

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Mon., Dec. 22

Senior Menu: Scalloped potatoes with ham, green beans, fruit, whole wheat bread.

No School

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

Basketball Double Header at Redfield: (GJV-1, BJV-2:15, GV-3:30, BV-5:00)

MS/JV WR @ Salem (MCM). Boys Wrestling, 3 p.m.

5th/6th Volleyball Practice, 6 p.m.

St. John's Lutheran Preschool Christmas Program, 7 p.m.

## Tuesday, Dec. 23

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, catalina blend, fruit, garlic toast.

No School

## Wednesday, Dec. 24

Senior Menu: Hot pork sandwich, coleslaw, baked beans, fruit.

No School

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

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

United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Britton service at 10 a.m.; Groton service at 5 p.m.; Conde service at 7 p.m.

Groton CM&A: Service, 5 p.m.



## Thursday, Dec. 25

No School

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

## Fri., Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Hamburger cabbage roll hot dish, mixed vegetables, fruit, cornmeal muffin.

No School

## Sat., Dec. 27

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

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# Groton Daily Independent

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# 1440

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

## Second Tanker Seized

The US said it seized an oil tanker leaving Venezuela Saturday and was pursuing another vessel as of this writing.

The Panamanian-flagged oil tanker called the Centuries was not on a list of US-sanctioned entities. Observers claim it had previously shipped sanctioned goods and had engaged in spoofing—a practice of falsifying location data. It is believed to be owned by a China-based trader and was estimated to be carrying more than 1.8 million barrels of crude oil. Venezuela has the world's largest oil reserves—estimated at over 300 billion barrels—and exports an estimated 749,000 barrels per day, 80% of which goes to China.

The US Coast Guard first seized a tanker in the region, the Skipper, earlier this month. Oil prices jumped 3% since President Donald Trump announced a blockade last week on oil tankers entering and exiting Venezuela.

## Turning Point USA Returns

Turning Point USA wrapped up its fifth annual AmericaFest yesterday, a gathering of some of the most prominent figures in the conservative movement.

More than 30,000 people attended this year's event—the first since founder and former CEO Charlie Kirk was assassinated in September. Speakers included Donald Trump Jr., House Speaker Mike Johnson (R, LA-4), and media figures including Megyn Kelly, Ben Shapiro, and Tucker Carlson. The convention saw high-profile moments of infighting, including over the US' relationship with Israel and allegations of antisemitism. Vice President JD Vance gave the closing speech after TPUSA CEO Erika Kirk, Charlie Kirk's widow, endorsed him for president last week (Vance has not announced a bid as of this writing).

TPUSA is a significant force in the conservative movement, generating over \$500M in total revenue since its 2012 founding and boasting over 350,000 grassroots donors.

## Historic Space Trip

A 33-year-old German engineer became the first wheelchair user to go to space over the weekend, riding aboard Blue Origin's New Shepard launch vehicle. The roughly 10-minute-long trip took Michaela Benthaus, paralyzed below the neck in a bike accident in 2018, and five other passengers more than 65 miles above the Earth's surface.

The Jeff Bezos-owned company has emerged as a leader in the nascent space tourism industry, having shuttled 86 passengers across 17 flights just past the edge of outer space since 2021. The trips rely on a reusable booster that launches vertically, with the capsule separating at the Kármán line—which roughly marks where space begins—before coasting and eventually parachuting back to Earth. Previous passengers include a 90-year-old William Shatner and singer Katy Perry.

Benthaus' trip was sponsored by a fellow passenger, though general public reservations can be made with a \$150K deposit (though trips aren't guaranteed).

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Four teams advance to join the four top seeds in the College Football Playoff quarterfinals; see preview of the matchups, scheduled to begin Dec. 31.

Bowen Yang ends run at "Saturday Night Live," bidding farewell to the show midseason.

Third "Avatar" installment earns \$88M at the domestic box office, \$345M globally.

Boxer and influencer Jake Paul loses to former world heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua in Netflix match Friday, confirms jaw broken in two places.

## Science & Technology

Self-driving company Waymo temporarily suspends service in San Francisco after widespread blackout knocks out traffic lights, leaving cars unable to function safely.

Commerce Department reportedly cancels five-year, \$285M contract with the public-private SMART Institute; consortium focused on using digital replicas to speed up chip manufacturing.

Evolutionary study suggests ant species with weaker individual exoskeletons free up nutritional resources to create more worker ants, tending to lead to more successful colonies.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close up Friday (S&P 500 +0.9%, Dow +0.4%, Nasdaq +1.3%), driven by a rebound in AI stocks; Oracle rises 6.6% on news of impending TikTok sale.

Analysis shows a record \$61B flowed into data center construction deals in 2025, with roughly 75% made in the US and Canada.

Delaware Supreme Court reinstates Tesla CEO Elon Musk's \$56B bonus package from 2018, which was rescinded by a lower court last year; Musk becomes first person to surpass \$700B in net wealth.

## Politics & World Affairs

Gunmen kill at least nine people, wound 10 others in mass shooting in Bekkersdal, South Africa.

Files released by the Justice Department Friday include copy of the earliest known complaint against sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, submitted to the FBI in 1996; the government did not bring charges until more than a decade later.

French authorities arrest three employees at the Élysée Palace on suspicion of stealing thousands of dollars' worth of silverware.

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## Groton Named VFW Youth Baseball Community of the Year

Sioux Falls, S.D. (Dec. 21, 2025) — The Department of South Dakota Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) has announced Groton as the VFW Youth Baseball Community of the Year, recognizing the city's outstanding efforts in hosting and supporting youth baseball across the state.

The VFW Executive Committee met Dec. 8 to determine the annual honor, using the score sheet posted on the SD VFW Baseball website to guide its decision. Groton was selected for its exceptional organization, adaptability, and commitment to providing a positive baseball experience for players and families.

Danny Frisby-Griffin, chairman of the Department of SD VFW Baseball, announced the winners of the program's eighth annual VFW Youth Baseball Community of the Year Award. As part of the recognition, the Groton Baseball Association and the City of Groton received a \$1,000 prize to support youth baseball efforts.

"This recognition honors their exceptional efforts and adaptability in hosting an outstanding tournament," Frisby-Griffin said.

The Groton Baseball Association collaborated closely with the community to provide youth players from across South Dakota the opportunity to participate in a well-run and welcoming tournament environment.

In addition to Groton's recognition, the SD VFW Baseball program honored two organizations as Friends of SD VFW Baseball for their positive relationships and support. The Clear Lake/Deuel Baseball Association received a \$500 award for stepping in on short notice to work with their community and successfully host a tournament.

The Hot Springs Baseball Association was also recognized with a \$250 award for its positive, can-do attitude in making sure the tournament in the Black Hills was enjoyable for players, coaches, parents, and siblings. SD VFW Baseball officials noted the association's warm hospitality and strong developmental approach.

The SD VFW Baseball program continues to rely on community partnerships and donations to support youth baseball opportunities throughout the state. Donations help fund baseball programs, scholarships, and assistance for communities in need, while also supporting veterans' programs.

"We learn something new every season that requires us to adjust the SD VFW Baseball rules at our annual meeting with our associations and coaches," Frisby-Griffin said. "We are extremely excited to be able to recognize communities and organizations for their outstanding support of VFW Youth Baseball."

Looking ahead, SD VFW Baseball encourages fans to support youth baseball and veterans' programs across South Dakota. The annual Frisby-Griffin "We're consistently striving to make SD VFW Baseball better every year" message highlighted upcoming events, including the 2026 Varsity Showcase and All-Star Game scheduled for Aug. 9, 2026, and the organization's annual meeting set for Aug. 23, 2026, at a location to be determined.

## Monday Night Football

San Francisco 49ers @ Indianapolis Colts — 8:15 PM ET on ABC

### Recap from Yesterday (Sunday, Dec 21)

Here were some of the key Week 16 results:

Saints 29, Jets 6 — Saints dominate.

Panthers 23, Buccaneers 20 — Close NFC South contest.

Vikings 16, Giants 13 — Late field goal decides it.

Titans 26, Chiefs 9 — Titans control AFC matchup.

Jaguars 34, Broncos 20 — Jacksonville strong.

Texans 23, Raiders 21 — Houston extends streak.

Steelers 29, Lions 24 — Close finish.

Patriots 28, Ravens 24 — New England clinches playoff spot.

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**GT** on **St. John's Lutheran Christmas Program**  
Mon., Dec. 22, 7 p.m.

Groton Area Tigers Groton, SD

**GDILIVE**  
YouTube

*Glory* TO THE NEW BORN

A production of the **Groton Daily Independent**

For more info: [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)

**GT** on **GBB at Redfield**  
Mon. Dec. 22, 3:30 p.m.

Groton Area Tigers Groton, SD

**GDILIVE**  
YouTube

A production of the **Groton Daily Independent**

For more info: [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)



**GT** on **BBB at Redfield**  
Mon. Dec. 22, 5 p.m.

Groton Area Tigers Groton, SD

**GDILIVE**  
YouTube

A production of the **Groton Daily Independent**

For more info: [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)



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The Minnesota Vikings, winners of two straight, faced off against the New York Giants on Sunday. New York had lost eight straight and was in position for the number one overall pick in the 2026 draft. This should have been an easy win for Minnesota. Instead, the Vikings narrowly escaped with the 16-13 win. The Vikings are 7-8 this season with two games left on the schedule.

The Vikings got the ball to begin the game and stalled right outside of the red zone, but a Will Reichard field goal gave them a 3-0 lead. New York responded with a decent drive of their own, but a Jalen Redmond sack on fourth down prevented the Giants from putting points on the board.

J.J. McCarthy threw an interception on Minnesota's next possession, keeping the score 3-0 after fifteen minutes of play.

The first quarter was a snooze-fest, but the second quarter had plenty of fireworks. New York tied the game with a 27-yard field goal, then Minnesota responded with a field goal of its own to reclaim the lead. A Byron Murphy interception ended the Giants' next possession, and three plays later McCarthy scrambled for a 12-yard touchdown. The Vikings' defense forced a three-and-out, and it looked like the Vikings were starting to pull away in this one. However, McCarthy was blasted by a blitzing linebacker and fumbled the ball, which the Giants scooped up and returned 27 yards for a touchdown. With only 17 seconds left in the half, and McCarthy in the injury tent, the Vikings took a knee and went into halftime.

The third quarter was quiet, with both teams having one complete possession each, and both ended in punts.

New York put together a long 14-play drive, taking over nine minutes off the clock, but only managed a field goal to tie the score 13-13 early in the fourth quarter. The Vikings responded with a 14-play drive of their own, this one also ending in a field goal. The Giants had one more opportunity to tie or take the lead, but a turnover on downs gave the ball to Minnesota, who put the game away and returned home with a 16-13 victory.

J.J. McCarthy completed 9 of 14 passes for 108 yards, no touchdowns, and one interception. He did have a rushing score, but also fumbled, which led to New York's only touchdown. He didn't return to the game because of the injury sustained in the second quarter. Max Brosmer took over, completing 7 of 9 passes for 52 yards.

Jordan Mason was injured early in the game, leaving Aaron Jones Sr. to shoulder the load. He carried the ball 21 times for 85 yards. Justin Jefferson finally had a good game, leading the team in both receptions (6) and receiving yards (85).

Defensively, the Vikings had a solid game, holding the Giants' offense out of the end zone and to only 141 total yards. The defense had five sacks, six tackles for a loss, six QB hits, one interception, and four pass deflections.

Looking ahead, the Vikings will play the Lions on Christmas Day. The game will be on Netflix, and the kickoff is scheduled for 3:30 pm. The Lions are fighting for a playoff spot, so the Vikings have a chance to spoil their postseason plans. Skol

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**Annual Membership Rates**

Student is \$29.82 per month or \$255.60 per year  
Single is \$35.15 per month or \$319.50 per year  
2-Person is \$55.45 per month or \$575.10 per year  
Family is \$67.10 per month or \$702.26 per year

**Month-to-Month Rates**

Student is \$35.15 per month  
Single is \$40.48 per month  
2-Person is \$59.78 per month  
Family is \$72.43 per month

**While many other rates have gone up, ours has not.  
Same rates for several years!**

## “A Healthier You in the New Year: Start with the Switch”

As the holiday season winds down and the New Year approaches, many of us begin reflecting on the past year and thinking ahead. It’s a natural time to set resolutions—those hopeful promises to ourselves to eat better, move more, stress less or simply live healthier. Yet, despite our best intentions, many resolutions fade by February. Why is lasting change so hard? As a physical therapist helping patients make healthy changes for over 30 years, I have found the answer may lie in how we approach change, by using the science of behavior change to our advantage.

Drawing from the work of Chip and Dan Heath in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, we can rethink our strategy. Their model uses a simple metaphor that I have found helpful: to make meaningful change, we must direct the rider (our rational mind), motivate the elephant (our emotional side), and shape the path (our environment and habits).

### 1. Direct the Rider: Set Clear, Meaningful Goals

Our rational mind thrives on clarity. Vague resolutions like “get in shape” or “eat healthier” don’t provide enough direction. Instead, set specific, achievable goals that matter to you. Maybe it’s walking 20 minutes at least five times a week, cooking a healthy dinner at home three nights a week, or scheduling that long-overdue check-up before spring comes. The key is to make goals concrete and personally relevant. When your rider knows where to go, it’s easier to stay on course.

### 2. Motivate the Elephant: Tap Into Emotion

Logic alone won’t drive change—your emotional side needs to be on board. If your heart is not in, it doesn’t matter what your mind thinks. Ask yourself: Why does this goal matter to me? Maybe you want more energy to play with your kids, to feel confident hiking with friends or to reduce stress to find more joy in life. Connecting your goals to deeper values and emotions gives them staying power. When the elephant is motivated, change becomes less of a chore and more of a meaningful pursuit.

### 3. Shape the Path: Make Change Easier

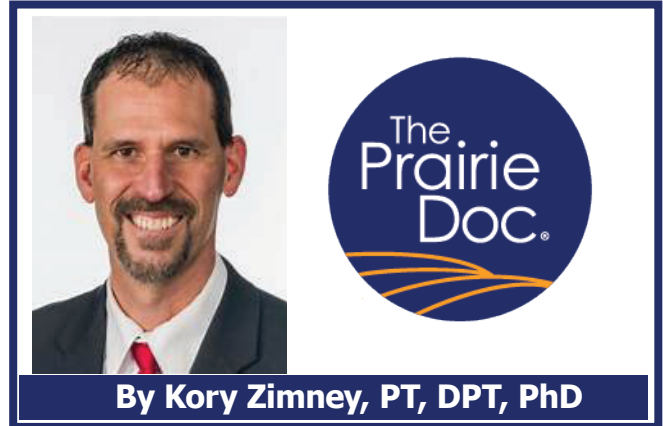
Even the best intentions can be derailed by a cluttered environment or lack of support. Set yourself up for success by shaping your surroundings. Lay out your walking shoes the night before. Keep healthy snacks visible. Invite a friend to join you on your health change. Small nudges to your environment can make a big difference. When the path is clear, both rider and elephant can move forward with less resistance.

And remember: progress beats perfection. Life is unpredictable, and goals may need adjusting. That’s okay. What matters is staying engaged in the process and being kind to yourself along the way. A missed workout or a skipped healthy meal doesn’t mean failure—it’s just part of the journey.

This New Year, instead of making a resolution you hope to keep, make a switch—one that aligns your mind, heart and habits. You might be surprised at how far a small, well-directed change can take you.

So, as you gather with loved ones this season and look ahead to the coming year, consider making a healthy switch.

Kory Zimney, PT, DPT, PhD is a professor at the University of South Dakota, School of Health Sciences Physical Therapy Department and director of the PhD in Health Science program. Dr. Zimney is part of the Center for Brain and Behavioral Research at the University of South Dakota and the Therapeutic Neuroscience Research Group, conducting research specifically in the areas of pain science and therapeutic alliance. Follow The Prairie Doc® at [www.prairiedoc.org](http://www.prairiedoc.org), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Tik Tok. Prairie Doc Programming includes On Call with the Prairie Doc®, a medical Q&A show (most Thursdays at 7pm on SDPB, YouTube and streaming on Facebook), 2 podcasts, and a Radio program (on SDPB, Sundays at 6am and 1pm).



## EARTHTALK

### Trump Kills EV Tax Credit, But Will It Kill The EV?

by Marium Zahra

Dear EarthTalk: Will Trump's killing of the \$7,500 electric vehicle tax credit significantly slow the transition to EVs? Are carmakers adjusting their plans in favor of gas cars now?

– Paul Jones, New York, NY

On October 1st, 2025, the Trump administration ended the \$7,500 federal tax credit for EV buyers. The tax credit was originally enacted in 2022 by the Biden administration to encourage the purchase of EVs and support sustainable transportation nationwide. The credit was a key incentive for consumers to adopt EVs. Its recent expiration comes with a larger tax and spending budget to reduce government spending and boost U.S. oil production. The intention of the Trump cuts was to save billions of dollars in the long run and to pressure carmakers to move production to the United States, creating increased jobs.



The loss of the credit poses some consequences for buyers and manufacturers alike. It is likely that it will decrease demand for EVs. According to a recent CNN story, this means that "prices in real terms will immediately rise." The story also emphasizes that many consumers rushed to buy EVs while the credits still lasted in August and September. This could result in many people choosing not to buy EVs and, in turn, decreasing sales in the last three months of 2025.

