrow indoor passages to find a crucified Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas at the main altar. According to local lore, the crucifix was found on the site in the early 1800s, a continent away from its analog at a basilica in the Guatemalan town of Esquipulas.

A spiritual place

Chimayó, known for its artisan weavings and chile crops, rests high above the Rio Grande Valley and opposite the national defense laboratory at Los Alamos that sprang up in the race to develop the first atomic weapon.

The iconic adobe church at Chimayó was cast from local mud at the sunset of Spanish rule in the Americas in the early 1800s, on a site already held sacred by Native Americans.

Set amid narrow streets, curio shops and brooks that flow quickly in spring, El Santuario de Chimayó has been designated as a National Historic Landmark that includes examples of 19th century Hispanic folk art, religious frescoes and saints carved from wood known as bultos.

One votive room is filled with notes of thanks from those who say they had ailments cured.

A separate chapel is dedicated to the Santo Niño de Atocha, a patron saint of children, travelers and those seeking liberation and a fitting figure of devotion for Chimayó pilgrims on the go.

Hundreds of children's shoes have been left in a prayer room there by the faithful in tribute to the holy child who wears out footwear on miraculous errands. There are even tiny boots tacked to the ceiling.

Pueblo people who inhabited the Chimayó area long before Spanish settlers believed healing spirits could be found in the form of hot springs. Those springs ultimately dried up, leaving behind earth attributed with healing powers.

A way of life

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 60 of 82

Photographer Miguel Gandert grew up in the Española valley below Chimayó and made the pilgrimage as a boy with his parents.

"Everybody went to Chimayó. You didn't have to be Catholic," said Gandert, who was among those who photographed the 1996 pilgrimage through a federal grant. "People just went there because it was a powerful, spiritual place."

Scenes from that pilgrimage — on display at the New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe — include children eating snow cones to keep cool, men shouldering large wooden crosses, infants swaddled in blankets, bikers in leather and weary pedestrians resting on highway guardrails to smoke.

A generation later, Good Friday pilgrims still haul crosses on the road to Chimayó, as families leave behind cars, push strollers and allow time for older hikers. Throngs of visitors often wait hours for a turn to file into the Santuario de Chimayó to commemorate the crucifixion.

It's just one of hundreds of adobe churches anchoring a uniquely New Mexican way of life for their communities. Many are at risk of crumbling into the ground in disrepair as congregations and traditions fade.

A journey on foot

Pilgrims from nearby towns set out for Chimayó in the predawn hours. Some have walked 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Santa Fe, while others traveled for days from Albuquerque and elsewhere.

Vendors sell religious trinkets, coffee and treats. State transportation workers, law enforcement agencies and other volunteers are stationed along the roadway to ensure safety from oncoming traffic, the outdoor elements and exhaustion.

Pilgrims traverse an arid landscape speckled with juniper and piñon trees and cholla cactus that finally give way to lush cottonwood trees and green pastures on the final descent into Chimayó.

The magnitude of the religious pilgrimage has few if any rivals in the U.S. Many participants say their thoughts dwell not only on Jesus Christ but on the suffering of family, friends and neighbors with prayers for relief.

## Law firms, universities and now civil society groups are in Trump's sights for punitive action

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — First the nation's top law firms. Then its premier universities. Now, President Donald Trump is leaning on the advocacy groups that underpin U.S. civil society.

Trump said Thursday that the administration is looking at the tax-exempt status not just of Harvard, but environmental groups and specifically the ethics watchdog organization Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, or CREW. It could be a devastating financial blow to the nonprofit organizations — and his perceived political foes.

The president's remarks, during an event at the White House, began to confirm what advocacy groups have been quietly warning: Trump's campaign of retribution is coming next for them.

"It's supposed to be a charitable organization," Trump said about CREW, in particular. "The only charity they had is going after Donald Trump. So we're looking at that. We're looking at a lot of things."

Trump and his team have been working their way through the nation's institutions, threatening to chisel away at the independence and autonomy of the law firms, college campuses and now advocacy groups — or putting them at risk of losing their federal funds or professional livelihood.

It's all coming quickly, not yet 100 days into the new administration, and in ways historically unheard of in this country for their speed and scope. And it's sending shock waves reverberating throughout the American system.

"It's a sad day in this country when organizations that provide critical services to their communities are under attack from their government," said Cole Leiter, executive director of the advocacy group Americans Against Government Censorship. "No administration, Republican or Democratic, should be able to weaponize the weight of the government against their political enemies."

The list of organizations grows



# Groton Daily Independent

**Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 61 of 82**

On their own, Trump's actions are an almost daily list of executive pronouncements from the White House. The Trump administration has issued orders against the law firms that had cases or attorneys perceived to be against him, and it has made demands of the universities over their rules around campus activism.

Thursday brought potentially more to the stack: Trump singled out CREW, the watchdog group whose founder, Norm Eisen, played a pivotal role in Trump's first impeachment, and the environmental groups that largely stand at odds with his "drill baby drill" agenda.

"Tax exempt status — I mean, it's a privilege. It's really a privilege, and it's been abused by a lot more than Harvard," Trump said. "We'll be making some statements. It's a big deal."

But taken together, the executive orders and actions and memos are making one thing clear: The Trump administration is eager to test new ways to flex executive power, and dare the courts and Congress to intervene. And there's more expected to come.

Environmental, immigration and civil society advocacy groups have been bracing for potential threats to their tax-exempt status, according to a person familiar with the situation and granted anonymity to discuss it. The person said some expect Trump might start taking action against the environmental groups on Earth Day, which is Tuesday.

These are the largely nonprofit organizations and groups, many based in Washington, advocating for various communities, constituencies and causes.

Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said environmental groups have heard that the Trump administration is preparing executive orders targeting the tax status of environmental groups that work on climate change, as well as that of any foundations that fund their work.

"Trump is marshaling all the power of government to punish his perceived enemies," Suckling said. "We've got a crack legal team and will have him in court within 24 hours. We're ready and waiting for him to come at us."

CREW has examined Trump's affairs for years

CREW has been a leading ethics group in Washington, with Trump long the subject of its probes.

Ahead of the 2024 election, the group was part of the legal effort to disqualify Trump from regaining the White House under the 14th Amendment, in the aftermath of the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol. More recently, CREW sued over the firing of federal workers by Trump and the Department of Government Efficiency.

"For more than 20 years, CREW has exposed government corruption from politicians of both parties who violate the public trust and has worked to promote an ethical, transparent government," said Jordan Libowitz, the organization's vice president.

Trump's attacks on civil society have created a climate that is potentially chilling for the organizations in question — but they have had mixed results.

Five of the major law firms and Trump reached a deal in which they agreed to provide a combined hundreds of millions of dollars in pro bono counsel to causes the administration says it supports. The firms are trying to avoid various sanctions, including terminated federal contracts, federal employment investigations over diversity hiring and others.

While Columbia University agreed to the Trump administration's demands to overhaul its rules for public protests rather than risk billions of dollars in lost federal funds, Harvard rebuffed the administration and now faces a \$2 billion federal funding freeze and the threat to its tax-exempt status.

The tax-exempt status allows nonprofit organizations to receive donations that are crucial to their financial bottom line. Changing that could, in some situations, lead to calamity.

"Good governance groups are the heart of a healthy democracy," Libowitz said. "We will continue to do our work to ensure Americans have an ethical and accountable government."

## Florida State gunman used deputy mom's former service weapon to kill 2 and wound 6, authorities say

By KATE PAYNE and DAVID FISCHER Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — The 20-year-old son of a sheriff's deputy opened fire Thursday at Florida State University with his mother's former service weapon, killing two men and wounding at least six others, investigators said.

Officers quickly arrived and shot and wounded the shooter after he refused to comply with commands, said Tallahassee Police Chief Lawrence Revell.

Authorities have not yet revealed a motive for the shooting, which began around lunchtime just outside the student union, sending frightened students and parents hiding for cover in a bowling alley and a freight elevator inside the building.

The shooter, identified by police as Phoenix Ikner, is believed to be a Florida State student, investigators said. The two men who died were not students, said Florida State University Police Chief Jason Trumbower, adding that he would not release additional information about the victims.

The shooter obtained access to a weapon that belongs to his mother, who has been with the sheriff's office for over 18 years and has been a model employee, said Leon County Sheriff Walt McNeil. Police said they believed Ikner shot the victims using his mother's former service handgun, which she had kept for personal use after the force upgraded to new weapons.

Five people who were injured were struck by gunfire while a sixth was hurt while trying to run away, Revell said in a statement Thursday night. They were all in fair condition, Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare said in a Facebook post.

The alleged shooter was a long-standing member of the sheriff's office's youth advisory council, the sheriff said.

"He has been steeped in the Leon County Sheriff's Office family, engaged in a number of training programs that we have," McNeil said. "So it's not a surprise to us that he had access to weapons."

As of Thursday night, Ikner was in the hospital with "serious but non-life-threatening injuries," according to Revell.

Witness says the suspect's shotgun jammed

Ambulances, fire trucks and patrol vehicles from multiple law enforcement agencies raced toward the campus just west of Florida's capital after the university issued an active shooter alert.