As EVs are far more costly than gas cars, the likely outcome of the cuts is that many will be unable to afford the switch. The impact is expected to be so dire that analysts who originally forecasted EVs to take up some 48 percent of the U.S. market share by 2030 have now downgraded predictions to 37 percent.

Many carmakers have begun actively responding to the recent policy changes. It is expected that many will either have to scale back or cancel new EV models. Stephanie Valdez Streaty, director of industry insights at Cox Automotive, told CNBC in July 2025 that the EV tax credit cuts are like "the training wheels are being taken off" of a nascent technology. "Those training wheels have helped balance and support EV adoption," she added.

Electric vehicles are more climate sustainable than gasoline cars. The shift to EVs has been key to promoting climate consciousness and decreasing the amount of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere. As customers stick with gasoline cars, air quality levels and the environment hang in the balance..

While this was Goodall's most well-known work, it was not her last. After receiving her Ph.d, Goodall continued to advocate for wildlife protection and conservation of endangered habitats. As a researcher, Goodall left her legacy on challenging the idea of human uniqueness. Her youth empowerment, reforestation and activism also inspired multiple generations to come together for conservation.



## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **COMMENTARY**

#### **A scalpel, not a DOGE chainsaw, is the best approach for state budget cuts** by Dana Hess

There is an old saying that if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. It's probably also true that if the only tool you have is a chainsaw, everything looks like it needs to be cut.

Many of us remember an image of Elon Musk wielding a chainsaw, celebrating the many triumphs of the Department of Government Efficiency. Yet, often the actions taken by DOGE proved to be less than triumphant and only rarely led to efficiency.

Unless you're one of those people who knows how to use a chainsaw to carve a bear statue out of a tree trunk, the chainsaw isn't known for its precision. In the case of DOGE, its accomplishments didn't lead to efficiency so much as they often led to court where many of its actions were overturned.

Despite the department's dubious history, according to two candidates for the Republican nomination for governor of South Dakota, a DOGE-like entity is just what's needed to cut the fat in state government.

"One thing that we're focusing on is doing a South Dakota DOGE, actually cutting state expenditures and then passing that savings on to property taxpayers," Speaker of the House Jon Hansen told KELO.

Not to be outdone, Aberdeen businessman Toby Doeden told KELO, "There is abuse. I guarantee it. And my DOGE is going to find it."

Let's just take a moment to consider this. Both candidates believe there is waste in government. Both believe he is the guy to root it out. Both seem to think that they can cut enough fat out of state government to offer some relief to property taxpayers.

So they have both chosen to cut the state bureaucracy by ... wait for it ... adding to the bureaucracy with a new Department of Government Efficiency. Unless they repurpose a state department that already exists, these candidates will be adding to the state's expenses before they can start whittling away at any fat in the budget.

The state departments that would appear in the crosshairs of Doeden or Hansen already get a pretty good going-over by the Legislature. During the legislative session, each department is quizzed twice — once in the House and once in the Senate — about its intentions for the coming year.

Then the Appropriations Committee weighs in, ultimately deciding how much money the department needs. Calling for the creation of a DOGE clone is an insult to legislative oversight.

It's notable that the other two candidates for the Republican nomination, Gov. Larry Rhoden and U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, have yet to get on the DOGE-for-South Dakota bandwagon. Too often in Republican primaries, voters are given a choice of candidates who agree with each other on major issues. Finding a way to cut property taxes, through a DOGE-like entity or some other way, will give voters a distinct choice in the primary.

If, to fulfill some campaign promise, Doeden or Hansen must create their own version of DOGE, the new governor would do well not to follow the Musk/Trump model. If we learned anything from watching the slash and burn techniques employed by DOGE, it's that chainsaws are best left to lumberjacks. Government waste should be cleared away with a scalpel.

Too often, South Dakota's GOP candidates for governor act as if following the example set by President Donald Trump marks the sure path to victory. Maybe that's true in heavily red South Dakota. However, following the example the president set with DOGE is just a sure path to chaos.

*Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.*

## International student numbers decline in South Dakota amid immigration crackdown

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

International students face plenty of questions amid federal immigration policy changes, said Beth Riley, director of South Dakota Mines' Ivanhoe International Center.

Should they risk going home to see family, or will they be barred from returning? Will they be able to secure internships or jobs in the United States after their education?

"Some are worried that they will not be able to get their degrees," Riley said. "This includes current students. They are worried that all the hard work and money they have spent will go to waste."

Despite those concerns, international student enrollment increased by 23 students this fall at South Dakota Mines, a public university in Rapid City. But the overall enrollment of international students across South Dakota's six public universities dropped by 76 students, from 2,233 to 2,157. The drop comes after a 10-year high last fall that capped four straight years of increases.

The largest drops in international student enrollment this fall were at South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota — with 35 and 94 fewer international students, respectively.

An immigration crackdown by President Donald Trump's administration has made it harder for international students to enter, stay and work in the country. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security, led by former South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, tried to deport a South Dakota Mines graduate student from India, Priya Saxena, earlier this year because of a four-year-old misdemeanor traffic violation. Saxena filed a lawsuit and convinced a federal judge to let her stay in the country and graduate.

Trump paused all immigration applications earlier this month from 19 countries the president had listed for restricted travel into the United States, a move that freezes processing for green card holders and citizenship applications. The action came after an Afghan national who was granted asylum shot and killed a National Guard member in Washington, D.C.

The Trump administration is also reportedly considering the elimination a policy that allows recent foreign graduates to work in the United States. Optional Practical Training, or OPT, allows graduates to stay for a year. Some students in science, engineering and related fields can stay for up to three years.

### South Dakota fares better than the rest of the U.S.

Last year's international student enrollment record in South Dakota was a "bright spot" compared to other states, said Rachel Banks, senior director for public policy and legislative strategy with NAFSA: Association of International Educators, formerly the National Association of Foreign Student Advisers.

"South Dakota was on an upward trajectory," Banks said.

The roughly 3% drop in the state this fall was less than the national 17% drop in international student enrollment.

"We weren't entirely shocked by that, given everything that happened leading up to the fall — spring visa revocations and recommendations the administration rolled out — that have a chilling effect on enrollment," Banks said, adding that the Trump administration's policy changes "send out a rather negative, unwelcoming message for international students."

The national drop in international student enrollment could result in canceled courses, Banks said, if there aren't enough students to fill classrooms or graduate students to teach the courses.

### Students' experiences vary

Zhongfang Yuan traveled from China to the United States to study electrical engineering this fall. After the 30-year-old saw changes the Trump administration was implementing in the spring, he rushed to apply for a visa and attend South Dakota Mines.

It was surprisingly smooth, he said, only taking a few days before his visa was approved after applying in April. But it wasn't the same for others.

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A month after he applied, the Trump administration temporarily paused and then revamped the student visa interview process and brought more scrutiny to the vetting system. That led to long delays and meant many accepted students couldn't get appointments at embassies or consulates in time for the start of the fall semester.

A friend of his, who also attends South Dakota Mines, applied for a visa weeks later and endured a longer, more stressful process.

## **International students impact SD economically, culturally**

Kirsten Linke is the director of international student and scholar services at SDSU. Most international students pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering or math, often because they can work in the United States longer with a specialized visa extension, Linke said. That can be more appealing to potential employers.

South Dakota Mines and Dakota State University, the two public universities specializing in STEM fields, reported increased international student enrollment this year.

International students contribute to research and economic development across the state, Riley said. The students, at public and private schools, contributed \$67.1 million across South Dakota during the 2024-2025 academic year, according to a report from NAFSA.

International students also increase cultural awareness among the student body on campus, Linke said. They present different worldviews, and they help other students understand how local or national issues work on a global scale.

U.S. immigration policy changes come at the same time other countries are implementing policies to attract international students. Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany have expanded post-study work rights, streamlined visa processes, and invested heavily in global education marketing, Riley said.

"As these destinations become more attractive, the United States risks losing market share in international education and, with it, a significant source of research capacity, workforce development, and long-term economic competitiveness," Riley said.

## **Senator from SD supports bill to 'Keep STEM Talent'**

The United States doesn't offer a direct path to permanent residency or citizenship for international students like other countries, Banks said — something U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, hopes to remedy as a cosponsor of the Keep STEM Talent Act. It would offer a direct path to a green card for international students.

STEM graduate students attending U.S. universities would be able to retain their student visa status if they're sponsored by an employer for a green card, which they can't do currently. The graduates, along with their spouse and children, would also be exempt from employment-based green card caps if they have a job offer in the country.

"Particularly with the advancements of artificial intelligence and cybersecurity," Rounds said in a press release, "we must keep talent in the United States and stay ahead of our near peer competitors such as China and Russia."

The bill also includes more stringent vetting requirements and requires employers sponsoring foreign STEM graduates to recruit U.S. workers at above-average wages first.

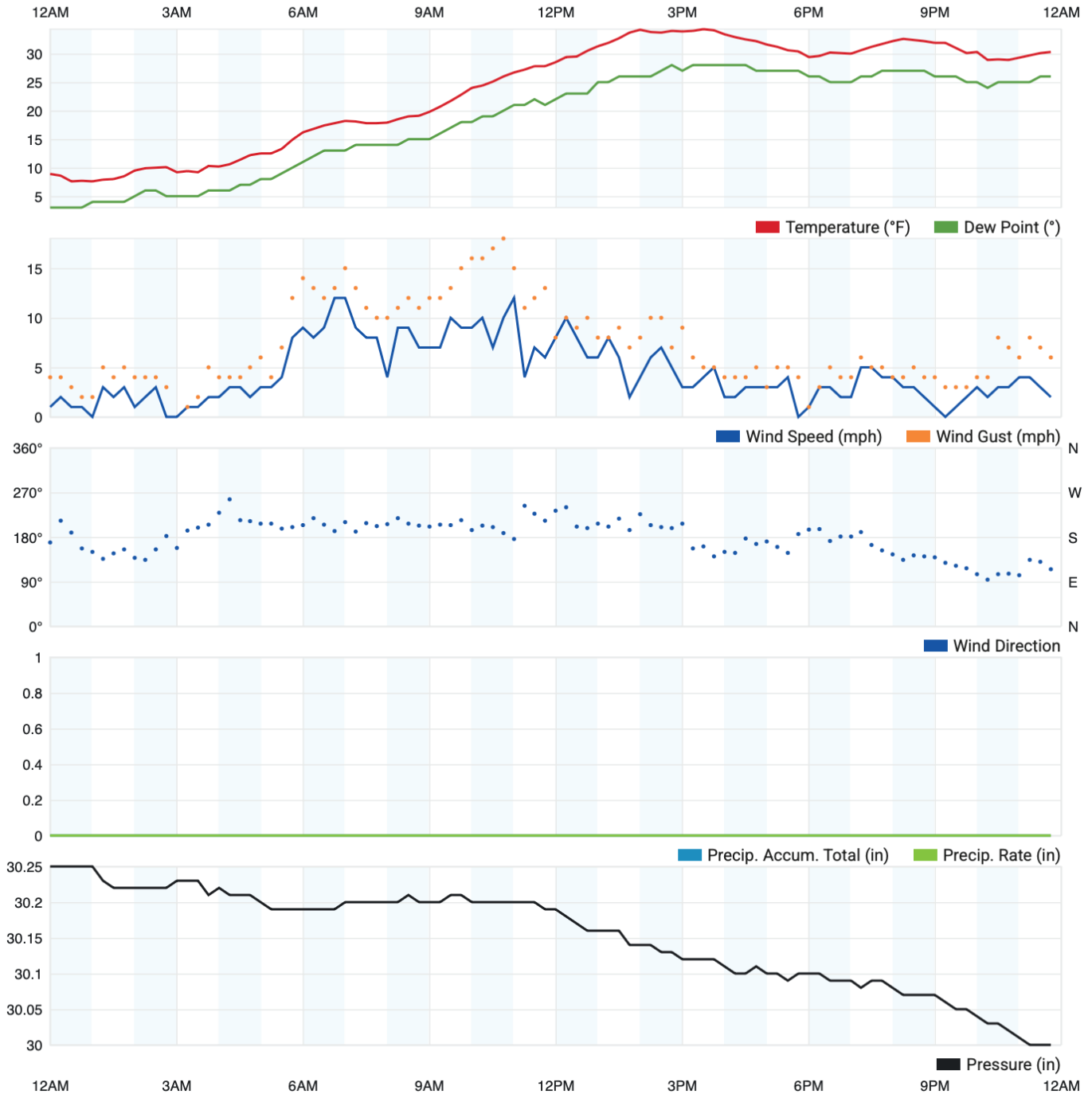
*Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was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

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 21, 2025



# Groton Daily Independent

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Today



High: 29 °F

Patchy Fog

Tonight



Low: 20 °F

Areas Fog

Tuesday



High: 28 °F

Patchy Fog  
then Partly  
Sunny

Tuesday Night



Low: 20 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Wednesday



High: 35 °F

Partly Sunny

## Above Average Temps Warmest over Central SD



Monday



Highs:  
32 - 58

Tuesday



Highs:  
25 - 47

Wednesday



Highs:  
34 - 57

Thursday



Highs:  
36 - 62

Friday



Highs:  
29 - 53

20-25% change of a light wintry mix  
Thursday night - Friday morning over  
northern South Dakota

Temperatures for the week will be mainly in the 30s to 40s over northern SD, with the warmest temperatures in the 40s to 50s over central and south central SD. The week will also feature mostly dry conditions with only a 20 to 25 percent chance of a wintry mix of precipitation Thursday night into Friday morning across northern South Dakota.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 2:02 PM

Low Temp: 8 °F at 12:48 AM

Wind: 18 mph at 10:38 AM

Precip: : 0.00

## Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 2020

Record Low: -28 in 1990

Average High: 26

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.42

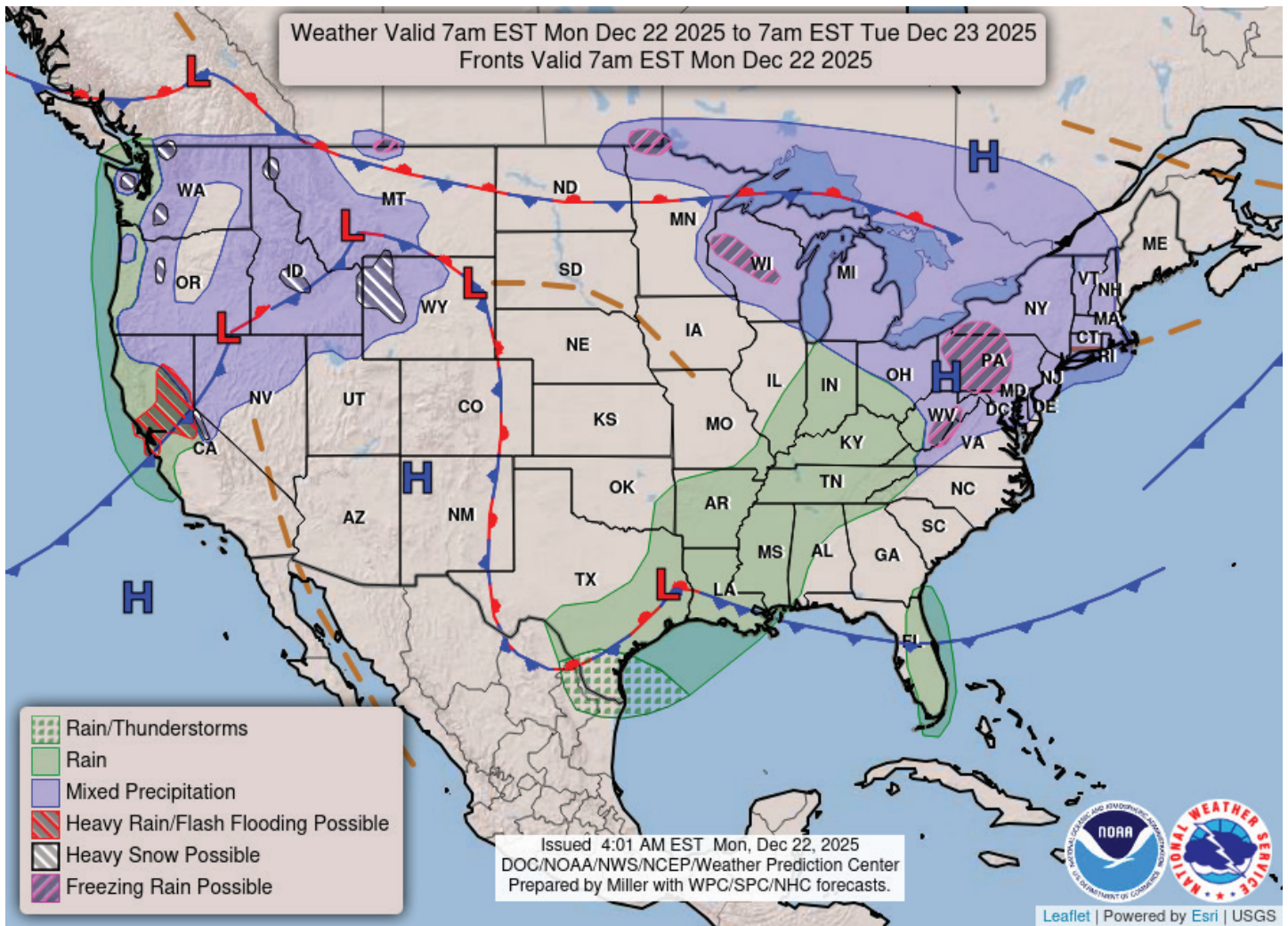
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.67

Average Precip to date: 21.63

Precip Year to Date: 25.48

Sunset Tonight: 4:52 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds, combined with air temperatures below zero, created wind chills from -40 to -65 degrees over west-central Minnesota early in the day on the 22nd. Air temperatures were generally in the -20 to -25 degree range, with afternoon highs around 15 below zero.

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds gusted to 35 miles per hour and caused near-whiteout conditions over a wide area of southwest and west-central Minnesota during the late afternoon on the 21st into the early morning of the 22nd. Several car accidents ensued. A 30-year old man was killed when he lost control of his truck and slid into a ditch in the near-blizzard conditions.

1839 — The second of triple December storms hit the northeastern U.S. The storm produced 25 inches of snow at Gettysburg, PA, and gales in New England, but only produced light snow along the coast. (David Ludlum)

1961 — Holiday travel was paralyzed over extreme northeastern Kansas, and adjacent parts of Missouri, Iowa and Nebraska. The storm produced 5 to 15 inches of snow, with drifts up to ten feet high. (22nd-23rd) (The Weather Channel)

1983 — On the first day of winter 75 cities reported record low temperatures for the date, with twelve of those cities reporting record low temperatures for the month as a whole. The mercury plunged to 51 degrees below zero at Wisdom MT, and Waco TX set an all-time record low a reading of 12 above zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 — The first day of winter was a relatively tranquil one for much of the nation, but heralded a winter storm in the Central Rockies. The storm produced 40 inches of snow at the top of the Pomerelle Ski Resort, south of Burley ID, the heaviest snow of record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Strong winds prevailed in the foothills of Wyoming and Colorado. Winds gusted to 123 mph southwest of Fort Collins CO, and reached 141 mph at the summit of Mount Evans. An ice storm paralyzed parts of Upper Michigan during the day. The freezing rain left roads around Marquette MI blocked by cars and semi-trucks. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — A total of 137 cities across the central and eastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Thirty-five of those cities established record lows for the month of December. Morning lows of 23 degrees below zero at Kansas City MO, 26 degrees below zero at Concordia KS, and 27 degrees below zero at Goodland KS established all-time records for those three locations. Unofficial morning lows included 50 degrees below zero at Recluse WY and 60 degrees below zero at Rochford SD. Broadus MT and Hardin MT tied for honors as the official cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 47 degrees below zero. Chinook winds at Cutbank MT helped warm the temperature 74 degrees, from a morning low of 34 degrees below zero to an afternoon high of 40 degrees. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989: Between December 22 and December 24, 1989, deepening low pressure pulled a frigid arctic air mass into the southeastern United States. This sequence of events produced a historic snowstorm and a rare white Christmas across the region. At Charleston, South Carolina, the storm deposited 8 inches of snow – the greatest snowfall in modern history. At Savannah, Georgia, the storm total accumulation of 3.6 inches tied the greatest snowfall in modern history.

2002: Heavy rains prompted flooding in the mountain city of Teresopolis, located about 90 km north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. A mudslide was responsible for 9 deaths and 50 injuries.

2004 — Tremendous snows occurred in the Ohio Valley. The following cities set new records for their most significant snowstorm ever: Evansville, Indiana 22.3 inches, Dayton, Ohio 16.4 inches, and Paducah, Kentucky 14.2 inches. Other big snowfall totals were 31 inches at Liberty, Indiana, 28 inches at Buena Vista, Indiana, 24 inches at Greenville, Ohio, and 23 inches at Mansfield, Ohio. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the NWS Office in Paducah, Kentucky.



Daily Devotion

## Free to Enjoy God

**Our heavenly Father sees past our faults and mistakes to the precious child He loves.**

Psalms 37:3-5: 3 Trust in the LORD and do good; Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.

4 Delight yourself in the LORD; And He will give you the desires of your heart.

5 Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

Scripture mentions children coming to Jesus (Matthew 18:2-3; Matthew 19:13-14). Some probably climbed onto His lap, while others perhaps sat at His feet. We can picture them asking Him questions, begging to hear more stories, and whispering secrets in His ear. It isn't surprising that they would gather around Jesus; children can usually sense when an adult loves them deeply.

Contrast this image of the Savior's welcoming, loving nature with the picture some Christians have of God—they see Him as a judgmental taskmaster who motivates by intimidation. While it's true that we are to obey the Lord, we're also to delight in Him, just as we would enjoy the company of a close friend.

How much better to have a biblically accurate view—that God, while sovereign over the universe, balances authority with love. While He does want us to pursue spiritual growth, He also wants us to relax and enjoy spending time with Him.

Taking pleasure in the Lord requires that we understand His attitude toward us: Our Father loves us tenderly and compassionately. He sees past our faults and mistakes to the precious child He created. In fact, He loves us so much that He sent Jesus Christ to save us and enable us to be with Him in heaven eternally. We have no greater friend!

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

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.19.25

1 11 27 39 59 18

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$100,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 32 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.20.25

9 12 34 45 50 1

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$10,180,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 47 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.21.25

11 24 27 38 46 15

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 2 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.20.25

4 15 17 23 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$136,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 2 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.20.25

5 8 19 23 43 6

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

12.20.25

4 5 28 52 69 20

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$1,600,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 31 Mins 16 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### **No. 2 Texas women pull away from South Dakota State 70-51 in a rare away game at Summit League power**

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Jordan Lee had 17 points and four steals to help No. 2 Texas pull away from South Dakota State for a 70-51 win on Sunday.

The Longhorns visited the Jackrabbits in a home-and-home series with the Summit League power after needing to fill out last year's schedule, coach Vic Schaefer said.

This one was a lot closer than the 103-57 outcome at Texas last season.

Texas (14-0) led South Dakota state (10-4) by eight points midway through the third quarter. Madison Booker scored six points in the final five minutes to help Texas take a 49-34 lead at the end of the period.

Booker had 14 points and nine rebounds but hit just 7 of 20 shots from the field. Rori Harmon had 11 points and seven assists. Harmon has 51 assists and only four turnovers in her last five game.

Brooklyn Meyer led South Dakota State with 20 points. Texas centers Brea Cunningham and Kyla Oldacre got into foul trouble while guarding her.

Mahli Abdouch scored 10 for South Dakota State, but the freshman guard committed 11 of the Jackrabbits' 23 turnovers.

South Dakota State was competitive for nearly three quarters despite the absence of starters Katie Vasecka and Emilee Fox, both missing for a fifth straight game with lower-body injuries.

Justice Carlton missed the game with an upper-body injury for Texas. Backup point guard Bryanna Preston returned after missing nine straight games with a sprained ankle and had nine points and four assists in 11 minutes.

Up next

South Dakota State: Hosts St. Thomas on Jan. 1.

Texas: Hosts Southeastern Louisiana on Dec. 28.

### **Russian general killed by bomb under his car in Moscow**

MOSCOW (AP) — A Russian general was killed Monday morning after an explosive device detonated underneath his car in Moscow, and investigators said Ukraine could be behind the attack, the third such killing of a senior military officer in a year.

Lt. Gen. Fani Sarvarov, head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, died from his injuries, said Svetlana Petrenko, the spokesperson for Russia's Investigative Committee, the nation's top criminal investigation agency.

"Investigators are pursuing numerous lines of inquiry regarding the murder. One of these is that the crime was orchestrated by Ukrainian intelligence services," Petrenko said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that President Vladimir Putin had been immediately informed about Sarvarov's killing.

The Defense Ministry said that Sarvarov had previously fought in Chechnya and taken part in Moscow's military campaign in Syria.

Just over a year ago, on Dec. 17, 2024, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security service claimed responsibility for the attack.

An Uzbek man was quickly arrested and charged with killing Kirillov on behalf of the Ukrainian security service.

Russian President Vladimir Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by Russia's security agencies, noting they should learn from it and improve their efficiency.

But in April, another senior Russian military officer, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, a deputy head of the main

operational department in the General Staff, was killed by an explosive device placed in his car parked near to his apartment building just outside Moscow. A suspected perpetrator was quickly arrested.

Moscow also has blamed Ukraine for several bombings and other attacks in Russia.

## **Kansas lawmakers to vote on proposal to lure Kansas City Chiefs with new stadium across state line**

By DAVE SKRETTA and JOHN HANNA Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas lawmakers are poised to vote Monday on a proposal that could lure the Kansas City Chiefs across the state line from Missouri, and replace popular but aging Arrowhead Stadium with a new facility capable of hosting major year-round events.

The meeting of the Legislative Coordinating Council, which includes the state's top lawmakers, is expected to be attended by Chiefs owner Clark Hunt and other team officials. If the proposal is passed, the Chiefs could move swiftly in announcing plans to depart their 53-year-old home at the Truman Sports Complex for a stadium that could cost upwards of \$2 billion.

The state's proposal would allow for STAR bonds to be issued to cover up to 70% of the overall cost of the project. They would be paid off with state sales and liquor tax revenues generated in a defined area around around the sports complex.

The same bonding process was used to build Kansas Speedway and the surrounding shopping and entertainment district, known as The Legends, in Kansas City, Kansas — the area where a future stadium for the Chiefs is most likely to be built.

The area is also home to Children's Mercy Park, where Sporting Kansas City of Major League Soccer plays its home matches.

"The state of Kansas is in active discussions with the Kansas City Chiefs about the prospects of building a new stadium and other facilities in Kansas," the Kansas Department of Commerce said last week. "No final agreement has been reached, but this would be a massive economic win for Kansas and benefit Kansans for generations to come. We are aggressively pursuing this opportunity."

The move by the Chiefs would be a massive blow to Missouri lawmakers and Gov. Mike Kehoe, who have been working on a package of their own to prevent a second NFL franchise in a decade from leaving their borders. The Rams departed St. Louis for Los Angeles a decade ago in part because of their inability to secure funding to help replace The Dome at America's Center.

Kehoe backed a special legislative session in June to authorize bonds covering up to 50% of the cost of new or renovated stadiums, plus up to \$50 million of tax credits for each stadium and unspecified aid from local governments.

The special session came in response to Kansas lawmakers approving their bond package.

The Chiefs originally planned an \$800 million renovation of Arrowhead Stadium in a joint effort with the Kansas City Royals, who are similarly planning to build a new facility to replace Kauffman Stadium — which sits a couple of hundred yards across a parking lot from Arrowhead Stadium — when the two teams' leases with Jackson County, Missouri, expire in January 2031.

But after county voters soundly defeated a local sales tax extension last year, the Royals and Chiefs began work on separate plans.

The Royals will not be discussed by Kansas lawmakers Monday, but momentum appears to be building behind their own move across the state line. An affiliate of the club already has purchased the mortgage on a tract of land in Overland Park, Kansas.

Quinton Lucas, the mayor of Kansas City, Missouri, has been working to keep both franchises on the Missouri side of the state line. He said in a statement over the weekend that negotiations had continued with the Chiefs throughout last week.

"We'll reserve further comment until we hear from the Kansas City Chiefs," Lucas said.

Hunt has long said his preference was to renovate Arrowhead Stadium, which was beloved by his father and team founder, the late Lamar Hunt. It is considered one of the jewels of the NFL, alongside Lambeau

Field in Green Bay, and is revered for its tailgating scene and home-field advantage; it currently holds the Guinness World Record for the loudest stadium roar.

This summer, Arrowhead Stadium will host six World Cup matches, including matches in the Round of 32 and quarterfinals.

The Hunt family has warmed in recent years to the idea of leaving their own mark by building its replacement, though. Not only would a new, state-of-the-art stadium provide new revenue streams, through luxury seating and accompanying development, but a fixed or retractable roof would allow it to be used year-round. That would mean the potential to host concerts and events, college football bowl games, the Final Four and one of Lamar Hunt's long-held dreams: a Super Bowl.

## **Bondi Beach shooting suspect conducted firearms training with his father, Australian police say**

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — A man accused of killing 15 people at Sydney's Bondi Beach conducted firearms training in an area of New South Wales state outside of Sydney with his father, Australian police documents released on Monday allege.

The men recorded a video about their justification for the meticulously planned attack, according to a police statement of facts that was made public following Naveed Akram's video court appearance Monday from a Sydney hospital where he has been treated for an abdomen injury.

Officers wounded Akram at the scene of the Dec. 14 shooting and killed his father, 50-year-old Sajid Akram.

New South Wales state government confirmed Naveed Akram was transferred Monday from a hospital to a prison. Neither facility was identified by authorities.

The statement alleges the 24-year-old and his father began their attack by throwing four improvised explosive devices toward a crowd celebrating an annual Jewish event at Bondi Beach, but the devices failed to explode.

Police described the devices as three aluminum pipe bombs and a tennis ball bomb containing an explosive, black powder and steel ball bearings. None detonated, but police described them as "viable" IEDs.

Authorities have charged Akram with 59 offenses including 15 counts of murder, 40 counts of causing harm with intent to murder in relation to the wounded survivors and one of committing a terrorist act.

The antisemitic attack at the start of the eight-day Hanukkah celebration was Australia's worst mass shooting since a lone gunman killed 35 people in Tasmania state in 1996.

The New South Wales government introduced draft laws to Parliament on Monday that Premier Chris Minns said would become the toughest in Australia.

The new restrictions would include making Australian citizenship a condition of qualifying for a firearms license. That would have excluded Sajid Akram, who was an Indian citizen with a permanent resident visa.

Sajid Akram also legally owned six rifles and shotguns. A new legal limit for recreational shooters would be a maximum of four guns.

Police said a video found on Naveed Akram's phone shows him with his father "recite their political and religious views and appear to summarise their justification for the Bondi terrorist attack."

The men are seen in the video "condemning the acts of Zionists" while they also "adhere to a religiously motivated ideology linked to Islamic State," police said.

Video shot in October show them "firing shotguns and moving in a tactical manner" on grassland surrounded by trees, police said.

"There is evidence that the Accused and his father meticulously planned this terrorist attack for many months," police allege.

At Bondi, an impromptu memorial that grew near the Bondi Pavilion after the massacre as thousands of mourners brought flowers and heartfelt cards was removed Monday as the beachfront returns to more normal activity. Part of the memorial will be preserved by the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Victims' funerals continued Monday with French national Dan Elkayam's service held in the nearby suburb of Woollahra, at the heart of Sydney's Jewish life. The 27-year-old moved from Paris to Sydney a year ago. The health department had said before Akram was discharged that 13 patients injured at Bondi remained in hospitals on Monday.

## Starlink in the crosshairs: How Russia could attack Elon Musk's conquering of space

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

Two NATO-nation intelligence services suspect Russia is developing a new anti-satellite weapon to target Elon Musk's Starlink constellation with destructive orbiting clouds of shrapnel, with the aim of reining in Western space superiority that has helped Ukraine on the battlefield.

Intelligence findings seen by The Associated Press say the so-called "zone-effect" weapon would seek to flood Starlink orbits with hundreds of thousands of high-density pellets, potentially disabling multiple satellites at once but also risking catastrophic collateral damage to other orbiting systems.

Analysts who haven't seen the findings say they doubt such a weapon could work without causing uncontrollable chaos in space for companies and countries, including Russia and its ally China, that rely on thousands of orbiting satellites for communications, defense and other vital needs.

Such repercussions, including risks to its own space systems, could steer Moscow away from deploying or using such a weapon, analysts said.

"I don't buy it. Like, I really don't," said Victoria Samson, a space-security specialist at the Secure World Foundation who leads the Colorado-based nongovernmental organization's annual study of anti-satellite systems. "I would be very surprised, frankly, if they were to do something like that."

But the commander of the Canadian military's Space Division, Brig. Gen. Christopher Horner, said such Russian work cannot be ruled out in light of previous U.S. allegations that Russia also has been pursuing an indiscriminate nuclear, space-based weapon.

"I can't say I've been briefed on that type of system. But it's not implausible," he said. "If the reporting on the nuclear weapons system is accurate and that they're willing to develop that and willing to go to that end, well it wouldn't strike me as shocking that something just short of that, but equally damaging, is within their wheelhouse of development."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov didn't respond to messages from the AP seeking comment. Russia has previously called for United Nations efforts to stop the orbital deployment of weapons and President Vladimir Putin has said Moscow has no intention of deploying nuclear space weapons.

Weapon would have multiple targets

The intelligence findings were shown to the AP on condition that the services involved were not identified and the news organization was not able to independently verify the findings' conclusions.

The U.S. Space Force didn't respond to e-mailed questions. The French military's Space Command said in a statement to the AP that it could not comment on the findings but said, "We can inform you that Russia has, in recent years, been multiplying irresponsible, dangerous, and even hostile actions in space."

Russia views Starlink in particular as a grave threat, the findings indicate. The thousands of low-orbiting satellites have been pivotal for Ukraine's survival against Russia's full-scale invasion, now in its fourth year.

Starlink's high-speed internet service is used by Ukrainian forces for battlefield communications, weapons targeting and other roles and by civilians and government officials where Russian strikes have affected communications.