Aidan Stickney, a 21-year-old studying business management, was running late to class when he said he saw a man get out of a car with a shotgun and aim at another man in a white polo shirt.

The gun jammed, Stickney said, and the shooter rushed back to his car and emerged with a handgun, opening fire on a woman. Stickney ran, warning others as he called 911.

"I got lucky today. I really did. I really, really did," he said.

Trumbower said investigators have no evidence that anyone was shot with the shotgun.

Shots sent students scattering

Ryan Cedergren, a 21-year-old communications student, said he and about 30 others hid in the bowling alley in the union's lower level after seeing students running from a nearby bar.

"In that moment, it was survival," he said.

Chris Pento said he and his twins were getting lunch at the student union during a campus tour when they heard gunshots. "It was surreal. And people just started running," he told WCTV in Tallahassee.

They crammed into a service elevator after encountering locked doors at the end of a hallway. "That was probably the scariest point because we didn't know. It could get worse, right?" he said. "The doors opened and two officers were there, guns drawn."

Dozens of patrol vehicles, including a forensics van, were parked outside the student union hours after the shooting. Officers blocked off the area with crime scene tape.

Students and staff who left behind phones, keys and other items in the rush to evacuate waited in the shade and prayed for the victims.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 63 of 82

Shooting shocks campus and the nation

President Donald Trump said from the Oval Office that he had been fully briefed on the shooting. "It's a horrible thing. It's horrible that things like this take place," he said.

But Trump also suggested that he would not be advocating for any new gun legislation, saying, "The gun doesn't do the shooting, the people do."

After receiving warnings of an active shooter, students and faculty took cover and waited in classrooms, offices and dorms across campus.

The first thing you think of is just, 'This can't be true,' right?" said Kai McGalla, a sophomore who spoke by phone while locked down at a campus testing center.

Junior Joshua Sirmans, 20, was in the main library when alarms went off. Law enforcement officers escorted him and other students from the library with their hands over their heads, he said.

University President Richard McCullough said he was heartbroken by the violence. "Our hearts go out to our students and the victims of this terrible tragedy," he said.

As dusk fell over Florida State University, a small memorial of candles and bouquets of flowers had been set up outside the student union, while investigators' yellow tape blocked off the nearby doors.

Another shooting a decade ago at Florida State

Florida State is one of Florida's 12 public universities, with its main campus in Tallahassee. About 44,000 students are enrolled in the university, per the school's 2024 fact sheet.

In 2014, the main library was the site of a shooting that wounded three people. Officers shot and killed the gunman, 31-year-old Myron May.

The university canceled classes for the rest of the week and canceled home athletic events through Sunday.

## Trump officials' defiance over Abrego Garcia's deportation is 'shocking,' appeals court says

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN, ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration's claim that it can't do anything to free Kilmar Abrego Garcia from an El Salvador prison and return him to the U.S. "should be shocking," a federal appeals court said Thursday in a blistering order that ratchets up the escalating conflict between the government's executive and judicial branches.

A three-judge panel from the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously refused to suspend a judge's decision to order sworn testimony by Trump administration officials to determine if they complied with her instruction to facilitate Abrego Garcia's return.

Judge J. Harvie Wilkinson III, who was nominated by Republican President Ronald Reagan, wrote that he and his two colleagues "cling to the hope that it is not naïve to believe our good brethren in the Executive Branch perceive the rule of law as vital to the American ethos."

"This case presents their unique chance to vindicate that value and to summon the best that is within us while there is still time," Wilkinson wrote.

The seven-page order amounts to an extraordinary condemnation of the administration's position in Abrego Garcia's case and also an ominous warning of the dangers of an escalating conflict between the judiciary and executive branches the court said threatens to "diminish both." It says the judiciary will be hurt by the "constant intimations of its illegitimacy" while the executive branch "will lose much from a public perception of its lawlessness."

When asked by reporters Thursday afternoon if he believed Abrego Garcia was entitled to due process, President Donald Trump ducked the question.

"I have to refer, again, to the lawyers," he said in the Oval Office. "I have to do what they ask me to do."

The president added: "I had heard that there were a lot of things about a certain gentleman — perhaps it was that gentleman — that would make that case be a case that's easily winnable on appeal. So we'll just have to see. I'm gonna have to respond to the lawyers."



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 64 of 82

The Justice Department didn't immediately comment on the decision. In a brief accompanying their appeal, government lawyers argued that courts do not have the authority to "press-gang the President or his agents into taking any particular act of diplomacy."

"Yet here, a single district court has inserted itself into the foreign policy of the United States and has tried to dictate it from the bench," they wrote.

The panel said the Republican president's government is "asserting a right to stash away residents of this country in foreign prisons without the semblance of due process that is the foundation of our constitutional order."

"Further, it claims in essence that because it has rid itself of custody that there is nothing that can be done. This should be shocking not only to judges, but to the intuitive sense of liberty that Americans far removed from courthouses still hold dear," Wilkinson wrote.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court said the Trump administration must work to bring back Abrego Garcia. An earlier order by U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis "properly requires the Government to 'facilitate' Abrego Garcia's release from custody in El Salvador and to ensure that his case is handled as it would have been had he not been improperly sent to El Salvador," the high court said in an unsigned order with no noted dissents.

The Justice Department appealed after Xinis on Tuesday ordered sworn testimony by at least four officials who work for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department.

The 4th Circuit panel denied the government's request for a stay of Xinis' order while they appeal.

"The relief the government is requesting is both extraordinary and premature," the opinion says. "While we fully respect the Executive's robust assertion of its Article II powers, we shall not micromanage the efforts of a fine district judge attempting to implement the Supreme Court's recent decision."

Wilkinson, the opinion's author, was regarded as a contender for the Supreme Court seat that was ultimately filled by Chief Justice John Roberts in 2005. Wilkinson's conservative pedigree may complicate White House efforts to credibly assail him as a left-leaning jurist bent on thwarting the Trump administration's agenda for political purposes, a fallback line of attack when judicial decisions run counter to the president's wishes.

Joining Wilkinson in the ruling were judges Stephanie Thacker, who was nominated by Democratic President Barack Obama, and Robert Bruce King, who was nominated by Democratic President Bill Clinton.

White House officials claim they lack the authority to bring back the Salvadoran national from his native country. Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele also said Monday that he would not return Abrego Garcia, likening it to smuggling "a terrorist into the United States."

While initially acknowledging Abrego Garcia was mistakenly deported, the administration has dug in its heels in recent days, describing him as a "terrorist" even though he was never criminally charged in the U.S.

Attorney General Pam Bondi said Wednesday that "he is not coming back to our country."

Maryland Sen. Chris Van Hollen met with Abrego Garcia in El Salvador on Thursday. Van Hollen posted a photo of the meeting on X, but he did not provide an update on Abrego Garcia's status. Bukele also posted images of the meeting, saying, "Now that he's been confirmed healthy, he gets the honor of staying in El Salvador's custody."

Administration officials have conceded that Abrego Garcia shouldn't have been sent to El Salvador, but they have insisted that he was a member of the MS-13 gang. Abrego Garcia's lawyers say there is no evidence linking him to MS-13 or any other gang.

The appeals court panel concluded that Abrego Garcia deserves due process, even if the government can connect him to a gang.

"If the government is confident of its position, it should be assured that position will prevail in proceedings to terminate the withholding of removal order," the opinion says.

Xinis also was skeptical of assertions by White House officials and Bukele that they were unable to bring back Abrego Garcia. She described their statements as "two very misguided ships passing in the night."

"The Supreme Court has spoken," Xinis said Tuesday.  
Associated Press writer Will Weissert contributed reporting.

## Trump administration takes aim at Harvard's international students and tax-exempt status

By ANNIE MA, FATIMA HUSSEIN and ALIA WONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration has escalated its ongoing battle with Harvard, threatening to block the university from enrolling international students as the president called for withdrawing Harvard's tax-exempt status.

The moves raise the stakes of the showdown between the White House and the nation's oldest, wealthiest and arguably most prestigious university, which on Monday became the first to openly defy the administration's demands related to activism on campus, antisemitism and diversity.

"I think Harvard's a disgrace," President Donald Trump told reporters Thursday.

The Department of Homeland Security ordered Harvard on Tuesday to turn over "detailed records" of its foreign student visa holders' "illegal and violent activities" by April 30. It also said it was canceling two grants to the school totaling \$2.7 million.

By taking action against international students and the school's tax status, the administration struck at two pillars of Harvard, where international students make up 27% of the campus, and the majority of the student body is in graduate school, often conducting globally prominent research. The school has risen to distinction by attracting the world's top talent and large tax-deductible gifts from the country's richest donors.

The federal government has already frozen more than \$2 billion in grants and contracts to the Ivy League institution.

Leo Gerdén, a senior from Sweden, said many international students at Harvard are "scared of speaking up" because they feel attending the school has put a target on their back.

"All student visas right now at Harvard are at risk, and what the Trump administration is trying to do is divide us," Gerdén said.

"Harvard without its international community is simply not Harvard," added Gerdén, who is studying economics and government. If the institution were unable to admit people from abroad, "it would be incredibly tough for this university, for its students, for its academic community. So we should really fight with whatever means we have to make sure that doesn't happen."

The threat to Harvard's ability to host international students comes as the Trump administration has quietly deleted the records and ended the legal status of international students at schools across the country. The students have been left with no clear recourse to regain their legal status in the U.S. They fear deportation.

At least 1,024 students at 160 colleges, universities and university systems have had their visas revoked or their legal status terminated since late March, according to an Associated Press review of university statements, correspondence with school officials and court records. Many students said they had no legal infractions aside from minor traffic violations.

Harvard's tax status under review

Some of the government's demands of Harvard touched directly on the campus activism that first triggered federal scrutiny of elite universities.

The Trump administration, in a letter on Friday, told Harvard to impose tougher discipline on protesters and to screen international students for those who are "hostile to the American values."

It also called for broad leadership reforms at the university, changes to admissions policies and the removal of college recognition for some student clubs. The government also demanded Harvard audit its faculty and student body to ensure wide viewpoints in every department and, if necessary, diversify by admitting additional students and hiring new faculty.

On Monday, Harvard said it would not comply, citing the First Amendment. The following day, Trump

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 66 of 82

took to his Truth Social platform, questioning whether the university should lose its tax-exempt status "if it keeps pushing political, ideological, and terrorist inspired/supporting 'Sickness?'"

The White House suggested IRS scrutiny of Harvard's tax status had already started before the president's social media post. Federal tax law prohibits senior members of the executive branch from requesting that an IRS employee conduct or terminate an audit or investigation.

"Any forthcoming actions by the IRS will be conducted independently of the President, and investigations into any institution's violations of its tax status were initiated prior to the President's TRUTH," White House spokesman Harrison Fields said in an email Thursday.

However, a person familiar with the matter said the Treasury Department directed Andrew De Mello, the IRS acting chief counsel, to begin the process of revoking Harvard's tax-exempt status shortly after Trump's post. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal matters.

Trump told reporters Thursday that a decision on revoking the university's tax-exempt status hadn't been made yet. "Tax-exempt status, it's a privilege. It's really a privilege. And it's been abused by a lot more than Harvard," Trump said. "So we'll see how it all works out."

Tax exemptions enable universities to receive large donations from major funders who want to decrease their tax burdens, which was instrumental in helping Harvard amass the nation's largest university endowment at \$53 billion.

Harvard president says school will not submit to government orders

The Trump administration has already hampered Harvard's ability to fund its research and operations. After Harvard President Alan Garber said Monday the university would not bend to the government's demands, the White House announced the freeze of more than \$2.2 billion in multi-year grants and \$60 million in contracts.

The hold on federal money for research marked the seventh time the administration has taken such a step at one of the nation's most elite colleges. Republicans say the schools have allowed antisemitism and racial discrimination to fester in the form of pro-Palestinian protests and have promoted diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives contrary to the administration's directives.

Separately, the House Oversight Committee said Thursday that it would open an investigation into Harvard, accusing the school of a "lack of compliance with civil rights laws."

In a statement Thursday, the university reiterated: "Harvard will not surrender its independence or relinquish its constitutional rights." Harvard, the school said, "will continue to comply with the law and expect the Administration to do the same."

Christopher Rufo, who has pioneered several GOP strategies related to education, said the Trump administration should use against Harvard the same tools it used during the Civil Rights Movement to force desegregation, including stripping nonprofit status. Rufo said Harvard has discriminated against white and Asian American students, citing events such as graduation celebrations and a 2021 theater performance "exclusively for Black-identifying audience members."

"Cut the funding and watch the university implode," he said Tuesday on social media.

Nonprofit status, which is required for donations to be tax deductible, is contingent on an organization following IRS rules governing lobbying, political campaign activity and annual reporting obligations, among other requirements.

While "it's easy for a 501(c)(3) organization to maintain its tax exempt status," according to IRS publications, it "can be just as easy to lose it."

Former Harvard President Larry Summers, who also served as Treasury secretary under former President Bill Clinton, decried the threat to remove Harvard's status.

"Any self-respecting Treasury Secretary would resign rather than have the Department be complicit in the weaponization of the IRS against a political adversary of the President," he said on social media.

Trump's campaign to force change at elite universities started at Columbia University, which initially agreed to several demands after the Trump administration froze \$400 million of its federal funding.

But Columbia took a more emboldened tone after Harvard's defiance. Columbia's acting president, Claire



Shipman, said in a campus message Monday that some of the demands "are not subject to negotiation" and that she read of Harvard's rejection with "great interest."

Archon Fung, a professor of democracy at Harvard, called for "friends of academic freedom" and higher education to stand together.

"The government has an enormous amount of power — taxing power, investigatory power," Fung said. "I don't know who wins that struggle in the end."

## **UnitedHealthcare killing suspect Luigi Mangione indicted as prosecutors push for death penalty**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Luigi Mangione was indicted Thursday on a federal murder charge in the killing of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, a required step as prosecutors work to make good on the Trump administration's order to seek the death penalty for what it called a "premeditated, cold-blooded assassination that shocked America."

Mangione's indictment, returned by a federal grand jury in Manhattan, includes a charge of murder through use of a firearm, which carries the possibility of the death penalty. The indictment, which mirrors a criminal complaint brought after Mangione's arrest last December, also charges him with stalking and a gun offense.

Mangione's lawyers have argued that U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi's announcement this month ordering prosecutors to seek the death penalty was a "political stunt" that corrupted the grand jury process and deprived him of his constitutional right to due process.

Mangione, a 26-year-old Ivy League graduate from a prominent Maryland real estate family, faces separate federal and state murder charges after authorities say he gunned down Thompson, 50, outside a Manhattan hotel on Dec. 4 as the executive arrived for UnitedHealthcare's annual investor conference.

Surveillance video showed a masked gunman shooting Thompson from behind. Police say the words "delay," "deny" and "depose" were scrawled on the ammunition, mimicking a phrase commonly used to describe how insurers avoid paying claims.

The killing and ensuing five-day search leading to Mangione's arrest rattled the business community, with some health insurers deleting photos of executives from their websites and switching to online shareholder meetings. At the same time, some health insurance critics have rallied around Mangione as a stand-in for frustrations over coverage denials and hefty medical bills.

Mangione's federal indictment came just before a deadline Friday for prosecutors to either file one or seek a delay. It was not immediately clear when he will be brought to federal court in Manhattan for an arraignment.

A message seeking comment was left for a spokesperson for Mangione's defense team.

Bondi announced April 1 that she was directing federal prosecutors in Manhattan to seek the death penalty against Mangione. It was the first time the Justice Department said it was pursuing capital punishment since President Donald Trump returned to office Jan. 20 with a vow to resume federal executions after they were halted under the previous administration.

In her announcement, Bondi described Thompson's killing as "an act of political violence."

Mangione's lawyer, Karen Friedman Agnifilo, countered in a subsequent court filing that "the United States government intends to kill Mr. Mangione as a political stunt." She wants prosecutors blocked from seeking the death penalty.

Friedman Agnifilo and her co-counsel argued that Bondi's announcement — which was followed by posts to her Instagram account and a television appearance — violated long-established Justice Department protocols and "indelibly prejudiced" the grand jury process that ultimately led to his indictment.

Mangione remains locked up at a federal jail in Brooklyn. His state charges carry a maximum punishment of life in prison.

Prosecutors have said the two cases will proceed on parallel tracks, with the state case expected to go

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 68 of 82

to trial first. It wasn't immediately clear if Mangione's indictment Thursday will change the order.

Mangione was arrested Dec. 9 in Altoona, Pennsylvania, about 230 miles (about 370 kilometers) west of New York City and whisked to Manhattan by plane and helicopter.

Police said Mangione had a 9mm handgun that matched the one used in the shooting and other items including a notebook in which they say he expressed hostility toward the health insurance industry and wealthy executives.

Among the entries, prosecutors said, was one from August 2024 that said "the target is insurance" because "it checks every box" and one from October that describes an intent to "wack" an insurance company CEO. UnitedHealthcare, the largest U.S. health insurer, has said Mangione was never a client.

Friedman Agnifilo has said she would seek to suppress some of the evidence.

## **The Menendez brothers' bid for a shorter sentence and possible release is delayed again**

By JAIMIE DING and ANDREW DALTON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Erik and Lyle Menendez's bid for shorter sentences and a shot at freedom has again been delayed due to disputes among prosecutors and the brothers' lawyers.

Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Michael Jesic on Thursday set a new hearing for May 9 to tackle two issues in the brothers' resentencing case: whether material from risk assessments completed by the state parole board at the governor's order can be used in court, and whether the Los Angeles County district attorney should be removed as prosecutor in the case. The resentencing hearings will be on pause until those issues are resolved next month.

The brothers were sentenced in 1996 to life in prison without the possibility of parole for fatally shooting their entertainment executive father Jose Menendez and mother Kitty Menendez in their Beverly Hills home in 1989. The brothers were 18 and 21 at the time of the killings. Defense attorneys argued the brothers acted out of self-defense after years of sexual abuse by their father. Prosecutors said the brothers killed their parents for a multimillion-dollar inheritance.