Russian officials repeatedly have warned that commercial satellites serving Ukraine's military could be legitimate targets. This month, Russia said it has fielded a new ground-based missile system, the S-500, which is capable of hitting low-orbit targets.

Unlike a missile that Russia tested in 2021 to destroy a defunct Cold War-era satellite, the new weapon in development would target multiple Starlinks at once, with pellets possibly released by yet-to-be launched formations of small satellites, the intelligence findings say.

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Canada's Horner said it is hard to see how clouds of pellets could be corralled to only strike Starlink and that debris from such an attack could get "out of control in a hurry."

"You blow up a box full of BBs," he said. Doing that would "blanket an entire orbital regime and take out every Starlink satellite and every other satellite that's in a similar regime. And I think that's the part that is incredibly troubling."

System is possibly just experimental

The findings seen by the AP didn't say when Russia might be capable of deploying such a system nor detail whether it has been tested or how far along research is believed to be.

The system is in active development and information about the timing of an expected deployment is too sensitive to share, according to an official familiar with the findings and other related intelligence that the AP did not see. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the nonpublic findings.

Such Russian research could be simply experimental, Samson said.

"I wouldn't put it past some scientists ... to build out something like this because it's an interesting thought-experiment and they think, you know, 'Maybe at some point we can get our government to pay for it,'" she said.

Samson suggested the specter of a supposed new Russian threat may also be an effort to elicit an international response.

"Often times people pushing these ideas are doing it because they want the U.S. side to build something like that or ... to justify increased spending on counterspace capabilities or using it for a more hawkish approach on Russia," she said.

"I'm not saying that this is what's happening with this," Samson added. "But it has been known to happen that people take these crazy arguments and use them."

Tiny pellets could remain undetected

The intelligence findings say the pellets would be so small — just millimeters across — that they would evade detection by ground- and space-based systems that scan for space objects, which could make it hard to pin blame for any attack on Moscow.

Clayton Swope, who specializes in space security and weaponry at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based security and policy think tank, said if "the pellets are not trackable, that complicates things" but "people would figure it out."

"If satellites start winking out with damage, I guess you could put two and two together," he said.

Exactly how much destruction tiny pellets could do isn't clear. In November, a suspected impact by a small piece of debris was sufficient to damage a Chinese spacecraft that was meant to bring three astronauts back to the Earth.

"Most damage would probably be done to the solar panels because they're probably the most fragile part" of satellites, Swope said. "That'd be enough, though, to damage a satellite and probably bring it offline."

'Weapon of fear' could threaten chaos

After such an attack, pellets and debris would over time fall back toward Earth, possibly damaging other orbiting systems on their way down, analysts say.

Starlink's orbits are about 550 kilometers (340 miles) above the planet. China's Tiangong space station and the International Space Station operate at lower orbits, "so both would face risks," according to Swope.

The space chaos that such a weapon could cause might enable Moscow to threaten its adversaries without actually having to use it, Swope said.

"It definitely feels like a weapon of fear, looking for some kind of deterrence or something," he said.

Samson said the drawbacks of an indiscriminate pellet-weapon could steer Russia off such a path.

"They've invested a huge amount of time and money and human power into being, you know, a space power," she said.

Using such a weapon "would effectively cut off space for them as well," Samson said. "I don't know that they would be willing to give up that much."

## Passenger bus crash in Indonesia kills at least 16 people, official says

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — A passenger bus crash killed at least 16 people on Indonesia's main island of Java just after midnight Monday, officials said.

The bus carrying 34 people lost control on a toll road and struck a concrete barrier before rolling onto its side, said Budiono, a search and rescue agency chief who goes by single name like many Indonesians.

The inter-province bus was traveling from the capital Jakarta to the country's ancient royal city of Yogyakarta when it overturned while entering a curved exit ramp at the Krapyak toll way in Central Java's Semarang city, he said.

"The forceful impact threw several passengers and left them trapped against the bus body," Budiono said.

Police and rescue teams arrived about 40 minutes after the accident and recovered the bodies of six passengers who died at the scene. Another 10 people died on the way to a hospital or while being treated, Budiono said.

The 18 victims being treated at two nearby hospitals included five people in critical condition and 13 in serious condition, he said.

Television news reports showed the yellow bus overturned on its side and surrounded by National Search and Rescue Agency personnel, police and passersby as ambulances transported victims and the dead away from the accident scene.

Witnesses told authorities the bus was traveling at high speed before the driver lost control, Central Java Police Chief Ribut Hari Wibowo said at Dr. Karyadi General Hospital in Semarang where the bodies were being identified.

The driver was a substitute who sustained serious injuries but was able to communicate while under medical care, he said.

"We are still investigating the cause of the crash and questioning the injured substitute driver," Wibowo said, adding that police planned to test the driver for prohibited substances including drugs.

## Trump announces he's appointing Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry to serve as US special envoy to Greenland

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump on Sunday announced he is appointing Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry to serve as the U.S. special envoy to Greenland, the vast, semi-autonomous territory of Denmark that Trump has said the U.S. needs to take over.

"Jeff understands how essential Greenland is to our National Security, and will strongly advance our Country's Interests for the Safety, Security, and Survival of our Allies, and indeed, the World," Trump said in announcing the appointment.

Trump during his presidential transition and in the early months of his return to the White House repeatedly called for U.S. jurisdiction over Greenland, and has not ruled out military force to take control of the mineral-rich, strategically located Arctic island.

The issue had drifted out of the headlines in recent months, but in August, Danish officials summoned the U.S. ambassador following a report that at least three people with connections to Trump had carried out covert influence operations in Greenland.

Earlier this year, Vice President JD Vance visited a remote U.S. military base on the island and accused Denmark of underinvesting there.

Trump has said that Greenland is crucial for U.S. security and hasn't ruled out taking the island by military force, even though Denmark is a NATO ally of the U.S.

Landry took office as governor in January 2024. His term ends in January 2028.

"It's an honor to serve you in this volunteer position to make Greenland a part of the U.S.," Landry wrote in a posting on X in which he thanked Trump for the appointment. He added, "This in no way affects my

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position as Governor of Louisiana!"

Denmark, a NATO ally of the U.S., and Greenland have said the island is not for sale and condemned reports of the U.S. gathering intelligence there. The U.S. push for Greenland is also opposed by Russia and much of Europe.

The Embassy of Denmark in Washington did not immediately respond to requests for comment about Landry's appointment.

The Danish Defense Intelligence Service said in a report earlier this month that the United States is using its economic power to "assert its will" and threaten military force against friend and foe alike.

The service, in its annual assessment, said Washington's greater assertiveness under the Trump administration also comes as China and Russia seek to diminish Western, especially American, influence.

"The strategic importance of the Arctic is rising as the conflict between Russia and the West intensifies, and the growing security and strategic focus on the Arctic by the United States will further accelerate these developments," the report said.

## Power restored to most in San Francisco after massive outage

By JAIMIE DING and SUSAN HAIGH Associated Press

Power was restored Sunday to the bulk of the 130,000 homes and businesses in San Francisco impacted by a massive outage a day earlier that caused major disruptions in the city.

About 17,000 customers remained without power as of noon Sunday, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. said. PG&E said earlier its crews were working to restore electricity in several neighborhoods and small areas of downtown San Francisco following Saturday's outage.

PG&E in a statement said it expects to restore power to remaining customers no later than 2 p.m. Monday.

"The damage from the fire in our substation was significant and extensive, and the repairs and safe restoration will be complex," the utility said, referring to the substation at 8th and Mission streets. That fire has been blamed for some of the blackouts. The outage remains under investigation.

PG&E said it mobilized additional engineers and electricians to help with restoration efforts.

"This is a very complex work plan and will require the highest amount of safety focus to ensure safe work actions," PG&E said. No injuries have been reported.

The outage, which occurred shortly after 1 p.m. on Saturday, left a large swath of the northern part of the city without power that began to grow in size. At its peak, the outage represented roughly one-third of the utility company's customers in the city.

At about 4 p.m. on Saturday, PG&E posted on X that it had stabilized the grid and no further outages were expected.

Social media posts and local media reported mass closures of restaurants and shops and darkened street lights and Christmas decorations on Saturday, one of the busiest shopping days of the year.

The San Francisco Department of Emergency Management said on X there were "significant transit disruptions" happening citywide and urged residents to avoid nonessential travel and treat down traffic signals as four-way stops. Waymo, the operator of driverless ride-hailing vehicles, suspended its services. At least one video posted on social media appeared to show a Waymo vehicle stopped in the middle of an intersection.

## Vance refuses to set red lines over bigotry as conservatives feud at Turning Point

By JONATHAN J. COOPER and SEJAL GOVINDARAO Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Vice President JD Vance said Sunday the conservative movement should be open to everyone as long as they "love America," declining to condemn a streak of antisemitism that has divided the Republican Party and roiled the opening days of Turning Point USA's annual convention.

After a long weekend of debates about whether the movement should exclude figures such as bigoted

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podcaster Nick Fuentes, Vance came down firmly against "purity tests."

"I didn't bring a list of conservatives to denounce or to de-platform," Vance said during the convention's closing speech.

Turning Point leader Erika Kirk, who took the helm after the assassination of her husband, Charlie Kirk, has endorsed Vance as a potential successor to President Donald Trump, a helpful nod from an influential group with an army of volunteers.

But the tension on display at the four-day gathering foreshadowed the treacherous political waters that Vance, or anyone else who seeks the next Republican presidential nomination, will need to navigate in the coming years. Top voices in the "Make America Great Again" movement are jockeying for influence as Republicans begin considering a future without Trump, and there is no clear path to holding his coalition together.

### Defining a post-Trump GOP

The Republican Party's identity has been intertwined with Trump for a decade, but he's constitutionally ineligible to run for reelection despite his musings about serving a third term. Tucker Carlson said people are wondering, "who gets the machinery when the president exits the scene?"

So far, it looks like settling that question will come with a lot of fighting among conservatives. The Turning Point conference featured arguments about antisemitism, Israel and environmental regulations, not to mention rivalries between leading commentators.

Ben Shapiro, co-founder of the conservative media outlet Daily Wire, used his speech on the conference's opening night to denounce "charlatans who claim to speak in the name of principle but actually traffic in conspiracism and dishonesty."

"These people are frauds and they are grifters and they do not deserve your time," Shapiro said. He specifically called out Carlson for hosting Fuentes for a friendly interview on his podcast.

Carlson brushed off the criticism when he took the stage barely an hour later, and he said the idea of a Republican "civil war" was "totally fake."

"There are people who are mad at JD Vance, and they're stirring up a lot of this in order to make sure he doesn't get the nomination," he said. Carlson described Vance as "the one person" who subscribes to the "core idea of the Trump coalition," which Carlson said was "America first."

Turning Point spokesperson Andrew Kolvet framed the discord as a healthy debate about the future of the movement, an uncomfortable but necessary process of finding consensus.

"We're not hive-minded commies," he wrote on social media. "Let it play out."

If you love America, you're welcome in the movement, Vance says

Vance acknowledged the controversies that dominated the Turning Point conference, but he did not define any boundaries for the conservative movement besides patriotism.

"We don't care if you're white or black, rich or poor, young or old, rural or urban, controversial or a little bit boring, or somewhere in between," he said.

Vance didn't name anyone, but his comments came in the midst of an increasingly contentious debate over whether the right should give a platform to commentators espousing antisemitic views, particularly Fuentes, whose followers see themselves as working to preserve America's white, Christian identity. Fuentes has a growing audience, as does top-rated podcaster Candace Owens, who routinely shares antisemitic conspiracy theories.

"We have far more important work to do than canceling each other," he said.

Vance ticked off what he said were the accomplishments of the administration as it approaches the one-year mark, noting its efforts at the border and on the economy. He emphasized efforts to end diversity, equity and inclusion policies, drawing applause by saying they had been relegated to the "dustbin of history."

"In the United States of America, you don't have to apologize for being white anymore," he said.

Vance also said the U.S. "always will be a Christian nation," adding that "Christianity is America's creed, the shared moral language from the Revolution to the Civil War and beyond."

Those comments resonated with Isaiah White-Diller, an 18 year-old from Yuma, Arizona, who said he would support Vance if he runs for president.

"I have my right to be Christian here, I have my right to say whatever I want," White-Diller said.

Turning Point backs Vance

Vance hasn't disclosed his future plans, but Erika Kirk said Thursday that Turning Point wanted Vance "elected for 48 in the most resounding way possible." The next president will be the 48th in U.S. history.

Turning Point is a major force on the right, with a nationwide volunteer network that can be especially helpful in early primary states, when candidates rely on grassroots energy to build momentum. In a surprise appearance, rapper Nicki Minaj spoke effusively about Trump and Vance.

Vance was close with Charlie Kirk, and they supported each other over the years. After Kirk's assassination on a college campus in Utah, the vice president flew out on Air Force Two to collect Kirk's remains and bring them home to Arizona. The vice president helped uniformed service members carry the casket to the plane.

Emily Meck, 18, from Pine City, New York, said she appreciated Vance making space for a wide variety of views.

"We are free-thinkers, we're going to have these disagreements, we're going to have our own thoughts," Meck said.

Trump has spoken highly of both Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio as potential successors, even suggesting they could form a future Republican ticket. Rubio has said he would support Vance.

Asked in August whether Vance was the "heir apparent," Trump said "most likely."

"It's too early, obviously, to talk about it, but certainly he's doing a great job, and he would be probably favorite at this point," he said.

## These influencers are teaching Christianity online — and young people are listening

By CHARLOTTE KRAMON Associated Press/Report for America

ATLANTA (AP) — Millennial and Generation Z Christian influencers are increasingly filling a void in American religion, growing audiences across digital platforms by steering young people to biblical answers to tough questions that aren't always answered in Sunday sermons.

"I can be that in-between — Monday to Saturday help — to give you practical things to make you feel like you're not walking this walk alone," said Megan Ashley, 35, sitting cross-legged in sweats on the couch where she records her "In Totality" podcast.

From myriad backgrounds, these influencers talk candidly to their listeners about everything from anxieties and doubts to dating and culture, delving into the Bible's complexities. Those of faith say Christian influencers are galvanizing young people looking for meaning in a culture that lacks it at a time when years of declining church attendance has slowed.

"What they're making accessible is a truth that transforms people," said Lecrae Moore, a Christian rapper and podcaster. "There's something that's happening existentially — supernaturally — that I can't explain."

Ashley and Moore are among a half-dozen popular influencers who described their work for this story. With and without formal theological training, they describe themselves as churchgoers who don't want their messages boxed in by denominational labels.

Some grew up in church; others didn't, but they commonly describe experiencing a spiritual transformation that came out of hardship or a sense of emptiness they pin on secular lifestyles.

"We're like, listen, we're two mess-ups too. It's OK," said Arielle Reitsma, 36, co-host of podcast "Girls Gone Bible," which gets more than a million listens or streams each month.

Connecting online, and in person

These algorithm-savvy podcasters fit comfortably in a long tradition of Christian celebrities, said Zachary Sheldon, a Baylor University lecturer on media, religion and culture who cited televangelist Billy Graham as an example. Working independently, they can harness audiences more easily than established congregations and media organizations can.

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"Exposing people to the faith and challenging them to ask questions and search for something more" are really good things to do, Sheldon said. But he pointed to "potential dangers in granting them too much authority on the basis of their celebrity and their acumen with social media."

These influencers encourage church attendance and describe reaching a variety of people, including those who have been particularly disconnected from religion, which polls show is a growing number of young Americans. Only 41% of people ages 18-35 surveyed in 2023-24 said they believe in God with certainty, down from 65% in 2007, according to the Pew Research Center.

"People are spiritually hungry, emotionally hungry, and I think for the first time ever ... people are encountering Jesus even through online platforms, and they're realizing, this is true life and fulfillment," said Angela Halili, 29, Reitsma's co-host.

The pair now draws live crowds since starting the podcast more than two years ago. At an event in Atlanta, they warned hundreds of fans against idolizing work or relationships, Bibles in hand, and recounted their days as Hollywood actors battling addiction, heartbreak and mental health disorders. Halili said God brought them "radical healing," and they want listeners to know that God can perform "miracles" in their lives, too.

Afterward, they hugged and prayed for people in the audience, where Anna Williams, 17, said she considers both Reitsma and Halili to be "a big sister" in her life.

They say Christian life isn't easy, but it's worth it

Even as they espouse biblical principles as guidance toward true joy, influencers say that being Christian can be hard.

God "does make everything better, but that doesn't always come in the way that we think it's gonna come," said "In Totality" host Ashley.

Her current obsession, which she teaches with fervor, is a biblical passage about living as a sacrifice. God asks people to give up certain wants and behaviors so they can grow closer to him, Ashley says. She said her intensity grew after a healing encounter with God's "severity" as a freshly divorced single mom plagued by suicidal thoughts and depression.

Bible themes, heavier challenges, day-to-day plights as well as topics like parenting and Black culture are covered on "With the Perrys," a podcast led by husband and wife authors and spoken-word artists who also run a streetwear brand.

"It is the all — how do we do all of this stuff in this weird flesh and weird world?" said Jackie Hill Perry, 36.