The case has captured the public's attention for decades, and the Netflix drama "Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story" and a subsequent documentary brought new attention. Reporters from dozens of media outlets crowded outside the courthouse Thursday and vied for space inside.

Confusion and more delays

Gov. Gavin Newsom's office notified the district attorney's office and the court earlier this week that part of the risk assessment he recently ordered had been completed. Prosecutors filed a motion late Wednesday to delay the resentencing hearings so the court could obtain those reports and consider them in its decision.

There was confusion in the courtroom Thursday over exactly what those reports contained and if they could be used.

"We believed it constituted additional facts that the court should consider in deciding whether or not the Menendez brothers do pose a risk of danger to society," Los Angeles County District Attorney Nathan Hochman said outside court.

The resentencing hearings, which were supposed to take place Thursday and Friday, center on whether the brothers have been rehabilitated in prison and deserve a lesser sentence that could make them eligible for release.

Former Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón had requested their sentences be reduced to 50 years with the possibility of parole. But their defense attorney, Mark Geragos, said Thursday he'll ask the judge to reduce their charges to manslaughter, allowing them to be immediately released.

The brothers' hearing has been delayed several times. An initial hearing scheduled for January was postponed due to the LA fires and prosecutors' attempt to withdraw their sentencing request.

Arguing in the courtroom

Neither the judge nor the brothers' attorneys had seen the parole board report that spurred heated arguments in the packed courtroom on Thursday.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 69 of 82

"I need clarification from the governor's office," Jesic said. "This is stupid."

Prosecutors, who had seen the report intended for a separate June 13 parole board hearing, argued they should be able to use it. Deputy District Attorney Habib Balian said the report was relevant and necessary.

"If there is a report out there assessing the risk of violence, how do we not use it?" Habib said.

The governor's office confirmed that part of the risk assessment was shared with relevant parties for review 60 days before the June clemency hearing, per California law. They also notified the judge of the status of the report and offered to share it if requested, but said it was not a stand-alone risk assessment.

The brothers watched the proceedings via video from a correctional facility near San Diego, and could be seen in their blue prison garb on a screen in the courtroom. They showed no obvious reaction to the arguments.

Family denounces Hochman

Geragos angrily denounced Hochman for discussing the parole board report during a morning news conference and said he'll file a motion to remove Hochman from the case. Hochman was elected in November 2024 and does not support resentencing.

Hochman last month reversed his office's support for the brothers' resentencing, saying they have not admitted to lies told during their trial about why they killed their parents, or that they asked their friends to lie for them in court. Hochman's office has also said it does not believe that the brothers were sexually abused by their father and that by speaking about their childhood abuse, they have not taken complete responsibility for the crime.

The extended Menendez family, with the exception of an uncle who died last month, has said they fully forgive the brothers for what they did and want them to be freed. The brothers' attorneys say their clients have worked hard over the decades to better themselves and give back to the prison community.

Menendez cousin Tamara Goodell filed a complaint in March alleging Hochman had violated her rights as a victim under California law and was "hostile, dismissive and patronizing" during a meeting with the family.

"I don't feel safe with him," Goodell said after Thursday's hearing.

Then, prosecutors showed a gruesome photo of the 1989 crime scene during a hearing last Friday without warning.

"That's not dignity," said Bryan Freedman, who is representing Menendez relatives. "That's disrespect. That's harassment."

Balian apologized for the lack of a warning, but added, "Erik and Lyle Menendez caused that carnage, not me."

## Google's digital ad network declared an illegal monopoly, joining its search engine in penalty box

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Google has been branded an abusive monopolist by a federal judge for the second time in less than a year, this time for illegally exploiting some of its online marketing technology to boost the profits fueling an internet empire currently worth \$1.8 trillion.

The ruling issued Thursday by U.S. District Judge Leonie Brinkema in Virginia comes on the heels of a separate decision in August that concluded Google's namesake search engine has been illegally leveraging its dominance to stifle competition and innovation.

After the U.S. Justice Department targeted Google's ubiquitous search engine during President Donald Trump's first term, the same agency went after the company's lucrative digital advertising network in 2023 during President Joe Biden's ensuing administration in an attempt to undercut the power that Google has amassed since its inception in a Silicon Valley garage in 1998.

Although antitrust regulators prevailed both times, the battle is likely to continue for several more years as Google tries to overturn the two monopoly decisions in appeals while forging ahead in the new and highly lucrative technological frontier of artificial intelligence.

The next step in the latest case is a penalty phase that will likely begin late this year or early next year.



# Groton Daily Independent

**Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 70 of 82**

The same so-called remedy hearings in the search monopoly case are scheduled to begin Monday in Washington D.C., where Justice Department lawyers will try to convince U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta to impose a sweeping punishment that includes a proposed requirement for Google to sell its Chrome web browser.

Brinkema's 115-page decision centers on the marketing machine that Google has spent the past 17 years building around its search engine and other widely used products and services, including its Chrome browser, YouTube video site and digital maps.

The system was largely built around a series of acquisitions that started with Google's \$3.2 billion purchase of online ad specialist DoubleClick in 2008. U.S. regulators approved the deals at the time they were made before realizing that they had given the Mountain View, California, company a platform to manipulate the prices in an ecosystem that a wide range of websites depend on for revenue and provides a vital marketing connection to consumers.

The Justice Department lawyers argued that Google built and maintained dominant market positions in a technology trifecta used by website publishers to sell ad space on their webpages, as well as the technology that advertisers use to get their ads in front of consumers, and the ad exchanges that conduct automated auctions in fractions of a second to match buyer and seller.

After evaluating the evidence presented during a lengthy trial that concluded just before Thanksgiving last year, Brinkema reached a decision that rejected the Justice Department's assertions that Google has been mistreating advertisers while concluding the company has been abusing its power to stifle competition to the detriment of online publishers forced to rely on its network for revenue.

"For over a decade, Google has tied its publisher ad server and ad exchange together through contractual policies and technological integration, which enabled the company to establish and protect its monopoly power in these two markets," Brinkema wrote. "Google further entrenched its monopoly power by imposing anticompetitive policies on its customers and eliminating desirable product features."

Despite that rebuke, Brinkema also concluded that Google didn't break the law when it snapped up Doubleclick nor when it followed up that deal a few years later by buying another service, Admeld.

The Justice Department "failed to show that the DoubleClick and Admeld acquisitions were anticompetitive," Brinkema wrote. "Although these acquisitions helped Google gain monopoly power in two adjacent ad tech markets, they are insufficient, when viewed in isolation, to prove that Google acquired or maintained this monopoly power through exclusionary practices."

That finding may help Google fight off any attempt to force it to sell its advertising technology to stop its monopolistic behavior.

"This is a landmark victory in the ongoing fight to stop Google from monopolizing the digital public square," U.S. Attorney General Pamela Bondi said in a statement.

In a statement, Google said it will appeal the ruling.

"We disagree with the Court's decision regarding our publisher tools," said Lee-Anne Mulholland, Google's vice president of regulatory affairs. "Publishers have many options and they choose Google because our ad tech tools are simple, affordable and effective."

Analysts such as Brian Pitz of BMO Markets had been predicting that Google would likely lose the case, helping to brace investors for the latest setback to the company and its corporate parent, Alphabet Inc., whose shares declined by about 1% Thursday to close at \$151.22. Alphabet's stock has plunged by 20% so far this year.

On top of the setbacks in search and advertising, Google also is fighting a federal jury's 2023 verdict that determined its Play Store for apps on smartphones powered by its Android software is also an illegal monopoly.

As it did in the search monopoly case, Google vehemently denied the Justice Department's allegations. Its lawyers argued the government largely based its case on an antiquated concept of a market that existed a decade ago while underestimating a highly competitive market for advertising spending that includes the likes of Facebook parent Meta Platforms, Amazon, Microsoft and Comcast.

The market as drawn in the Justice Department's case didn't include ads that appear on mobile apps,

streaming television services, or other platforms to which internet users have increasingly migrated, prompting Google lawyer Karen Dunn to compare the government's definition a "time capsule with a BlackBerry, an iPod and a Blockbuster video card" during her opening statement when the trial began last September.

At trial, the Justice Department's lawyers emphasized the harm to news publishers that has arisen from Google's alleged dominance of the marketplace. Witnesses from Gannett, the publisher of USA Today and other newspapers, and News Corp., the publisher of The Wall Street Journal, testified about the difficulties they have faced and what they said was a lack of alternatives to Google's ad tech. Those companies rely on online advertising to fund their news operations and make their articles free to consumers on the internet, government lawyers have argued.

Now the government is in position to try to dismantle that byzantine ad system. When the case was filed more than two years ago during the Biden administration, the Justice Department asserted Google should be forced to sell, at a minimum, its Ad Manager product, which includes the technology used by website publishers and the ad exchange.

## **AP and the Trump administration argue over presidential access before appeals judges**

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

The Associated Press and the Trump administration returned to a courtroom Thursday — and will be in another on Friday — as part of the high-stakes battle over who can control which journalists are able to question the president.