She is an admired speaker who is working towards her seminary degree and wrote a book about leaving behind same-sex relationships. She and husband Preston Perry, 39, started podcasting in 2019. Followers already resonated with Perry's theological debates and story of growing up around poverty and violence before finding faith and becoming a Christian evangelist.

"God calls us to ruffle feathers sometimes, to speak to culture," Perry said.

In a recent episode, the Perrys urged listeners to be honest with God about struggling to trust him. Through focused prayer, obedience and Bible reading, God brings lasting peace, answers and growth during hard circumstances, they say, but this requires more than quick fixes like scrolling and sex.

At just 22, Bryce Crawford teaches Bible chapters on his self-named podcast and posts videos of himself talking to people about Christianity at Pride parades, the Burning Man counter-culture festival and a satanic temple.

Rather than shout "repent," Crawford's street evangelism aims to change minds through kindness. His followers say they're attracted by his empathetic yet bold demeanor while delivering talking points against lifestyles such as same-sex marriage.

"My issue with 'repent or burn in hell' is that people get frustrated because they don't know why you're telling them that," said Crawford, who describes being severely anxious and bitter toward God until God healed him at a Waffle House. "Our tactics have been one-on-one conversations, calmly listening, asking questions because we care about them, and in that explaining our worldview."

The challenges of online Christianity

These influencers acknowledge that online Christianity has its challenges.

A hyperfocus on online drama and Christianity's more esoteric beliefs can miss the basics, such as love and Christ's sacrifice, Hill Perry said. She worries that "simply talking about gentleness or respect or kindness or patience is gonna be boring" to people.

And the deep political and cultural rifts among Christians emerge online too.

For example, Halili and Reitsma got pushback for taking the opportunity to pray at a pre-inauguration rally for President Donald Trump. The Perrys have been criticized by conservatives for talking about police brutality and racial injustice, and liberals for expressing opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion.

Some followers say these influencers provide a welcome alternative to the buttoned-up pastors they grew up with who spoke of God as a faraway deity that would reject them for breaking too many rules.

"I really needed someone who was a younger Black female portraying something that wasn't super traditional," said Olivia Singleton, 24. She's involved with her church and likes her pastor, but feels like these influencers are like "one of the girls ... walking out the faith with you."

## Trump is leaning on son-in-law Jared Kushner for difficult diplomacy

By MATTHEW LEE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As the dawn rose on President Donald Trump's second term, one key figure from his first administration stood back, content to focus on his personal business interests and not retake a formal government role.

Now, nearly a year into Trump 2.0, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner has been drawn back into the foreign policy fold and is taking a greater role in delicate peace negotiations. Talks had initially been led almost solo by special envoy Steve Witkoff, a real estate mogul who had no government experience before this year.

The shift reflects a sense among Trump's inner circle that Kushner, who has diplomatic experience, complements Witkoff's negotiating style and can bridge seemingly intractable differences to close a deal, according to several current and former administration officials who, like others, spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the internal deliberations.

That role was on display this weekend as Kushner and Witkoff took part in a blitz of diplomacy in Miami.

On Sunday, they concluded two days of talks with Russian negotiator Kirill Dmitriev in Miami on the latest proposals to end Russia's war in Ukraine.

The talks with Dmitriev came after they met on Friday in Florida with the Ukrainian negotiating team, led by Rustem Umerov, as well as senior British, French and German national security officials. The Ukrainians and European officials stuck around Florida for more talks with U.S. government officials facilitated by Trump's envoys.

Witkoff and Kushner also squeezed in meetings on Friday with Turkish and Qatari officials to discuss the fragile truce between Israel and Hamas in Gaza as they look to implement the second phase of Trump's ceasefire plan.

Kushner and Witkoff employ contrasting styles

Witkoff, a longtime pal of Trump's, is seen by some inside the administration as an oversize character who has traveled the world for diplomatic negotiations on his private jet and does not miss an opportunity to publicly praise the president for his foreign policy acumen, the officials say.

Kushner has his own complicated business interests in the Middle East and a sometimes transactional outlook to diplomacy that has distressed some officials in European capitals, a Western diplomat said.

Still, Kushner is seen as a more credible negotiator than Witkoff, who is viewed by many Ukrainian and European officials as overly deferential to Russian interests during the war that began with Moscow's invasion in February 2022, the diplomat said.

"Kushner has a bit more of a track record from the first administration," said Ian Kelly, a retired career diplomat and former U.S. ambassador to Georgia who now teaches diplomacy at Northwestern University. Kelly stressed, however, that the jury is still out on Kushner's intervention.

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Trump views Kushner as a “trusted family member and talented adviser” who has played a pivotal role in some of his biggest foreign policy successes, said White House deputy press secretary Anna Kelly.

Trump and Witkoff “often seek Mr. Kushner’s input given his experience with complex negotiations, and Mr. Kushner has been generous in lending his valuable expertise when asked,” Kelly added.

State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott called Kushner “a world-class negotiator.” Pigott noted that Secretary of State Marco Rubio is grateful for Kushner’s “willingness to serve our country and help President Trump solve some of the world’s most complex challenges.”

In an interview with CBS’ “60 Minutes” in October, Kushner spoke about his unconventional approach to diplomacy.

“I was trained in foreign policy really in President Trump’s first term by seeing an outsider president come into Washington with a different school of foreign policy than had been brought in place for the 20 or 30 years prior,” he said.

But some Democrats and government oversight groups have expressed skepticism about Kushner’s role in shaping the administration policies in the Middle East while he manages billions of dollars in investments, including from Saudi Arabia and Qatar’s sovereign wealth funds through his firm, Affinity Partners.

Similarly, Witkoff has faced scrutiny for his and his family’s deep business ties to Gulf nations. Witkoff last year partnered with members of Trump’s family to launch a cryptocurrency company, World Liberty Financial, which received a \$2 billion investment from a United Arab Emirates-controlled wealth fund.

“What people call conflicts of interests, Steve and I call experience and trusted relationships that we have throughout the world,” said Kushner, who is not drawing a salary from the White House for his advisory role.

White House counsel David Warrington said in a statement that Kushner’s efforts for Trump “are undertaken in full compliance with the law.”

“Given that Jared Kushner was a critical part of the efforts leading to the historic Abraham Accords and other diplomatic successes in the first Trump Administration, the President asked Mr. Kushner to be available as the President engages in similar efforts to bring peace to the world,” Warrington said in a statement, referring to Trump’s first-term effort that normalized relations between Israel and several Arab nations. “Mr. Kushner has agreed to do so in his capacity as a private citizen.”

Kelly and other veterans of U.S. diplomatic encounters with the Russians over many years are also skeptical about Kushner’s ability to secure a Russia-Ukraine deal because Witkoff technically remains in the lead.

“I don’t see that the Witkoff approach is going to work,” Kelly said. “He doesn’t really read the Russians well. He misunderstands what they say and reports the misunderstandings back to Washington and the Europeans.”

“They seem to have this idea that the magic key is money: investment and development,” Kelly said. “But these guys don’t care about that, they are not real estate guys except in the sense that they want the land, period.”

Kushner was out of the spotlight until he wasn’t

For the first half of the year, Kushner stayed out of the spotlight, even as he pushed, unsuccessfully in some cases, to install some former associates — those with whom he worked on negotiating the Abraham Accords — into powerful roles in the new administration, according to the current and former administration officials.

Kushner had told Trump and others that while he would not be joining the second-term White House, he stood ready to offer his counsel if it was desired. That is a role he also played on a few occasions during the Biden years as the Democratic administration tried, without success, to expand the Abraham Accords.

Although Kushner remained an informal sounding board for Trump and top advisers, he resisted getting directly involved, even as the president expanded his peacemaking pursuits, until it became clear to him and others that the job might be too much for Witkoff to seal on his own, the officials said.

As Trump’s efforts to forge an agreement to end the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza faltered over the summer, Kushner came in, trading on his experience and contacts in negotiating the Abraham Accords to help Witkoff push Trump’s plan over the finish line.

Agreed to in late September after frantic talks surrounding the annual U.N. General Assembly, the 20-point

plan is still a work in progress, but its implementation is being coordinated by Kushner and numerous members of his Abraham Accords team.

"We always bring Jared when we want to get that deal closed," Trump told Israel's parliament, the Knesset, shortly after the agreement. "We need that brain on occasion."

As soon as the Gaza plan was finalized, Kushner said he was returning to his family and day job in Miami, where he heads a multibillion-dollar private equity firm. His involvement in high-stakes peacemaking was only temporary, Kushner said, joking that his wife, Ivanka, might change the locks if he did not get home soon.

"I'm gonna try to help set it up, and then I'm gonna hopefully go back to my normal life," Kushner said in October.

But within weeks of shepherding the Gaza ceasefire, Trump turned again to his fixer-in-law to dive into the Russia-Ukraine negotiations. They had been deadlocked for months despite persistent efforts by the White House to lure both Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy into an agreement.

Trump hinted then that he would continue to lean on Kushner when the stakes are highest, just as he has done.

## **Coast Guard is pursuing another tanker helping Venezuela skirt sanctions, US official says**

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — The U.S. Coast Guard on Sunday was pursuing another sanctioned oil tanker in the Caribbean Sea as the Trump administration appeared to be intensifying its targeting of such vessels connected to the Venezuelan government.

The pursuit of the tanker, which was confirmed by a U.S. official briefed on the operation, comes after the U.S. administration announced Saturday it had seized a tanker for the second time in less than two weeks.

The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly about the ongoing operation and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Sunday's pursuit involved "a sanctioned dark fleet vessel that is part of Venezuela's illegal sanctions evasion."

The official said the vessel was flying a false flag and under a judicial seizure order.

The Pentagon and Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the U.S. Coast Guard, deferred questions about the operation to the White House, which did not offer comment on the operation.

Saturday's predawn seizure of a Panama-flagged vessel called Centuries targeted what the White House described as a "falsely flagged vessel operating as part of the Venezuelan shadow fleet to traffic stolen oil."

The Coast Guard, with assistance from the Navy, seized a sanctioned tanker called Skipper on Dec. 10, another part of the shadow fleet of tankers that the U.S. says operates on the fringes of the law to move sanctioned cargo. It was not even flying a nation's flag when it was seized by the Coast Guard.

President Donald Trump, after that first seizure, said that the U.S. would carry out a "blockade" of Venezuela. It all comes as Trump has ratcheted up his rhetoric toward Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

This past week Trump demanded that Venezuela return assets that it seized from U.S. oil companies years ago, justifying anew his announcement of a "blockade" against oil tankers traveling to or from the South American country that face American sanctions.

Trump cited the lost U.S. investments in Venezuela when asked about his newest tactic in a pressure campaign against Maduro, suggesting the Republican administration's moves are at least somewhat motivated by disputes over oil investments, along with accusations of drug trafficking. Some sanctioned tankers already are diverting away from Venezuela.

U.S. oil companies dominated Venezuela's petroleum industry until the country's leaders moved to nationalize the sector, first in the 1970s and again in the 21st century under Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez. Compensation offered by Venezuela was deemed insufficient, and in 2014, an international

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arbitration panel ordered the country's socialist government to pay \$1.6 billion to ExxonMobil.

Maduro said in a message Sunday on Telegram that Venezuela has spent months "denouncing, challenging and defeating a campaign of aggression that goes from psychological terrorism to corsairs attacking oil tankers."

He added: "We are ready to accelerate the pace of our deep revolution!"

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who has been critical of Trump's Venezuela policy, called the tanker seizures a "provocation and a prelude to war."

"Look, at any point in time, there are 20, 30 governments around the world that we don't like that are either socialist or communist or have human rights violations," Paul said on ABC's "This Week." "But it isn't the job of the American soldier to be the policeman of the world."

The targeting of tankers comes as Trump has ordered the Defense Department to carry out a series of attacks on vessels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean that his administration alleges are smuggling fentanyl and other illegal drugs into the United States and beyond.

At least 104 people have been killed in 28 known strikes since early September. The strikes have faced scrutiny from U.S. lawmakers and human rights activists, who say the administration has offered scant evidence that its targets are indeed drug smugglers and that the fatal strikes amount to extrajudicial killings.

Trump has repeatedly said Maduro's days in power are numbered. White House chief of staff Susie Wiles said in an interview with Vanity Fair published last week that Trump "wants to keep on blowing boats up until Maduro cries uncle."

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., told NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday that Trump's use of military to mount pressure on Maduro runs contrary to Trump's pledge to keep the United States out of unnecessary wars.

Democrats have been pressing Trump to seek congressional authorization for the military action in the Caribbean.

"We should be using sanctions and other tools at our disposal to punish this dictator who is violating the human rights of his civilians and has run the Venezuelan economy into the ground," Kaine said. "But I'll tell you, we should not be waging war against Venezuela. We definitely should not be waging war without a vote of Congress."

## US says talks with Ukraine, Europe on ending war with Russia 'constructive'

By The Associated Press undefined

A White House envoy said Sunday he held "productive and constructive" talks in Florida with Ukrainian and European representatives to end the nearly four-year war between Russia and Ukraine.

Posting on social media, Steve Witkoff said the talks aimed at aligning on a shared strategic approach between Ukraine, the United States and Europe.

"Our shared priority is to stop the killing, ensure guaranteed security, and create conditions for Ukraine's recovery, stability, and long-term prosperity. Peace must be not only a cessation of hostilities, but also a dignified foundation for a stable future," U.S. President Donald Trump's envoy said.

The talks are part of the Trump administration's monthslong push for peace. Trump has unleashed an extensive diplomatic push to end the war, but his efforts have run into sharply conflicting demands by Moscow and Kyiv. Putin has recently signaled he is digging in on his maximalist demands on Ukraine, as Moscow's troops inch forward on the battlefield despite huge losses.

Positive assessments

Witkoff's assessment comes as negotiations have been proceeding with Russia as well. A Kremlin envoy said Saturday that the talks were pressing on "constructively" in Florida.

"The discussions are proceeding constructively. They began earlier and will continue today, and will also continue tomorrow," Kirill Dmitriev told reporters in Miami on Saturday. There were no immediate updates on the talks with Russia on Sunday.

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Dmitriev met with Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, Russian state news agency RIA Novosti reported.

For Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on Telegram Sunday that diplomatic efforts were "moving forward quite quickly, and our team in Florida has been working with the American side."

The Kremlin denied Sunday that trilateral talks involving Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. were under discussion, after Zelenskyy said Saturday that Washington had proposed the idea of three-way discussions.

"At present, no one has seriously discussed this initiative, and to my knowledge it is not being prepared," Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov said, according to Russian state news agencies.

Ukrainian civilians moved to Russia

In Ukraine, the country's human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets on Sunday accused Russian forces of forcibly removing about 50 Ukrainian civilians from the Ukrainian Sumy border region to Russian territory.

Writing on Telegram, he said that Russian forces illegally detained the residents in the village of Hrabovske on Thursday, before moving them to Russia on Saturday.

Lubinets said he contacted Russia's human rights commissioner, requesting information on the civilians' whereabouts and conditions, and demanding their immediate return to Ukraine.

Possible French-Russian talks

The French presidency on Sunday welcomed Putin's willingness to speak with President Emmanuel Macron, saying it would decide how to proceed "in the coming days."

"As soon as the prospect of a ceasefire and peace negotiations becomes clearer, it becomes useful again to speak with Putin," Macron's office said in a statement. "It is welcome that the Kremlin publicly agrees to this approach."

The statement came after reports that Putin was open to holding talks with the French president if there was mutual political will.

European Union leaders agreed on Friday to provide 90 billion euros (\$106 billion) to Ukraine to meet its military and economic needs for the next two years, although they failed to bridge differences with Belgium that would have allowed them to use frozen Russian assets to raise the funds. Instead, they were borrowed from capital markets.

## Top Trump administration official defends partial release of Epstein files as Democrats cry foul

By AAMER MADHANI AND ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche on Sunday defended the Justice Department's decision to release just a fraction of the Jeffrey Epstein files by the congressionally mandated deadline as necessary to protect survivors of sexual abuse by the disgraced financier.

Blanche pledged that the Trump administration eventually would meet its obligation required by law. But he stressed that the department was obligated to act with caution as it goes about making public thousands of documents that can include sensitive information.

Friday's partial release of the Epstein files has led to a new crush of criticism from Democrats who have accused the Republican administration of trying to hide information.

Blanche called that pushback disingenuous as President Donald Trump's administration continues to struggle with calls for greater transparency, including from members of his political base, about the government's investigations into Epstein, who once counted Trump as well as several political leaders and business titans among his peers.

"The reason why we are still reviewing documents and still continuing our process is simply that to protect victims," Blanche told NBC's "Meet the Press." "So the same individuals that are out there complaining about the lack of documents that were produced on Friday are the same individuals who apparently don't want us to protect victims."

Blanche's comments were the most extensive by the administration since the file dump, which included

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photographs, interview transcripts, call logs, court records and other documents. But some of the most consequential records expected about Epstein were nowhere to be found, such as FBI interviews with survivors and internal Justice Department memos examining charging decisions. Those records could help explain how investigators viewed the case and why Epstein was allowed in 2008 to plead guilty to a relatively minor state-level prostitution charge.

Trump, who was friends with Epstein for years before the two had a falling-out, tried for months to keep the records sealed. Though Trump has not been accused of wrongdoing in connection with Epstein, he has argued there is nothing to see in the files and that the public should focus on other issues.