Lawyers argued before a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals about putting in place a lower court order last week that the administration stop excluding AP from covering events in places like the Oval Office and Air Force One. It's not clear when those judges will make their determination.

On Friday, the two sides will go before the author of last week's decision, U.S. District Court Judge Trevor N. McFadden. The AP has asked him to enforce his ruling.

AP reporters and photographers have been blocked since President Trump objected to the outlet's decision not to rename the Gulf of Mexico. McFadden said last week the AP shouldn't be excluded just because Trump disagrees with them. Since then, AP says the White House is ignoring the order and continuing to keep its journalists out; Trump's team says it has put a new rotation system in place for these events, and it hasn't been AP's turn yet.

Through Eric McArthur, deputy assistant attorney general, the administration argued that access to the Oval Office is up to the president, just like he can invite Laura Ingraham of Fox News Channel in for a personal interview and not MSNBC's Rachel Maddow.

Charles Tobin, the AP's lawyer, said the president can't be ordered by a court to speak or answer a specific news outlet's questions. But when he invites reporters to cover him in a public setting covered by a predetermined "pool" of journalists, he can't discriminate on the basis of viewpoint.

"The White House has conceded this is all about trying to control a message, trying to control the viewpoint of The Associated Press," he said.

Illustrating a fine line the judges will be asked to walk, Tobin conceded that a president is welcome to invite 20 reporters whose viewpoints he agrees with in for a talk. "Isn't that awfully close to what is happening here?" asked Judge Gregory Katsas, a Trump appointee.

The difference is in excluding rather than inviting people, Tobin said — a point leaped upon by his opponent.

"President Trump is under no obligation to run the press pool the way his predecessors did or even the way he did during his first term," McArthur said. "If he can choose 20 people because of viewpoint, he can certainly exclude them because of viewpoint."

Judges also expressed some worry that courts may be called upon to micromanage what journalists get to cover the president and who can't.

Tobin returned to the idea put forth in McFadden's decision that it's a violation of the First Amendment

for Trump to exclude the AP because he disagreed with some of its reporting.

"The president of the United States does not have discretion to violate the U.S. Constitution," he said.

## **Pennsylvania intruder faced little resistance as Gov. Josh Shapiro and his family slept**

By MARYCLAIRE DALE and MARK SCOLFARO Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — The arsonist who broke into the Pennsylvania governor's residence while Gov. Josh Shapiro and his extended family slept upstairs on the first night of Passover encountered little resistance as he scaled a security fence, smashed windows with a hammer, ignited two Molotov cocktails and crawled inside before slipping off into the night minutes later.

That suggests multiple security failures, according to a former FBI agent who wondered why burglar alarms, motion detectors and other devices did not thwart the intruder sooner.

"He never should have gotten over the fence. He never should have gotten across the yard and to the house. He never should have broken the window. He never should have gotten inside," said retired FBI Special Agent J.J. Klaver, now a security consultant.

The arson early Sunday occurred just hours after Shapiro hosted a Seder for his family and members of the Jewish community. No one was injured, but the fire caused, by one official's estimate, millions of dollars in damage.

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't jarring, scary to see that in the light of day, to see the areas where we'd either make memories privately up in the residence with our kids -- hanging out, laughing, enjoying ourselves — or in the more public spaces where we've been able to welcome so many people to our home," Shapiro said Thursday. "But we're going to rebuild from that. We're going to be stronger."

White House, queen have faced intruders

Experts said it can be difficult to maintain security at official residences, like the one in Harrisburg, that also open their doors to the public for tours and events.

Intruders over the years have managed to breach both the White House and the queen's bedroom at Buckingham Palace. Meanwhile, Paul Pelosi, the husband of former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, was violently attacked inside their private home in California in 2022.

The Pennsylvania suspect, an unemployed mechanic from Harrisburg, told police he felt hatred toward Shapiro, and referenced Palestinians in a 911 call that day, according to court documents.

Still, Cody Balmer's specific motive remains unclear, and both his family and lawyers have said he has struggled with serious mental health issues. Balmer, 38, remains in custody without bail while his lawyers seek a competency evaluation.

Police say the attack took just minutes

State police, who provide the governor's security detail, pledged to hire an outside expert to review the breach and to assess the need for added security. They said the intruder came and went in a matter of minutes early Sunday as troopers on duty spotted the threat on security cameras and searched the grounds while he was still there.

"It was a very quick event," Lt. Col. George Bivens said.

Shapiro, a high-profile Democrat on the national stage who was awakened about 2 a.m. Sunday by his state police detail, has expressed confidence in the agency while confirming that security measures would be bolstered.

Klaver, who is based near Philadelphia, has planned site visits involving the governor and said Shapiro typically has several members of his security team in tow. In addition to staff, an array of high-tech systems can help police keep up with ever-evolving threats, another expert said.

"As people and groups get more creative, that's obviously where you need to adjust and learn. You're always looking to do things better," said John Geffre, general manager of Unlimited Technology, an Exton, Pa.-based security systems integrator.

Yet Balmer told police he relied on a rudimentary method to make the explosives — gasoline from his



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 73 of 82

lawn mower and a few beer bottles. And he said he planned to hit Shapiro with the small sledgehammer if he encountered him.

Expert: He shouldn't have gotten that close

Mohsin Siddiqui, 40, who manages a Sunoco station across the street, said he doesn't often notice security outside the residence, but he never thought they would need it. The events of last weekend took him by surprise. The residence is about a mile north of the Capitol complex, in a mixed-use neighborhood beside the Susquehanna River.

"It's a peaceful area," Siddiqui said Thursday. "We had no idea this could even happen."

Shapiro splits his time between the mansion that has housed governors since it was built in the 1960s and a home in Abington, a Philadelphia suburb.

The security review, Klaver said, should focus on "potential threats or vulnerabilities for any given location, and protecting the people in that location."

Every state has a centralized emergency office open round-the-clock that could monitor security system feeds, he said.

"There should have been electronic security that would have detected all of that before he got close enough," he said of the attacker, "so that as soon as he broke the perimeter of the property, the state trooper there should have been alerted, should have been there, and should have taken him into custody."

## **In his words: Shapiro recounts evacuating arson fire in pajamas at Pennsylvania governor's residence**

By MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro on Thursday provided new details about the arson fire early Sunday that prompted his family's evacuation from the governor's official residence in Harrisburg, recounting how wife and four kids and their two dogs — Bo and Bentley — were awakened by state police and guided to safety.

Shapiro spoke to reporters after his family served a catered lunch to Harrisburg firefighters in thanks for their role in responding to the blaze that is estimated to have caused millions in damage to the building and its contents. No one was hurt.

A suspect has been charged, and the motive is under investigation.

Shapiro is a first-term Democrat considered a potential candidate for president in 2028.

Here's what Shapiro had to say about the attack, which burned the same room where his family and guests had a Passover Seder a few hours earlier.

A fire hours after holiday meal

"We concluded our Seder maybe around 10ish or so at night," and guests, family and others were in private areas on the first floor, he said.

"Everybody was just enjoying one another and spending time celebrating not just the holiday but each other and enjoying each other's company," he said. Around midnight, they went upstairs and "spent an hour yelling at the kids to go to bed and they didn't listen."

"Said goodnight to the kids, got the dogs situated, and I'd say probably fell asleep around 1 o'clock in the morning," Shapiro said.

Banging on the door

"Less than an hour later, I heard yelling in the hallway, which was not like our kids' voices. It was one of the state troopers running down the hallway, and he banged on the door. I don't know how he did it, but it wasn't a knock. It was more of a bang," he said.

Shapiro said he and his wife, Lori, were told there was a fire and they had to evacuate immediately.

"I would say within just a few seconds we ran to each of the doors in the hallway, to open them up and get the kids up, get the dogs up and usher everybody down a back stairwell," he said. "And we followed the troopers out to the driveway area, and we were asked multiple times if everyone was present and accounted for. They were. Troopers and Capitol Police kept us safe." Firefighters converged on the property.

Shapiro said first responders repeatedly made sure no one was missing.

Cold and misty, in pajamas

"I remember it being a cold and kind of misty night. We were all a little chilly. Everybody was in their pajamas. And we just kind of huddled up and just tried to keep the kids calm and keep everybody calm," he said. They did not realize from where they were just how much damage had been done to the other side of the house.

Emergency responders kept arriving.

"We were able to gather a few items up from the house," he said. "And then we were on our way to a safe location for all of us, and we got the kids to sleep. Got them settled."

The next morning Shapiro returned to the fire scene.

Returning to see the damage

Shapiro and his wife were again at the residence on Thursday and examined the damage to the private areas where his family lives and the public spaces where they welcome guests.

"To see those spots that are charred and burned out and glass broken around the areas that before were happy, special places for us is tough," he said.

## **Supreme Court keeps hold on Trump's restrictions on birthright citizenship but sets May arguments**

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Thursday kept on hold President Donald Trump's restrictions on birthright citizenship but agreed to hear arguments on the issue in May.

Trump's executive order to end birthright citizenship for the children of people who are in the U.S. illegally has been halted nationwide by three district courts around the country. Appeals courts have declined to disturb those rulings.

The Republican administration had sought to narrow those orders to allow for the policy to take effect in parts or most of the country while court challenges play out. That is expected to be the focus of the high court arguments on May 15.

Birthright citizenship automatically makes anyone born in the United States an American citizen, including children born to mothers in the country illegally. The right was enshrined soon after the Civil War in the Constitution's 14th Amendment.

Trump and his supporters have argued that there should be tougher standards for becoming an American citizen, which he called "a priceless and profound gift" in the executive order he signed soon after becoming president again in January.

The Trump administration has asserted that children of noncitizens are not "subject to the jurisdiction" of the United States, a phrase used in the amendment, and therefore are not entitled to citizenship.

Trump said he is "so happy" the Supreme Court will hear arguments.

"I think the case has been so misunderstood," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office.

He noted that the 14th Amendment, granting automatic citizenship to people born in the U.S., was ratified right after the Civil War. He suggested that means it is "all about slavery."

"If you look at it that way, we would win that case," Trump said.

But states, immigrants and rights groups that have sued to block the executive order have accused the administration of trying to unsettle the broader understanding of birthright citizenship that has been accepted since the amendment's adoption.

Reacting to the court's order Thursday, New Jersey Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin, leading one of the lawsuits, said birthright citizenship "cannot be turned on or off at the whims of a single man."

Judges so far have uniformly ruled against the administration.

The Justice Department argues that individual judges lack the power to give nationwide effect to their rulings.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 75 of 82

The administration instead wants the justices to allow Trump's plan to go into effect for everyone except the handful of people and groups that sued. Failing that, the administration says that the plan could remain blocked for now in the 22 states that sued. New Hampshire is covered by a separate order that is not at issue in this case.

As a further fallback, the administration asked "at a minimum" to be allowed to make public announcements about how it plans to carry out the policy if it eventually is allowed to take effect.

However, while the emergency appeal is not directly focused on the validity of the order, the justices probably will find it hard to avoid that underlying issue.

If the court is inclined to agree with the administration, it risks creating a confusing patchwork of rules in which the state in which a child is born could determine whether citizenship is granted automatically.

Several justices have raised concerns in the past about nationwide, or universal, injunctions, but the court has never ruled on the matter.

The administration made a similar argument in Trump's first term, including in the Supreme Court fight over his ban on travel to the U.S. from several Muslim majority countries.

The court eventually upheld Trump's policy, but did not take up the issue of nationwide injunctions.

The Justice Department has complained that the use of these broad court orders "thwart the Executive Branch's crucial policies on matters ranging from border security, to international relations, to national security, to military readiness."

The administration faces more than 150 lawsuits over Trump's fast-paced efforts to reshape the federal government. Judges have issued dozens of orders delaying the president's agenda.

## **Cable car accident in southern Italy kills at least 4 people**

MILAN (AP) — A cable car carrying tourists south of Naples crashed to the ground Thursday after a cable snapped, killing at least four people and critically injuring one, officials said.

The snapped cable brought both the upward and downward-going cable cars to a halt as they traversed Monte Faito in the town of Castellammare di Stabia. The upward cable car eventually crashed, causing the fatalities and injury, while eight tourists and an operator were evacuated from the downward cable car, Naples Prefect Michele de Bari said.

"The traction cable broke. The emergency brake downstream worked, but evidently not the one on the cabin that was entering the station," said Castellammare Mayor Luigi Vicinanza.

Italy's alpine rescue, along with firefighters, police and civil protection services responded to the accident.

The accident occurred just a week after the cable car, popular for its views of Mount Vesuvius and the Bay of Naples, reopened for the season.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni expressed her condolences for the victims and their families and said she was in touch with rescuers. She was in Washington, where she met with U.S. President Donald Trump.

## **Trump says he's in 'no rush' to end tariffs as he meets with Italy's Meloni**

By JOSH BOAK and COLLEN BARRY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Thursday he is in "no rush" to reach any trade deals because he views tariffs as making the United States wealthy. But he suggested while meeting with Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni that it would be easy to find an agreement with the European Union and others.

Trump played down the likelihood of an accelerated timeline to wrap up deals, saying other countries "want to make deals more than I do."

"We're in no rush," said Trump, hinting he has leverage because other countries want access to U.S. consumers.

Even though Trump has a warm relationship with Meloni, she was unable in their meeting to change his mind on tariffs.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 76 of 82

"No, tariffs are making us rich. We were losing a lot of money under Biden," Trump said of his predecessor, Democrat Joe Biden. "And now that whole tide is turned."

Trump is convinced that his devotion to tariffs will yield unprecedented wealth for his country even as the stock market has dropped, interest on U.S. debt has risen and CEOs are warning of price increases and job losses in what increasingly looks like a threat to the existing structure of the world economy.

A bond market panic was enough for Trump to partially pull back on his tariffs, causing him to pause his 20% import taxes on the EU for 90 days and charge a baseline 10% instead. Meloni's visit showed the challenge faced even by leaders who enjoy a rapport with Trump.

After they met, Trump told reporters that trade talks were easier than other business negotiations such as mergers. He said he had spoken with Chinese officials about tariffs "a lot" and the amount of his import taxes could be influenced by China approving a sale of the social media site TikTok. He also seemed to contradict his previous statement Thursday morning about being in no rush to make trade deals "over the next three or four weeks."

Even then, Trump showed no interest in fully severing his tariffs.

"Tariff negotiations are actually simpler than everyone has said," Trump said. "A number of people are going to pay that number or they're going to decide to go elsewhere if there is such a place. There really is no elsewhere."

Meloni had, in a sense, been "knighted" to represent the EU at a critical juncture in the fast-evolving trade war that has stoked recession fears. The U.S. administration has belittled its European counterparts for not doing enough on national security while threatening their economies with tariffs, sparking deep uncertainty about the future of the trans-Atlantic alliance.

She sought to portray the U.S. and Europe as natural allies in Western civilization and said it was important to "try to sit down and find solution" to tensions over trade and national security.

"The goal for me is to make the West great again," Meloni told Trump.

The EU is defending what it calls "the most important commercial relationship in the world," with annual trade with the U.S. totaling 1.6 trillion euros (\$1.8 trillion). It was unclear, based on Meloni's public interactions with Trump, whether the premier has a clear understanding of what Trump wants as part of an agreement.

His administration has said its tariffs would enable trade negotiations that would box out China, the world's dominant manufacturer. But Trump maintains that rivals and allies alike have taken advantage of the U.S. on trade, a position that has frustrated long-standing partners and raised concerns about whether Trump is a trustworthy dealmaker.

Trump tried to push back against claims that his tariffs are harming the economy, saying that gasoline and egg prices are already dropping. The president blamed the Federal Reserve for interest rates rising on U.S. debt. Rates largely increased because investors were worried about Trump's tariff plans and they became less willing to buy Treasury notes, while the central bank has held steady on its own benchmark rates because of economic uncertainty.

"We have very little inflation," Trump said. "I would say we have essentially no inflation."

The EU had already engaged with Trump administration officials in Washington. Maroš Šefčovič, the European Commissioner for trade and economic security, said he met Monday with Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick and U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer. Šefčovič said afterward on X that it would "require a significant joint effort on both sides" to get to zero tariffs and work on nontariff trade barriers, with Trump's team specifically objecting to Europe's use of value added taxes.

As the head of a far-right party, Meloni is ideologically aligned with Trump on issues including curbing migration, promoting traditional values and skepticism toward multilateral institutions. But stark differences have emerged in Meloni's unwavering support for Ukraine after Russia's invasion in February 2022.

The two leaders discussed the war and Italy's role in an eventual postwar reconstruction of Ukraine. Trump has previously pressed Meloni to increase Italy's defense spending, which last year fell well below the 2% of gross domestic product target for countries in the NATO military alliance. Italy's spending, at 1.49% of its gross domestic product, is among the lowest in Europe.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 77 of 82

"We didn't speak about how much that percentage would be increased, even though we are truly aware that the theme of defense is particularly important," Meloni said.

Despite the differences on Ukraine and defense spending, Meloni is seen by some in the U.S. administration as a vital bridge to Europe.

She was the only European leader to attend Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration and she has responded with restraint as shifts in U.S. policy under Trump have frayed the U.S.-European alliance. Meloni has denounced the tariffs as "wrong" and warned that "dividing the West would be disastrous for everyone" after Trump's heated White House exchange with Ukraine's president.

Italy maintains a 40 billion euro (\$45 billion) trade surplus with the U.S., its largest with any country, fueled by Americans' appetite for Italian sparkling wine, foodstuffs like Parmigiano Reggiano hard cheese and Parma ham, and Italian luxury fashion. These are all sectors critical to the Italian economy, and mostly supported by small- and medium-sized producers who are core center-right voters.

The meeting comes against the backdrop of growing concerns over global uncertainty generated by the escalating tariff wars. Italy's growth forecast for this year has already been slashed from 1% to 0.5% as a result.