Federal prosecutors in New York brought sex trafficking charges against Epstein in 2019, but he killed himself in jail after his arrest.

Democrats see a cover-up, not an effort to protect victims

But Democratic lawmakers on Sunday hammered Trump and the Justice Department for a partial release.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., argued that the Justice Department is obstructing the implementation of the law mandating the release of the documents not because it wants to protect the Epstein victims.

"It's all about covering up things that, for whatever reason, Donald Trump doesn't want to go public, either about himself, other members of his family, friends, Jeffrey Epstein, or just the social, business, cultural network that he was involved in for at least a decade, if not longer," he said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Blanche also defended the department's decision to remove several files related to the case from its public webpage, including a photograph showing Trump, less than a day after they were posted.

The missing files, which were available Friday but no longer accessible by Saturday, included images of paintings depicting nude women, and one showed a series of photographs along a credenza and in drawers. In that image, inside a drawer among other photos, was a photograph of Trump, alongside Epstein, Melania Trump and Epstein's longtime associate, Ghislaine Maxwell.

Blanche said the documents were removed because they also showed victims of Epstein. Blanche said that Trump photo and the other documents will be reposted once redactions are made to protect survivors.

"It has nothing to do with President Trump," Blanche said. "There are dozens of photos of President Trump already released to the public seeing him with Mr. Epstein."

The thousands of Epstein-related records posted publicly offer the most detailed look yet at nearly two decades worth of government scrutiny of Epstein's sexual abuse of young women and underage girls. Yet Friday's release, replete with redactions, has not dulled the clamor for information given how many records had yet to be released and because some of the materials had already been made public.

Justice Department has just learned the names of more potential victims, Blanche says

Blanche said that the department continues to review the trove of documents and has learned the names of additional potential victims in recent days.

The deputy attorney general also defended the decision by the federal Bureau of Prisons, which Blanche oversees, to transfer Maxwell to a less restrictive, minimum-security federal prison earlier this year soon after he interviewed her about Epstein. Blanche said that the transfer was made because of concerns about her safety.

Maxwell, Epstein's onetime girlfriend, is serving a 20-year federal prison sentence for her 2021 conviction for sex trafficking crimes.

"She was suffering numerous and numerous threats against her life," Blanche said. "So the BOP is not only responsible for putting people in jail and making sure they stay in jail, but also for their safety."

Meanwhile, Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., and Thomas Massie, R-Ky., have indicated they could draft articles of impeachment against Attorney General Pam Bondi for what they see as the gross failure of the department to comply with the Epstein Files Transparency Act.

"It's not about the timeline, it's about the selective concealment," Khanna said on CBS' "Face the Nation," adding that the redactions in the released files are excessive. He said he believes there will be "bipartisan support in holding her accountable, and a committee of Congress should determine whether these redactions are justified or not."

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House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York said on ABC's "This Week" that there needs "to be a full and complete explanation and then a full and complete investigation as to why the document production has fallen short of what the law clearly required," but he stopped short of backing impeachment.

Blanche dismissed the impeachment talk.

"Bring it on," Blanche said. "We are doing everything we're supposed to be doing to comply with this statute."

## Doctor's orders? 'Belly laugh at least two to five days a week'

By ALBERT STUMM Associated Press

Melanin Bee curves her spine like a stretching cat as she lets out a maniacal, forced laugh.

The quick-fire pattern of manufactured giggles — "oh, hoo hoo hoo, eeh, ha ha ha" — soon ripples into genuine laughter, and she giddily kicks her feet.

She's practicing what she calls Laughasté, a hilarious yoga routine she created that is a descendant of "laughter clubs" that emerged in India in the 1990s. It feels awkward at first, but you fake it till you make it, she said.

"It's about allowing yourself to be OK with being awkward," said Bee, a Los Angeles comedian and speaker. "Then you're going to find some form of silliness within that is going to allow you to laugh involuntarily."

The laughter clubs were based on the common-sense notion that laughter relieves stress. But a good laugh is also good for your heart, immune system and many other health benefits, said Dr. Michael Miller, a cardiologist and medical professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

"Like we say, exercise at least three to five days a week," Miller said. "Belly laugh at least two to five days a week."

The study of laughter

Although luminaries from the ancient Greeks to Freud have opined on the roots and implications of laughter, the modern study of laughter — gelotology — began emerging in the 1960s.

Stanford University psychologist William F. Fry, one of gelotology's founders, drew blood samples from himself while watching Laurel and Hardy. He discovered that laughter increased the number of immune-boosting blood cells.

In 1995, Dr. Madan Kataria, a physician in Mumbai, got wind of the emerging research as editor of a health magazine while researching an article on stress management. To combat his own stress, he started the first daily laughter club in a park. It ballooned from a handful of participants to more than 150 within a month, he said.

After the group quickly ran out of jokes, Kataria created exercises that activated the diaphragm, and he incorporated yogic breathing exercises, light stretches and deliberately silly sounds and movements.

"We were faking in the beginning and within seconds, everybody was in stitches," Kataria said.

Why is laughter good for you?

Miller began studying laughter in the 1990s. Showing funny movies to study participants, he found that laughter produces endorphins in the brain that promote beneficial chemicals in the blood vessels. Nitric oxide, for example, causes blood vessels to dilate, which lowers blood pressure, inflammation and cholesterol.

The combination reduces the risk for a heart attack, he said, and the endorphins are natural pain killers.

"When you've had a really good laugh, you feel very relaxed and light," said Miller, who is also chief of medicine at the Philadelphia Veterans Administration, where he is implementing a laughter therapy program. "It's like you've taken pain medication."

Forced laughter — or simulated mirth, in academia — may even be more beneficial than spontaneous laughter, said Jenny Rosendhal, a senior researcher of medical psychology at Jena University in Germany.

Rosendhal completed a meta-analysis of 45 laughter studies, among other research, and found that laughter-inducing therapies decreased glucose levels, the stress hormone cortisol and chronic pain. They also improved mobility and overall mood, especially in older populations.

Because humor is subjective, it is hard to measure. That's why much of the more recent research has

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focused on laughter yoga and similar programs that provoke sustained bouts of laughter during 30- to 45-minute sessions, Rosendhal said.

Laughter yoga is particularly effective for people who might not feel like laughing, such as those struggling with depression or cancer patients, she said. With simulated laughter, the physiological mechanisms are the same, such as additional inhaling, exhaling and muscle activity that also improves mood.

"The well-being comes through the back door," she said. "You start with an exercise, and then the spontaneous laughter comes later because it's funny to see people laughing."

How to laugh more

During a recent video call, Kataria said the trick is to learn to laugh for no reason. He and others in laughing yoga classes around the world have created hundreds of exercises that help.

The simplest: Get together with another person, look in each other's eyes and repeat the sound "ha" for a full minute. Or try the "breathe in and laugh." Bring your hands to your chest on a deep inhale, hold your breath for three seconds, and burst out laughing on the exhale while extending your hands forward.

In laughing yoga classes, people may pretend to greet each other like aliens, crawl around like their favorite animals, or tap their temple as if a light bulb went off, exclaiming, "Aha! ha ha ha!"

Kataria suggested bringing laughter into your daily life, even at things that might not seem funny. Demonstrating "credit card bill laughter," he held out his hand as if looking at a statement, and burst into a roiling, infectious laughter. For inspiration, you could log into one of the three dozen free online American laughter clubs recognized by Laughter Yoga International.

"Really, it's not about forcing yourself to laugh," he said. "It's like activating your laughter muscles, getting rid of your mental inhibitions and shyness. Then the real laughing is childlike laughing, unconditional laughing."

## Multiple gunmen open fire at a South African pub, killing 9 and wounding 10

By MICHELLE GUMEDE and ALFONSO NQUNJANA Associated Press

BEKKERSDAL, South Africa (AP) — Nine people have died and at least 10 others were wounded after a group of gunmen carried out a shooting at a South African pub during the early hours of Sunday, authorities said.

The incident occurred just before 1 a.m. in the township of Bekkersdal which is located 46 kilometers (28 miles) west of Johannesburg. It is the second mass shooting in South Africa in three weeks.

About 12 unknown suspects in a white minibus and a silver sedan opened fire at pub patrons at KwaN-oxolo tavern, in the Tambo section of Bekkersdal and continued to shoot randomly as they fled the scene, according to police.

"Some victims were randomly shot in the streets by unknown gunmen," the police said of the incident that left nine people dead and 10 hospitalized.

Maj. Gen. Fred Kekana, the acting provincial commissioner of Gauteng, told the AP at the scene that the gunmen, some of whom wore balaclavas, had one AK-47 rifle and several 9-millimeter pistols.

Police did not release information about the victims, but police spokesperson Brigadier Brenda Muridili confirmed that an e-hailing driver was among those caught in the crossfire. She said the driver had just dropped off a client.

"He was shot and killed," she told The Associated Press.

The motive for the shooting is unknown. A manhunt for the suspects in the multiple gunshot event has been initiated by Gauteng Serious and Violent Crime Investigations in collaboration with the Crime Detection Tracing Unit.

There have been several mass shootings at bars — sometimes called shebeens or taverns in South Africa — in recent years, including a mass shooting carried out by multiple suspects in an unlicensed bar near the South African capital that left at least 12 people dead and 13 injured earlier this month.

Another shooting killed 16 people in the Johannesburg township of Soweto in 2022. On the same day,

four people were killed in a mass shooting at a bar in another province.

The second-largest political party in South Africa, the Democratic Alliance, called for a special task force to probe the two recent shootings in the province.

Surrounded by abandoned mine shafts, the Bekkersdal region is notorious for illicit mining operations, which have led to serious social problems, including gang violence and the proliferation of illegal firearms.

With almost 26,000 homicides in 2024, or more than 70 per day on average, South Africa has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Firearms are by far the leading cause of death in homicides. Although the nation of 62 million has comparatively stringent gun control laws, officials say many murders are carried out using illegal firearms.

## Israel's Cabinet approves 19 new Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Israel's Cabinet has approved a proposal for 19 new Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, the far-right finance minister said Sunday, as the government pushes ahead with a construction binge in the territory that further threatens the possibility of a Palestinian state.

That brings the total number of new settlements over the past few years to 69, a new record, according to Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who has pushed a settlement expansion agenda in the West Bank. The latest ones include two that were previously evacuated during a 2005 disengagement plan.

The approval increases the number of settlements in the West Bank by nearly 50% during the current far-right government's tenure. In 2022, there were 141 settlements across the West Bank. After the latest approval, there are 210, according to Peace Now, an anti-settlement watchdog group.

Settlements are widely considered illegal under international law. Smotrich's office said the Cabinet approval came on Dec. 11 and that the development had been classified until now.

Settlements are the latest blow to Palestinian state

The approval comes as the U.S. pushes Israel and Hamas to move ahead with the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire, which took effect Oct. 10. The U.S.-brokered plan calls for a possible "pathway" to a Palestinian state, something the settlements are aimed at preventing.

The Cabinet decision included a retroactive legalization of some previously established settlement outposts or neighborhoods of existing settlements, and the creation of settlements on land where Palestinians were evacuated, the Finance Ministry said. Settlements can range in size from a single dwelling to a collection of high-rises.

The ministry said two of the settlements legalized in the latest approval are Kadim and Ganim, which were two of the four West Bank settlements dismantled in 2005, as part of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. There have been multiple attempts to resettle them after Israel's government in March 2023 repealed a 2005 act that evacuated the four outposts and barred Israelis from reentering the areas.

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza — areas claimed by the Palestinians for a future state — in the 1967 war. It has settled over 500,000 Jews in the West Bank, in addition to over 200,000 in contested east Jerusalem.

Israel's government is dominated by far-right proponents of the settler movement, including Smotrich and Cabinet Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who oversees the nation's police force.

Settler expansion has been compounded by a surge of attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank in recent months.

During October's olive harvest, settlers across the territory launched an average of eight attacks daily, the most since the United Nations humanitarian office began collecting data in 2006. The attacks continued in November, with the U.N. recording at least 136 more by Nov. 24.

Settlers burned cars, desecrated mosques, ransacked industrial plants and destroyed cropland. Israeli authorities have done little beyond issuing occasional condemnations of the violence.

2 Palestinians killed in West Bank clashes, ministry says

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The Palestinian Health Ministry in Ramallah said two Palestinians, including a 16-year-old, were killed in clashes with Israel's military on Saturday night in the northern part of the West Bank.

Israel's military said a militant was shot and killed after he threw a block at troops in Qabatiya, and another militant was killed after he hurled explosives at troops operating in the town of Silat al-Harithiya.

The Palestinian Health Ministry identified the Palestinian killed in Qabatiya as 16-year-old Rayan Abu Muallah. Palestinian media aired brief security footage of the incident, where the youth appears to emerge from an alley and is shot by troops as he approaches them without throwing anything. Israel's military said the incident is under review.

The Health Ministry identified the second man as Ahmad Ziyoud, 22.

Israel's military has scaled up military operations in the West Bank since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack that triggered the war in Gaza.

Cardinal celebrates Christmas Mass in Gaza City

The top Catholic leader in the Holy Land visited Gaza's only Catholic church and celebrated a pre-Christmas Mass on Sunday that included the baptism of a baby. Dozens of Palestinians gathered in the Holy Family Parish.

Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa is on his fourth visit to Gaza since the war began, and said the Christian community aims to be a "stable, solid reference point in this sea of destruction" as rebuilding slowly begins.

"It is different this time," Pizzaballa said. "I saw the new desire for a new life."

The Holy Family compound was hit by fragments from an Israeli shell in July, killing three people in what Israel called an accident and expressed regret over. The parish has served as a refuge for Christians and Muslims, sheltering hundreds of displaced people.

There was a mix of gratitude and grief as people at the church marked Christmas away from home. "They welcomed us with great love and respect," said Nazih Lam'e Habashi, 78, who stays there with his family. "This is the third holiday we are marking since the war."

"God willing, life will improve," added 67-year-old Najla Saba.

## 'Avatar: Fire and Ash' launches with \$88M domestically, \$345M worldwide

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — "Avatar: Fire and Ash" opened with \$345 million in worldwide sales, according to studio estimates Sunday, notching the second-best global debut of the year and potentially putting James Cameron on course to set yet more blockbuster records.

Sixteen years into the "Avatar" saga, Pandora is still abundant in box-office riches. "Fire and Ash," the third film in Cameron's science-fiction franchise, launched with \$88 million domestically and \$257 million internationally. The only film to open bigger in 2025 was "Zootopia 2" (\$497.2 million over three days). In the coming weeks, "Fire and Ash" will have the significant benefit of the highly lucrative holiday moviegoing corridor.

But there was a tad less fanfare to this "Avatar" film, coming three years after "Avatar: The Way of Water." That film launched in 2022 with a massive \$435 million globally and \$134 million in North America. Domestically, "Fire and Ash" fell a hefty 35% from the previous installment. Reviews for "Fire and Ash" were also more mixed, scoring a series-low 68% "fresh" score on Rotten Tomatoes.

Yet those quibbles are only a product of the lofty standards of "Avatar." The first two films rank as two of the three biggest box-office films of all time. To reach those heights, the "Avatar" films have depended on legs more than huge openings.

"Avatar" (2009), opened with \$77 million domestically but held the top spot for seven weeks. It ultimately grossed \$2.92 billion worldwide. "The Way of Water" also held strong to eventually tally \$2.3 billion globally.

"The openings are not what the 'Avatar' movies are about," said David A. Gross, a film consultant who publishes a newsletter on box office numbers. "It's what they do after they open that made them the no.

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2 and no. 3 biggest films of all time.”

For “Fire and Ash” to follow in those footsteps, it will need robust ticket sales to continue for weeks. Working in its favor so far: strong word-of-mouth. Audiences gave it an “A” CinemaScore.

In interviews, Cameron has repeatedly said “Fire and Ash” needs to perform well for there to be subsequent “Avatar” films. (Four and five are already written but not greenlit.) These are exceptionally expensive movies to make. With a production budget of at least \$400 million, “Fire and Ash” is one of the costliest movies ever made.

“James Cameron is not known for his low budget movies,” said Paul Dergarabedian, senior media analyst for Comscore. “You can’t exactly create the world of Pandora on the cheap. If you’re going to have a 3D movie, an epic film that’s three hours and 17 minutes, it’s a huge buy-in of money, time, resources, and then you have to hope the audience wants to once again go along on that ride.”

“Fire and Ash” was especially boosted by premium format showings, which accounted for 66% of its opening weekend. A narrow majority of moviegoers (56%) chose to watch it in 3D.

The “Avatar” films have always been especially popular overseas. “Fire and Ash” was strongest in China, where its \$57.6 million opening weekend surpassed the two previous movies.

‘David’ overperforms and ‘Marty Supreme’ sets a record

“Fire and Ash” didn’t have the weekend entirely to itself. A trio of other new wide releases made it into theaters in hopes of offering some counterprogramming: Lionsgate’s “The Housemaid,” Angel Studios’ “David” and Paramount Pictures’ “The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants.”

In the race for second place, “David” came out on top. The animated tale of David and Goliath collected \$22 million from 3,118 theaters, notching the best opening weekend for Angel Studios, the Christian-oriented studio that emerged with 2023’s surprise hit “Sound of Freedom.”