The White House has imposed tariffs on much of the world, arguing that other countries have taken advantage of the U.S., as evidenced by its trade deficits. But with the 90-day pause, it increased Trump's tariffs on China to 145% while keep separate ones as much as 25% on Canada, Mexico, autos, steel and aluminum.

On Wednesday, Trump met with Japan's chief trade negotiator, Ryosei Akazawa. Trump, on social media, summarized the meeting as achieving "Big progress!" but he did not offer any specifics.

China is simultaneously seeking to strike deals that could possibly undercut claims made by Trump that his tariffs will ultimately lead to more domestic factory jobs and stronger growth.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said Thursday the administration is working on the "big 15 economies" first when it comes to trade deals. He said South Korean officials will visit Washington next week.

## Believers say microdosing psychedelics helps them. Scientists are trying to measure the claims

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Microdosing is gaining popularity with a new breed of health seekers. These self-experimenters take a very small amount of psilocybin mushrooms or LSD to try to reduce anxiety, stress and depression. Some claim the practice gives them access to joy, creativity and connection they can't get otherwise.

This isn't a full-blown acid trip — or even close. If you see visions, it's not a microdose. People who microdose don't do it every day. Instead, they take tiny doses intermittently, on a schedule or when they feel it could be beneficial.

One small study suggests any psychological benefits come from users' expectations — the placebo effect. But the science is still new and research is ongoing.

The substances are illegal in most places, but the wave of scientific research focused on the benefits of supervised hallucinatory experiences has spurred Oregon and Colorado to legalize psychedelic therapy. Further opening the door to microdosing, a handful of cities have officially directed police to make psychedelics a low priority for enforcement.

What are people who microdose reporting?

"I started microdosing and within a couple of months, I had a general sense of well-being that I hadn't had in so long," said Marine Corps combat veteran Matt Metzger.

He grows his own mushrooms in Olympia, Washington, where psilocybin has been decriminalized. Taking small amounts of psilocybin helps him cope with PTSD, he said.

In Loveland, Colorado, Aubrie Gates said microdosing psilocybin has made her a better parent and enhanced her creativity.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 78 of 82

"It makes you feel viscerally in your body a new way of being, a more healthy way of being," Gates said. "And so instead of just like thinking with your conscious mind, 'Oh, I need to be more present,' you feel what it feels like to be more present."

What does the science say about microdosing?

These kinds of claims are hard to measure in the lab, say scientists studying microdosing.

For starters, belief is so important to the experience that empty capsules can produce the same effects.

In one study involving people who microdose, participants didn't know until afterward whether they had spent four weeks taking their usual microdose or placebos. Psychological measures improved after four weeks for everyone in the study, regardless of whether they were taking microdoses or empty capsules.

"It appears that I was indeed taking placebos throughout the trial. I'm quite astonished," wrote one of the study participants. "It seems I was able to generate a powerful 'altered consciousness' experience based only (on) the expectation around the possibility of a microdose."

Scientists haven't found lasting effects on creativity or cognition, according to a review of a handful of small placebo-controlled trials of microdosing LSD.

One small study did find glimmers of an effect of small LSD doses on vigor and elation in people with mild depression when compared with a placebo.

"It may only work in some people and not in other people, so it makes it hard for us to measure it under laboratory conditions," said University of Chicago neuroscience researcher Harriet de Wit, who led the research.

The potential has spurred an Australian company to conduct early trials of microdoses of LSD for severe depression and in cancer patients experiencing despair.

Meanwhile, few rigorous studies of psilocybin microdosing have been done.

Psilocybin mushrooms are the most often used among psychedelic drugs, according to a report by the nonpartisan Rand research group. Rand estimates that 8 million people in the U.S. used psilocybin in 2023 and half of them reported microdosing the last time they used it.

A few words of caution about microdosing

Even microdosing advocates caution that the long-term effects have not been studied in humans.

Other warnings: Unregulated products from shady sources could contain harmful substances. And accidentally taking too much could cause disturbing sensations.

The nonprofit Fireside Project offers free phone support for people during a psychedelic experience and has received hundreds of calls about microdosing.

"People may call just to simply process their experience," said project founder Josh White, who microdoses the plant iboga and LSD to "continue to deepen the insight about my life" that he gained in a full-blown psychedelic experience.

Balazs Szigeti of University of California San Francisco, who has studied microdosing, said it may be a way to harness the placebo effect for personal benefit.

"It's like a self-fulfilling prophecy," Szigeti said. "People who are interested in microdosing should give microdosing a try, but only if they're enthusiastic about it, if they have a positive expectation about the benefits of microdosing."

## Russia's top court lifts terror group designation on Afghanistan's Taliban

Associated Press undefined

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's Supreme Court on Thursday lifted a ban on Afghanistan's ruling Taliban, a group that was designated as a terrorist organization more than two decades ago.

The Taliban seized power in Afghanistan in August 2021 as U.S. and NATO troops were in the final weeks of withdrawing from the country after two decades of war.

The Russian court's move was a diplomatic victory for the Taliban, who were put on Moscow's list of terrorist organizations in 2003, making any contact with them punishable under Russian law.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 79 of 82

At the same time, Taliban delegations have attended various forums hosted by Russia as Moscow has sought to position itself as a regional power broker.

The court's ruling on a request by the Prosecutor General's Office followed last year's adoption of a law stipulating that the official designation as a terrorist organization could be suspended by a court.

The former Soviet Union fought a 10-year war in Afghanistan that ended with Moscow withdrawing its troops in 1989.

Russian officials have recently been emphasizing the need to engage with the Taliban to help stabilize Afghanistan.

In recent years, the Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have removed the Taliban from their lists of terrorist groups.

The Taliban initially promised a more moderate rule than during their first stint in power from 1996 to 2001, but started to enforce restrictions on women and girls soon after the 2021 takeover. Women are barred from most jobs and public places, including parks, baths and gyms, while girls are banned from education beyond sixth grade.

Such measures have isolated the Taliban on the world stage, although their government has established diplomatic ties with countries including China and the United Arab Emirates.

The U.N. this year renewed its call for the Taliban to lift the bans.

The group's decrees limiting the participation of girls and women have affected foreign aid to the country. The Taliban also have brought back their strict interpretation of Islamic law, or Shariah, including public executions.

Some Taliban want greater engagement with the international community and want to scrap harsher policies to attract more outside support. In recent months, there has been increased engagement between the Taliban and the U.S. under President Donald Trump, mostly because of prisoner exchanges and releases.

Ibraheem Bahiss, a senior analyst with Crisis Group's Asia Program, said the Taliban's listing as a terrorist group was a legal impairment for trade and political ties with Kabul and its lifting reflected Moscow's desire to improved relations.

"However, beyond making it easier for individuals and businesses to engage with Afghanistan. I am not sure what other major benefit this will have," he said.

South Asia analyst Michael Kugelman said the Russian move was not ground-breaking because many countries had never formally designated the Taliban as a terrorist organization. At the same time, he called the decision a "win-win" for bilateral relations.

For Russia, he said it would serve as a confidence-building measure helping pave the way for more engagement and enabling Moscow to better protect its interests in Afghanistan, particularly concerns about anti-Russia terror groups like Islamic State-Khorasan.

"Meanwhile, for the Taliban, the court decision is a legitimacy-boosting outcome they can leverage to point to international acceptance of their rule," Kugelman observed.

## Picking a team from bars to beam and hoping for 10s: Fantasy leagues in gymnastics are a thing

By MAYA SWEEDLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thomas Bateman kept busy this year managing college fantasy teams in 12 different leagues, a lineup that included SECret Weapon and One and Dunne. Five of them won it all.

These were not teams stocked with NFL or NBA players. All 12 were made up of college gymnasts, and the Chicago-based marriage and family therapist is just one member of a fervent and growing fan base that channels their love of the sport into fantasy leagues.

"It's such a great way to get to know the sport a bit," Bateman said. "When I started off, I got these lists from College Gym News and picked athletes I didn't really know, so then I got to know teams I liked and then got familiar with athletes I want to draft. It's a great way to potentially grow the audience of the sport."

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 80 of 82

Interest in gymnastics traditionally peaks with the Olympic cycle, but on the “gymternet” – the online global community for devoted fans – it’s a year-round sport. At the college level, major growth in name, image and likeness deals, viewership and streaming availability has been accompanied by a surge in fantasy leagues, too.

This year, over 7,000 women’s college gymnastics devotees have found their way to the Gymlytics and GymCastic fantasy platforms — all within the last few years.

From the Olympics to NCAA

Gymlytics, which launched before the 2022 collegiate season, runs through the regular season and has a postseason bracket competition. GymCastic, in its second year, offers weekly fantasy matchups, including the NCAA postseason and elite meets later in the year.

The two leagues take slightly different approaches. Gymlytics participants draft individual athletes for their team at the beginning of the season and set lineups for each week of competition. GymCastic runs a salary cap-style draft, in which athletes are valued at a certain number of “gym rubles.” Participants select athletes until their roster is filled while staying under the cap.

Neither are the first platforms of their kind: Founders of both pointed to Kristen Watkins, a former college gymnast and self-taught programmer who created and ran College Fantasy Gymnastics for the decade leading into the pandemic-canceled 2020 season, as an inspiration.

Watkins competed for the MIT gymnastics team until it was cut following the 2009 season, a period in which other college gymnastics programs were cut or coming under threat of reduction. The creation of the fantasy league, she said, was motivated in part because she wanted to see if there could be more interest in women’s gymnastics.

Subsequent leagues have hinged on the same idea.

“That’s the point of everything we do: It’s very, very specific to the gymnastics fans,” said Jessica O’Beirne, creator of the popular GymCastic podcast and a co-founder of the fantasy league of the same name. “We use the lingo of gymnastics. It’s so niche and so specific.”

The Gymlytics audience is similarly a lot of “diehard gymnastics fans,” said Lauren Pickens, a co-creator. That includes former athletes. Pickens recalled hearing from recently graduated members of the championship-winning Michigan team who had barely missed the Gymlytics draft deadline but wanted to put teams together. (She helped them join in.)

Growth beyond diehard fans

Like all fantasy team managers who care about results, Bateman and other participants have their hands full. Week to week, participants set lineups across the four apparatuses – vault, uneven bars, balance beam and floor exercise – to maximize the total number of points their team scores. An injury or struggles at a weekend meet are factors in roster changes.

Bateman joined Gymlytics in 2022 with friends who had been gymnasts at the University of Michigan. He named SEcRet Weapon after the Southeastern Conference, whose member school LSU is a repeat favorite at this week’s NCAA championships in Texas. One and Dunne bears the surname of LSU gymnast and popular influencer Olivia Dunne — and the name worked in a league where each team could include just one athlete from each college.

As GymCastic and Gymlytics have taken off, their creators have seen these diehard fans bring in friends and family who are less familiar with the sport.

“We’ve gotten a lot of emails from people saying, my significant other did fantasy basketball or fantasy football and because there’s a fantasy gymnastics, they wanted to connect with me and my passion so they joined a league,” said GymCastic COO Steve Cooper. “And now they’re screaming at the TV like I am.”

According to the Fantasy Sports & Gaming Association, the number of Americans over the age of 21 participating in fantasy sports grew by about 5% between 2017 and 2022. It’s been much more robust for Gymlytics, which launched its first season with 1,000 teams and, according to co-founder Yarden Tamir, had nearly 7,000 teams across 55 countries this season; and for GymCastic, which has seen over 10% growth between its first and second seasons, per Cooper.

While overall fantasy sports participation skews male by about a 2:1 ratio, according to FSGA data, the

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 81 of 82

Gymlytics and GymCastic founders both estimated their participants were more gender balanced.

Higher visibility

Multiple fantasy gymnastics participants and founders pointed to the 2021 and 2022 collegiate seasons as a turning point. Those seasons followed the delayed Tokyo Games and a 2021 Supreme Court decision allowing college athletes to earn endorsement money, marking the beginning of Olympics gymnasts being able to cash in and retain their NCAA eligibility.

Other than Simone Biles, every member of that medal-winning Tokyo team, including alternates, went on to compete in the NCAA.

"Olympics is so fun but it's hard to consistently follow elite athletes because oftentimes they're only competing three or four times per year," Bateman said. NCAA gymnastics "is fun, too, and it's such an accessible format."

Accessibility has also grown as streaming networks have jumped in. According to ESPN, the three most-watched gymnastics telecasts have been the three most recent national championships. In 2022, ESPN and affiliated platforms broadcast 40 meets across five platforms; after championships this year, it will be more than 60 meets across eight.

"FOX bought in this year. ESPN is doing GameDay-style shows to lead into their broadcast," said Brandis Heffner, the managing editor of College Gym News and a fantasy player. "Giving that option to gymnastics fans has been a fantastic way to help build the sport."

Running a custom fantasy league isn't without its challenges. League officials pointed to challenges with data availability and inconsistent information across conferences and regions, including judging details.

Gymlytics and GymCastic have both gotten around it by leveraging the devotion among their participants, essentially crowdsourcing scores to get them into their databases. While there are improvements to be made on both the institutional and platform sides, the fantasy league founders all expressed optimism.

"There are a ton of little features we want to add and make the environment easier to use, more automated," Tamir said. "If one actual person you don't know uses it, that's a huge win, but when thousands of users are using it on a daily basis, that's wild. We're just continuing to make that tent larger."

## Lebanon detains several people on suspicion of firing rockets at Israel

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The Lebanese military said it has detained a group of people linked to firing rockets into Israel last month.

The army said in a statement late Wednesday that those detained included a number of Palestinians who were involved in firing rockets in two separate attacks toward Israel in late March that triggered intense Israeli airstrikes on parts of Lebanon. Lebanon's Hezbollah group denied at the time it was behind the firing of rockets.

Since the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire in late November ended their 14-month conflict, Israel has carried out almost daily airstrikes that left dozens of civilians and Hezbollah members dead.

The army said that a vehicle and other equipment used in the rockets attacks were confiscated and the detainees were referred to judicial authorities. The army said it had carried out raids in different parts of Lebanon to detain the suspects without giving further details.

On Thursday, the state-run National News Agency reported that Gen. Rodolph Haikal briefed a weekly cabinet meeting about the security situation along the border and the ongoing implementation of the U.N. Security Council resolution that ended the 14-month Israel-Hezbollah war.

Three security and one judicial officials told The Associated Press that four Palestinians linked to the Hamas group are being questioned.

A Hamas official told the AP that several members of the group were detained in Lebanon recently and released shortly afterward adding that they were not involved in firing rockets into Israel. He said in one case authorities detained a Hamas member who was carrying an unlicensed pistol.



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, April 18, 2025 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 297 ~ 82 of 82

All officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media. Hezbollah started launching attacks on Israel a day after the Israel-Hamas war erupted on Oct. 7, 2023, with the Palestinian militants' attack on southern Israel. The war that left more than 4,000 people dead in Lebanon and caused wide destruction ended in late November with a U.S.-brokered ceasefire.

On Tuesday, the office of the U.N. high commissioner for human rights said that at least 71 civilians, including 14 women and nine children, have been killed by Israeli strikes in Lebanon since a ceasefire took effect.

Lebanese Information Minister Paul Morcos said Thursday in a press conference following a cabinet meeting that Lebanon has recorded 2,740 Israeli violations of the ceasefire and that 190 people have been killed and 485 injured in Lebanon by Israeli strikes since the ceasefire began. He did not specify how many were civilians.

Israel has said that its strikes in Lebanon are in response to ceasefire violations by Hezbollah and to prevent the group from rearming.

## Today in History: April 18, the 1906 San Francisco earthquake

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, April 18, the 108th day of 2025. There are 257 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On April 18, 1906, the deadliest earthquake in U.S. history struck San Francisco, followed by raging fires across the city. More than 3,000 people are believed to have been killed by the quake, which was estimated to have reached as high as 8.3 magnitude on the Richter scale.

Also on this date:

In 1775, Paul Revere began his famous ride from Charlestown to Lexington, Massachusetts, warning colonists that British Regular troops were approaching.

In 1942, in the first World War II attack on the Japanese mainland, 16 U.S. Army Air Force B-25 bombers conducted an air raid, led by Lt. Col. James Doolittle, over Tokyo and several other Japanese cities.

In 1955, physicist Albert Einstein died in Princeton, New Jersey, at age 76.

In 1978, the Senate approved the Panama Canal Treaty, providing for the complete turnover of control of the waterway to Panama on the last day of 1999.

In 1983, 63 people, including 17 Americans, were killed at the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon, by a suicide bomber driving a van laden with explosives.

In 2015, a ship carrying migrants from Africa sank in the Mediterranean off Libya. As many as 700 people are believed to have drowned.

In 2016, "Hamilton," Lin-Manuel Miranda's hip-hop stage biography of America's first treasury secretary, won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

In 2019, the final report from special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation was made public. It outlined Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election but "did not establish that members of the Trump Campaign conspired or coordinated with the Russian government in its election interference activities."

In 2023, Fox and Dominion Voting Systems reached a \$787.5 million settlement in the voting machine company's defamation lawsuit, averting a trial in a case that exposed how the top-rated network promoted falsehoods regarding the 2020 presidential election.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Hayley Mills is 79. Actor James Woods is 78. Actor Rick Moranis is 72. Actor Eric Roberts is 69. Journalist-author Susan Faludi is 66. Actor Jane Leeves is 64. Ventriloquist-comedian Jeff Dunham is 63. Talk show host Conan O'Brien is 62. Actor Eric McCormack is 62. Actor Maria Bello is 58. Football Hall of Famer Willie Roaf is 55. Actor David Tennant is 54. Filmmaker Eli Roth is 53. Football Hall of Famer Derrick Brooks is 52. Filmmaker Edgar Wright is 51. Actor Melissa Joan Hart is 49. Reality TV star Kourtney Kardashian is 46. Former MLB All-Star Miguel Cabrera is 42. Actor America Ferrera is 41. Actor Vanessa Kirby is 37. Actor Alia Shawkat is 36.