“The Housemaid,” Paul Feig’s twisty psychological thriller starring Sydney Sweeney and Amanda Seyfried, opened with \$19 million 3,015 theaters. The Lionsgate release, which cost about \$35 million to make, is set up well to be one of the top R-rated options in theaters over the holidays. Based on Freida McFadden’s bestselling novel, it stars Sweeney as a woman with a troubled past who becomes a live-in maid for a wealthy family.

Trailing the pack was “The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants,” which collected \$16 million from 3,557 theaters. The G-rated film, based on the Nickelodeon TV series, is the first “SpongeBob” theatrical movie since 2015’s “The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water.”

All of this weekend’s new films will hope the ticket sales keep rolling in over the upcoming Christmas break. Starting Dec. 25, they’ll need to contend with some new wide releases, including A24’s “Marty Supreme,” with Timothée Chalamet; Focus Features’ “Song Sung Blue,” with Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson; and Sony’s “Anaconda,” with Jack Black and Paul Rudd.

Before expanding on Christmas, “Marty Supreme” opened in six theaters over the weekend, grossing \$875,000 or \$145,000 per theater. That was good enough for not only the best per-theater average of the year, but the best since 2016 and a new high mark for A24. The film, directed by Josh Safdie and starring Chalamet as an aspiring table tennis player in 1950s New York, is the most expensive ever for A24.

Top 10 movies by domestic box office

With final domestic figures being released Monday, this list factors in the estimated ticket sales for Friday through Sunday at U.S. and Canadian theaters, according to Comscore:

1. “Avatar: Fire and Ash,” \$88 million.
2. “David,” \$22 million.
3. “The Housemaid,” \$19 million.
4. “The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants,” \$16 million.
5. “Zootopia 2,” \$14.5 million.
6. “Five Nights at Freddy’s 2,” \$7.3 million.
7. “Wicked: For Good,” \$4.3 million.
8. “Dhurandhar,” \$2.5 million.

9. "Marty Supreme," \$875,000.

10. "Hamnet," \$850,000.

## Jalen Hurts and the Eagles win their second NFC East title in a row by beating the Commanders 29-18

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

LANDOVER, Md. (AP) — As the percussive horns of Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke" filled the air, Philadelphia Eagles coach Nick Sirianni — wearing a black T-shirt bearing the words, "Been there, won that" — made the rounds in the locker room, offering hand clasps and back slaps to his players after they accomplished something that hadn't happened in two decades: win a second consecutive NFC East title.

"Gets better and better," running back Saquon Barkley said as he walked through the scene Saturday night, "each time."

This was not a terrific performance by the reigning Super Bowl champions, from a fumble on the opening kickoff to a pair of penalties on the tush push to three wide-left field-goal tries to a halftime deficit. Still, Barkley, Jalen Hurts and the Eagles eventually got going in the right direction and clinched their division yet again by beating the Washington Commanders 29-18.

"I'm just happy," Hurts said, "we were able to check that off."

The game included a late brawl when Barkley tacked on a 2-point conversion that increased the Eagles' lead to 19 points before the Commanders scored a meaningless TD.

Starting plays under center far more frequently than he did earlier in the season, Hurts completed 22 of 30 throws — with 15 of those caught by A.J. Brown or DeVonta Smith — for 185 yards, two touchdowns and no turnovers. He connected with Smith from 5 yards out in the first half and with Dallas Goedert from 15 in the third quarter to cap a 17-play, 83-yard, 10 1/2-minute drive.

"We've slowly been playing better and better on the offensive side of the ball," said Goedert, whose 10th TD reception this season tied a record for Philadelphia tight ends that was first set in the 1960s.

Hurts also did plenty of damage on the ground, gaining 40 yards on seven carries for the Eagles (10-5), who have followed a three-game losing streak by winning two in a row. They are the first team to top the NFC East in back-to-back seasons since Philadelphia did it every year from 2001 to 2004; the gap since then was the longest drought without a repeat champ for any division in NFL history.

Barkley added a 12-yard TD run for the Eagles, part of his 21-carry, 132-yard performance that raised his season rushing total above 1,000 yards.

A year after going 12-5, the Commanders have lost nine of 10 to fall to 4-11.

"It certainly feels terrible," coach Dan Quinn said, "to hear that record."

Chants of "E-A-G-L-E-S, Eagles!" frequently rang out in the Commanders' stadium, and cries of "Cooooop!" greeted Cooper DeJean's interception of Josh Johnson, Washington's third-string quarterback, who came in when Marcus Mariota went out after the opening drive in the third quarter with an injured right hand while Washington led 10-7.

Mariota started Saturday in place of Jayden Daniels, the reigning AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year who led the Commanders to the NFC title game last season — where they lost 55-23 to Philadelphia — but has been shut down in 2025 after dealing with a series of injuries and appearing in only seven games.

The chilly evening started inauspiciously for Philadelphia. Will Shipley coughed up the opening kickoff when he was hit by Mike Sainristil. But just as they have over the course of the season, the Eagles got through what wasn't working and ended up in the right place.

"This division's had so much parity throughout the years," Sirianni said. "Obviously our goals are much higher. We've raised the expectations."

Jake Elliott, leaning left

The Eagles' Jake Elliott managed to send three field-goal attempts wide left in the first half. Elliott hadn't missed more than one in a game this season. But he was off on a 43-yarder in the first quarter, couldn't get a 57-yarder to go through the uprights in the second — and after that was wiped out by a penalty on

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Washington, Elliot went wide left once more, from 52. "I have the utmost confidence in Jake," Sirianni said.  
Brandon Graham, again

DE Brandon Graham, 37, whose two sacks last week made him the oldest Eagles player to record one, added another Saturday.

Injuries

Eagles: LB Nakobe Dean (hamstring) exited in the first quarter.

Commanders: Mariota was evaluated for a concussion and cleared, but his hand sidelined him. ... WR Jaylin Lane (ankle) left in the first quarter. ... RG Sam Cosmi and DT Johnny Newton were evaluated for concussions. ... OT Brandon Coleman hurt his shin.

Up next

Eagles: At the Bills on Dec. 28.

Commanders: Host the Cowboys on Thursday night.

## Thousands cheer as the sun rises on winter solstice at Stonehenge

LONDON (AP) — Thousands of people cheered and danced around Stonehenge as the sun rose over the prehistoric stone circle on Sunday, the winter solstice.

The crowds, many dressed as druids and pagans, had gathered before dawn, waiting patiently in the dark and cold field in southwest England. Some sang and beat drums, while others took time to reflect among the huge stone pillars.

Many make the pilgrimage to the stone circle every summer and winter and consider it a spiritual experience. The ancient monument, erected between 5,000 and 3,500 years ago, was built to align with the movement of the sun on the solstices — key dates in the calendar for ancient farmers.

English Heritage, the organization that manages Stonehenge, said some 8,500 people celebrated Saturday at the monument on Salisbury Plain, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) southwest of London. It added that its livestream of the festivities drew over 242,000 views from around the world.

Sunday is the shortest day of the year north of the equator, where the solstice marks the start of astronomical winter. It's the opposite in the Southern Hemisphere, where it is the longest day of the year and summer will start.

The winter solstice is when the sun makes its shortest, lowest arc, but many celebrate it as a time of renewal because after Sunday, the sun starts climbing again and days will get a little longer every day until late June.

## Prince William brings his son to the same homeless shelter he first visited with Princess Diana

LONDON (AP) — Prince William and his eldest son, Prince George, put on aprons to help make Christmas lunch at a homeless shelter, a charity that the Prince of Wales first visited as a child with his mother, the late Princess Diana.

The royal father and son were seen decorating a Christmas tree and helping with meal preparations in the kitchen at The Passage in central London, in a video posted to William's YouTube account on Saturday.

"Proud to join volunteers and staff at The Passage in preparing Christmas lunch – this year with another pair of helping hands," read a post on the social media account of William and his wife, Princess Catherine.

William is the royal patron of The Passage, which he first visited when he was 11 with his mother, Diana. The heir to the throne has visited the charity in recent years, but this was the first time George, 12, joined him.

The young royal signed his name in a book on the same page that Diana and William had written their names 32 years ago, in December 1993.

William was shown pouring Brussels sprouts onto an oven tray, while George helped set out Yorkshire puddings and set a long table for dozens of attendees.

William launched his Homewards project in 2023 to tackle homelessness.

## Muddy eruption at Yellowstone's Black Diamond Pool captured on video

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

"Kablooey!"

That's the word U.S. Geological Survey volcanic experts used to describe a muddy eruption at Black Diamond Pool in Yellowstone National Park on Saturday morning.

Video shared by the USGS on social media shows mud spraying up and out from the pool just before 9:23 a.m. in Biscuit Basin about midway between park favorites Old Faithful and Grand Prismatic.

Other recent eruptions have mostly been audible and not visible, because they happened either at night or when the camera was obscured by ice.

The agency said the Black Diamond Pool was previously the site of a hydrothermal explosion, in July 2024, that sent rocks and mud flying hundreds of feet high and damaged a boardwalk. It prompted the closure of the area to visitors due to the damage and the potential for additional hazardous activity.

So-called dirty eruptions reaching up to 40 feet (about 12 meters) have occurred sporadically since then.

Researchers installed a new camera and a seismic and acoustic monitoring station this summer, and they say the instruments, along with temperature sensors maintained by the Yellowstone National Park Geology Program, can better detect and characterize the eruptions.

The Yellowstone Volcano Observatory webcam at Black Diamond Pool didn't disappoint Saturday.

"We got a nice clear view of one of these dirty eruptions under bright blue skies with the surroundings covered in snow (ah, winter in Yellowstone!)," USGS Volcanoes said on social media, noting that it was a great example of the kind of activity that has been happening at the spot over the past 19 months.

Experts say there is no real pattern to the eruptions at the pool and no precursors.

Park officials say Yellowstone preserves the most extraordinary collection of hot springs, geysers, mud pots and fumaroles on Earth. More than 10,000 hydrothermal features are found within the park, over 500 of them geysers.

## Marco wins! Schwarz scores World Cup giant slalom victory with favored Marco Odermatt sixth

ALTA BADIA, Italy (AP) — Yes, a Marco won the World Cup giant slalom Sunday. Just not the one expected at Alta Badia.

Marco Schwarz was first on the classic Gran Risa course where Marco Odermatt, the dominant skier of his generation, had won five of the past six giant slaloms.

Wearing start bib No. 1, Schwarz got a wire-to-wire win by protecting his first-run lead to finish 0.18 seconds ahead of Lucas Pinheiro Braathen of Brazil.

"This victory means a lot to me," said Schwarz, who missed almost a full year of racing through injury since his previous win in a slalom in December 2023.

"It's good for the soul, good for the whole team," he said, after hugging third-placed Austria teammate Stefan Brennsteiner in the finish area.

Pinheiro Braathen had been the only other racer to win an Alta Badia giant slalom since Odermatt's winning run started in December 2021. Pinheiro Braathen was racing for Norway in 2022 and later switched to his mother's home nation Brazil, getting its first World Cup win last month in a slalom.

Maybe fatigue caught up with Odermatt after a tough three-day program of speed races at nearby Val Gardena, where since Thursday he won a downhill and was runner-up in a downhill and a super-G.

Odermatt placed sixth Sunday trailing 0.82 behind Schwarz's two-run time, and showed a rare flash of anger crossing the finish line. Odermatt still has a huge lead in the season-long overall standings chasing a sixth straight title with more than double the points of second-placed Schwarz.

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It was the seventh career World Cup win and second in giant slalom for the 30-year-old Schwarz, one of the most all-purpose skiers on the men's circuit. His previous GS win was in California, at the Palisades Tahoe resort in February 2023.

Russia's return

The race included the first Russian skier in a men's World Cup event for nearly four years since the easing of a ban imposed during the war on Ukraine by the International Ski and Snowboard Federation.

The 35-year-old Aleksander Andrienko was given approved neutral status this month by FIS to resume competing so he could try to qualify for the Milan Cortina Olympics in February.

Given the No. 39 start bib Sunday, Andrienko was 52nd-fastest and more than one second outside the top-30 times that qualify for a second run. Neutral athletes from Russia and Belarus must compete without their national identity of team colors and flag.

Olympic contender out

Missing from the lineup was Alexander Steen Olsen, who opted this week for season-ending knee surgery because of a persistent injury.

Steen Olsen was a two-time winner in giant slalom on the World Cup circuit last season and shaped as a medal contender at the Olympics. Odermatt is the Olympic champion in giant slalom.

## **Netflix and Paramount are fighting over Warner Bros. Discovery. Here's the regulatory outlook**

By WYATTE GRANTHAM-PHILIPS AP Business Writer

Warner Bros. Discovery is in the middle of a Hollywood tug-of-war between Netflix and Paramount. And chances are it'll be a long, bumpy regulatory road ahead for either buyer.

Warner's board on Wednesday urged shareholders to back the deal it struck with Netflix to sell its studio and streaming business for \$72 billion. Meanwhile, Skydance-owned Paramount is moving forward with its hostile \$77.9 billion bid for a full takeover of the company, including networks like CNN.

In both scenarios, a merger would likely trigger a review by the U.S. Justice Department, which could sue to block the transaction or request changes. But other countries and entities could challenge either acquisition, too.

Politics are also expected to come into play under U.S. President Donald Trump, who has made unprecedented suggestions about his personal involvement on whether a deal will go through.

The process could drag on for more than a year, if not longer. But regardless of who wins, new ownership of Warner properties would drastically reshape the industry — impacting movie-making, streaming platforms and the broader media landscape.

Here's what we know.

A look at the players

The buyout target — Warner Bros. Discovery — is a 102-year-old Hollywood giant. It is one of the "big five" studios, producing titles ranging from "Harry Potter" to "Superman." And its cable operations include top networks like CNN and Discovery. Warner also owns DC Studios and HBO Max.

Paramount, which closed its own \$8 billion merger with Skydance just months ago, is also one of Hollywood's remaining legacy studios — with a blockbuster lineup including "Top Gun" and "The Godfather." Beyond traditional film and TV production, it owns networks like CBS, MTV and Nickelodeon, as well as the Paramount+ streaming service.

For Netflix, streaming is its bread and butter, accounting for 20% of the U.S. market for on-demand subscriptions, according to data from streaming guide JustWatch. That compares to 13% for HBO Max and 7% for Paramount+. But Netflix has also built up its own production arm, rolling out popular titles like "Squid Game" and "Stranger Things."

Netflix is the biggest of the three companies, with a market capitalization of around \$430 billion as of mid-December. Warner Bros. Discovery is about \$70 billion, while Paramount Skydance trails at closer to \$14 billion.

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## Regulatory hurdles for Netflix vs Paramount

Paramount has already pointed to Netflix's streaming dominance, arguing that bringing the platform under the same roof as HBO Max would squash competition and give it "overwhelming" market share. But Netflix has maintained its merger will give consumers more choice, allowing it to offer more plans and titles for customers to choose from Warner's catalog.

Antitrust experts expect Paramount and Netflix to try to convince regulators that they're not just up against more traditional rival subscriptions, but broader video libraries across the internet.

YouTube is at the top of the list and Netflix is already laying the groundwork to show Google's streaming platform dominance in terms of viewing hours, which, according to media analytics firm Nielsen, accounted for nearly 13% of viewership this fall compared with 8% for Netflix.

Jim Speta, a professor at Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law, expects both companies to say that a merger is "necessary for them to compete against YouTube."

"The broader you make the market that we're thinking about, the less the merger looks anti-competitive," Speta said.

Meanwhile, others will argue that either merger is bad for consumers. While content libraries may broaden, a case could be made about a combined company wielding its power to control prices — or adding more subscription hoops for consumers to jump through to watch certain titles.

Among concerns, "the range of available content on the streaming services might decrease," said Scott Wagner, head of antitrust practice at law firm Bilzin Sumberg. He pointed to older movies in particular that could potentially see shorter streaming windows across platforms.

## Implications for studio production and news

If successful, Paramount's takeover would combine two of Hollywood's "big five" studios. And while Netflix has agreed to uphold Warner's contractual obligations for theatrical releases in its proposed acquisition, critics are skeptical given its reliance on online streaming.

Some trade groups have warned that consequences of either deal could include job losses. Layoffs tied to restructuring are common following a merger and wouldn't likely draw antitrust scrutiny, but Speta notes competition concerns could still arise if a company "becomes so big that it has purchasing power" and is deemed to control wages more broadly.

For Paramount specifically, there's also the news and broader cable landscape to consider.

Attorneys like Wagner expect the prospect of having Warner-owned CNN and Paramount's CBS under the same roof will be brought up in the regulatory review. But he doesn't believe it will carry the same weight as streaming and content library questions — or become a tipping point that will lead to the merger's demise overall.

Similar to broadening the definition of the streaming market, advocates of the Paramount merger will probably point to wider media offerings beyond traditional TV news, including information-sharing on social media platforms, Warner said.

But there are also political implications around a possible CBS-CNN combo. Under new Skydance ownership, Paramount has already taken steps to appeal to more conservative viewers in its news operations, notably with the installation of Free Press founder Bari Weiss as editor-in-chief of CBS News. And if the company's takeover bid of Warner is successful, many expect similar shifts at CNN — a network that has long attracted ire from Trump.

## Trump's potential role

Trump has been vocal about whether a buyout of Warner will go through, and even said he would personally "be involved in that decision."

Speta says such a suggestion should raise alarm. While changes in administration have caused shifts in the reach of antitrust enforcement over the years, "presidents picking whether mergers happen or don't happen is completely unprecedented," he said.

Earlier this month, Trump said Netflix's deal "could be a problem" because of the size of the combined market share. The Republican president also has a close relationship with billionaire Oracle founder Larry Ellison — the father of Paramount CEO David Ellison — whose family trust is heavily backing the company's

bid to buy Warner. An investment firm run by Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, was among other initial contributors to Paramount's bid, but later backed out.

Meanwhile, Netflix has its own political connections. Trump previously called Ted Sarandos, co-CEO of the streaming giant, a "fantastic man" and said the two met in the Oval Office before the proposed Warner merger was announced. And Trump has continued to publicly lash out at Paramount over editorial decisions at CBS' "60 Minutes."

Even without Trump's intervention, the companies could bruise themselves as the process plays out, according to Paul Nary, assistant professor of management at University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business. He notes Warner Bros. Discovery has largely underperformed for shareholders since its inception just three years ago — and could "potentially being left in even worse shape" if management is distracted by shuffling through a long, drawn-out deal.

"There's a potential for the winners curse here," he said. "Media and entertainment is one of those spaces where you see all of these mega mergers — high stakes (and) big egos competing over the glamorous assets. And so many of those deals end up failing."

## **Trump's return brought stiff headwinds for clean energy. So why are advocates optimistic in 2026?**

By JENNIFER McDERMOTT Associated Press

There were some highs amid a lot of lows in a roller coaster year for clean energy as President Donald Trump worked to boost polluting fuels while blocking wind and solar, according to dozens of energy developers, experts and politicians.

Surveyed by The Associated Press, many described 2025 as turbulent and challenging for clean energy, though there was progress as projects connected to the electric grid. They said clean energy must continue to grow to meet skyrocketing demand for electricity to power data centers and to lower Americans' utility bills.

Solar builder and operator Jorge Vargas said it has been "a very tough year for clean energy" as Trump often made headlines criticizing renewable energy and Republicans muscled a tax and spending cut bill through Congress in July that dramatically rolled back tax breaks for clean energy.

"There was a cooldown effect this year," said Vargas, cofounder and CEO of Aspen Power. "Having said that, we are a resilient industry."

Plug Power president Jose Luis Crespo said the developments — both policy recalibration and technological progress — will shape clean energy's trajectory for years to come.

### **Energy policy whiplash in 2025**

Much of clean energy's fate in 2025 was driven by booster Joe Biden's exit from the White House.

The year began with ample federal subsidies for clean energy technologies, a growing number of U.S.-based companies making parts and materials for projects and a lot of demand from states and corporations, said Tom Harper, partner at global consultant Baringa.

It ends with subsidies stripped back, a weakened supply chain, higher costs from tariffs and some customers questioning their commitment to clean energy, Harper said. He described the year as "paradigm shifting."

Trump called wind and solar power "the scam of the century" and vowed not to approve new projects. The federal government canceled grants for hundreds of projects.

The Republicans' tax bill reversed or steeply curtailed clean energy programs established through the Democrats' flagship climate and health care bill in 2022. Wayne Winegarden, at the Pacific Research Institute think tank, said the time has come for alternative energy to demonstrate viability without subsidies. ( Fossil fuels also receive subsidies.)

Many energy executives said this was the most consequential policy shift. The bill reshaped the economics of clean energy projects, drove a rush to start construction before incentives expire and forced developers to reassess their strategies for acquiring parts and materials, Lennart Hinrichs said. He leads the expansion

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of TWAICE in the Americas, providing analytics software for battery energy storage systems.

Companies can't make billion-dollar investments with so much policy uncertainty, said American Clean Power Association CEO Jason Grumet.

Consequently, greenhouse gas emissions will fall at a much lower rate than previously projected in the U.S., said Brian Murray, director of the Nicholas Institute for Energy, Environment and Sustainability at Duke University.

Still, solar and battery storage are booming

Solar and storage accounted for 85% of the new power added to the grid in the first nine months of the Trump administration, according to Wood Mackenzie research.

That's because the economics remain strong, demand is high and the technologies can be deployed quickly, said Mike Hall, CEO of Anza Renewables.

Solar energy company Sol Systems said it had a record year as it brought its largest utility-scale project online and grew its business. The energy storage systems company CMBlu Energy said storage clearly stands out as a winner this year too, moving from optional to essential.

"Trump's effort to manipulate government regulation to harm clean energy just isn't enough to offset the natural advantages that clean energy has," Democratic U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse said. "The direction is still all good."

The Solar Energy Industries Association said that no matter the policies in Washington, solar and storage will grow as the backbone of the nation's energy future.

Nuclear and geothermal had a good year, too

Democrats and Republicans have supported investing to keep nuclear reactors online, restart previously closed reactors and deploy new, advanced reactor designs. Nuclear power is a carbon-free source of electricity, though not typically labeled as green energy like other renewables.

"Who had 'restart Three Mile Island' on their 2025 Bingo card?" questioned Baringa partner David Shephard. The Pennsylvania plant was the site of the nation's worst commercial nuclear power accident, in 1979. The Energy Department is loaning \$1 billion to help finance a restart.

Everyone loves nuclear, said Darrin Kayser, executive vice president at Edelman. It helps that the technology for small, modular reactors is starting to come to fruition, Kayser added.

Benton Arnett, a senior director at the Nuclear Energy Institute, said that as the need for clean, reliable power intensifies, "we will look back on the actions being taken now as laying the foundation."

The Trump administration also supports geothermal energy, and the tax bill largely preserved geothermal tax credits. The Geothermal Rising association said technologies continue to mature and produce, making 2025 a breakthrough year.

Offshore wind had a terrible year

Momentum for offshore wind in the United States came to a grinding halt just as the industry was starting to gain traction, said Joey Lange, a senior managing director at Trio, a global sustainability and energy advisory company.

The Trump administration stopped construction on major offshore wind farms, revoked wind energy permits and paused permitting, canceled plans to use large areas of federal waters for new offshore wind development and stopped federal funding for offshore wind projects.

That has decimated the projects, developers and tech innovators, and no one in wind is raising or spending capital, said Eric Fischgrund, founder and CEO at FischTank PR. Still, Fischgrund said he remains optimistic because the world is transitioning to cleaner energy.

More clean energy needed in 2026

An energy strategy with a diverse mix of sources is the only way forward as demand grows from data centers and other sources, and as people demand affordable, reliable electricity, said former Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu. Landrieu, now with Natural Allies for a Clean Energy Future, said promoting or punishing specific energy technologies on ideological grounds is unsustainable.

Experts expect solar and battery storage to continue growing in 2026 to add a lot of power to the grid quickly and cheaply. The market will continue to ensure that most new electricity is renewable, said Amanda

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Levin, policy analysis director at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Hillary Bright, executive director of Turn Forward, thinks offshore wind will still play an important role too. It is both ready and needed to help address the demand for electricity in the new year, which will become increasingly clear "to all audiences," she said. Turn Forward advocates for offshore wind.

That skyrocketing demand "is shaking up the political calculus that drove the administration's early policy decisions around renewables," she said.

BlueWave CEO Sean Finnerty thinks that states, feeling the pressure to deliver affordable, reliable electricity, will increasingly drive clean energy momentum in 2026 by streamlining permitting and the process of connecting to the grid, and by reducing costs for things like permits and fees.

Ed Gunn, Lunar Energy's vice president for revenue, said the industry has weathered tough years before. "The fundamentals are unchanged," Gunn said, "there is massive value in clean energy."

## US tech enabled China's surveillance empire. Now Tibetan refugees in Nepal are paying the price

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and DAKE KANG Associated Press

KATHMANDU, Nepal (AP) — The white dome of Boudhanath rises like a silent guardian over the chaotic sprawl of Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, crowned by a golden spire that pierces the sky. Painted on each of the spire's four sides are the benevolent eyes of the Buddha — wide, calm, and unblinking — said to see all that unfolds below.

Those eyes have served as a symbol of sanctuary for generations of Tibetans fleeing the Chinese crackdown in their homeland. But today, Tibetan refugees are also watched by far more malevolent eyes: Thousands of CCTV cameras from China, perched on street corners and rooftops to monitor every movement below. This intense surveillance has stifled the once-vibrant Free Tibet movement that had resonated around the world.

Nepal is just one of at least 150 countries to which Chinese companies are supplying surveillance technology, from cameras in Vietnam to censorship firewalls in Pakistan to citywide monitoring systems in Kenya. This technology is now a key part of China's push for global influence, as it provides cash-strapped governments cost-effective, if invasive, forms of policing — turning algorithms and data into a force multiplier for control.

The irony at the heart of this digital authoritarianism is that the surveillance tools China exports are based on technology developed in its greatest rival, the United States, despite warnings that Chinese firms would buy, copy or outright steal American designs, an investigation by The Associated Press has found.

For decades, Silicon Valley firms often yielded to Beijing's demands: Give us your technology and we will give you access to our market. Although tensions fester between Washington and Beijing, the links between American tech and Chinese surveillance continue today.

For example, Amazon Web Services offers cloud services to Chinese tech giants like Hikvision and Dahua, assisting them in their overseas push. Both are on the U.S. Commerce Department's Entity List for national security and human-rights concerns, which means transactions with them are not illegal but subject to strict restrictions.

AWS told AP it adheres to ethical codes of conduct, complies with U.S. law, and does not itself offer surveillance infrastructure. Dahua said they conduct due diligence to prevent abuse of their products. Hikvision said the same, and that they "categorically reject any suggestion that the company is involved in or complicit in repression."

Chinese technology firms now offer a complete suite of telecommunications, surveillance, and digital infrastructure, with few restrictions on who they sell to or how they're used.

China pitches itself as a global security model with low crime rates, contrasting its record with the United States, said Sheena Greitens, a political scientist at the University of Texas at Austin.

"It's got a set of solutions that it's happy to share with the world that nobody else can offer," she said. "(But) they're certainly exporting the tools and techniques that are very important to authoritarian rule."

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The AP investigation was based on thousands of Nepali government procurement documents, corporate marketing material, leaked government and corporate documents, and interviews with more than 40 people, including Tibetan refugees and Nepali, American and Chinese engineers, executives, experts and officials.

While thousands of Tibetans once fled to Nepal every year, the number is now down to the single digits, according to Tibetan officials in Nepal. In a statement to AP, the Tibetan government in exile cited tight border controls, Nepal's warming ties with China and "unprecedented surveillance" as reasons for the drastic plunge.

A 2021 internal Nepali government report, obtained by AP, revealed that China has even built surveillance systems within Nepal and in some areas of the border buffer zone where construction is banned by bilateral agreements. In a statement to AP, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied coercing Western companies to hand over technology or working with Nepal to surveil Tibetans, calling it a "sheer fabrication driven by ulterior motives."

"Attempts to use Tibet-related issues to interfere in China's internal affairs, smear China's image, and poison the atmosphere of China-Nepal cooperation will never succeed," the statement said.

The Nepali government and the Chinese-controlled Tibetan authorities did not respond to requests for comment.

Under pressure, many Tibetans are responding the only way they can: Leaving. The Tibetan population in Nepal has plunged from over 20,000 to half that or less today.

Former activist Sonam Tashi gave up protesting years ago. Now 49, today he's just a father trying to get his 10-year-old son out — before the net pulls tighter. The boy was born in Nepal but has no document proving he is either a refugee or a citizen, a result of Chinese pressure.

Tashi described how those considered likely to protest are picked up in advance around key dates — like March 10, which marks the 1959 Tibetan uprising, or July 6, the Dalai Lama's birthday. In 2018, Nepal's police magazine confirmed that it was building predictive policing, which allows officers to watch people's movements, identify in advance who they think will protest and arrest them preemptively.

"There are cameras everywhere," Tashi said, sitting on a bus winding toward the Indian border. "There is no future."

'They gave us all the hardware'

After China crushed a Tibetan uprising in 1959, thousands fled across the Himalayas to Nepal, carrying only what they could: Religious paintings, prayer wheels and the weight of families left behind.

Their exodus, led by the charismatic Dalai Lama, captured the American imagination, with Hollywood films and actor Richard Gere's congressional appeals putting Tibet in the spotlight. Washington trod a careful line, defending the rights and religious freedom of Tibetans without recognizing independence.

Today, the future of the Free Tibet movement is in question. Without refugee cards that grant basic rights, Tibetans in Nepal can no longer open bank accounts, work legally or leave the country.

Cameras are now everywhere in Kathmandu, perched on traffic lights and swiveling from temple eaves. Most link back to a four-story brick building just a few blocks down from the Chinese embassy, where officers watch the country in real time.

The building hums with the low breath of cooling fans. Inside, a wall of monitors blinks with feeds from border towns, busy markets and clogged traffic crossings.

Officers in crisp blue uniforms and red caps sit in the glow, scanning scenes. Beneath the screens, a photo published in a Nepali daily shows, a sign in English and Chinese reads: "With the compliments of the Ministry of Public Security of China."

Their reach is vast.

Operators can track a motorbike weaving through the capital, follow a protest as it forms, or patch an alert directly to patrol radios. Many cameras are equipped with night vision facial recognition and AI tracking — able to pick a single face out of a festival crowd or lock onto a figure until it disappears indoors. The system not only sees but is learning to remember, storing patterns of movement, building a record of lives lived under its gaze.

A 34-year-old Tibetan cafe owner in the city watched the city change in quiet horror. "Now you can only

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be Tibetan in private," he said. He and other Tibetans in Nepal spoke to AP anonymously, fearing retaliation.

The first cameras in Boudhanath were installed in 2012, officially to deter crime. But after a Tibetan monk doused himself in petrol and set himself ablaze in front of the stupa in 2013, police added 35 night vision cameras around it.

The Chinese embassy in Kathmandu worked closely with the police, said Rupak Shrestha, a professor at Simon Fraser University in Canada who studied surveillance in Nepal. He said the police received special training to use the new cameras, identify potential symbols associated with the Free Tibet movement and anticipate dissent.

In 2013, a team of Nepal Police officers crossed the northern border into Tibet for a seemingly straightforward mission: Collect police radios from Chinese authorities in Zhangmu, a remote border town, about 120 kilometers (75 miles) from Kathmandu. A truck was loaded with equipment and a few handshakes later, they were driving back to Kathmandu.

The radios — made by the partly state-owned Chinese firm Hytera — looked like walkie-talkies but ran on a digital trunking system, a scaled-down mobile network for police use. Officers could talk privately, coordinate across districts, even patch into public phone lines. The entire system — radios, relay towers, software — was a \$5.5 million gift from China.

"They didn't give us the money," recalled a retired Nepali officer who made the trip. "They gave all the hardware. All Chinese."

He remembered not the border guards but the tech — sleek, reliable, and far ahead of anything they'd used before. He spoke on condition of anonymity to describe sensitive internal discussions.

He said Nepal had initially considered buying the technology from the U.S. and only wanted to deploy the system in its two biggest cities. Hytera was a fraction of the cost and performed comparably, but China also wanted coverage near the border with Tibet. Nepal acquiesced.

They installed the technology in Sindhupalchowk, a border district with a key road to China used by Tibetan refugees. "We understood their mindset," the retired officer said. "A secure border."

A police envoy from the Chinese embassy began making regular visits to the Nepal Police headquarters. He'd chat over coffee, flip through brochures from Chinese companies. "He'd say, 'You want anything?'" the retired officer recalled.

China began donating tens of millions in police aid and surveillance equipment, including a new school for Nepal's Armed Police Force. Hundreds of Nepali police traveled to China for training on policing and border control, according to Chinese government posts.

Ahead of a summit of South Asian leaders in 2014, among the goods on offer were ones from Uniview, China's pitch for an all-seeing eye.

The company was the Chinese surveillance business of what was then Hewlett Packard, or HP, before it was spun off in a 2011 deal. Since 2012, Uniview has been selling mass surveillance solutions to the Tibetan police, such as a command center, and developed cameras that track ethnicities such as Uyghurs and Tibetans.

Uniview installed cameras in Kathmandu for Nepal's first "safe city" project in 2016. It started with the city's roads, then went up across the capital — in tourist areas, religious sites, high-security zones like Parliament and the prime minister's home.

The cameras didn't just record. Some could follow people automatically as they moved. Others were designed to use less data, making it easier to store and review footage.

Hewlett Packard Enterprise, or HPE, a successor company to HP that sells security solutions, has no ownership in Uniview and declined to comment. Hytera and Uniview did not respond to requests for comment.

Nearly all the cameras installed in Nepal are now made by Chinese companies like Hikvision, Dahua and Uniview, and many come bundled with facial recognition and AI tracking software.

Hikvision's website and marketing materials advertise camera systems in Nepal linked via Hik-Connect and HikCentral Connect, cloud products that rely on Amazon Web Services. Hikvision sells to the Nepali police and government, and a template for Nepali tenders indicates CCTV cameras procured for the government are required to support Hik-Connect.

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In return for Beijing's support, top Nepali officials have thanked China repeatedly over the years, promising never to allow "anti-China activities" on Nepali territory.

The Nepali police head offices aren't far from the now-forlorn Tibetan reception center, which used to shelter tired, hungry Tibetans fleeing across the border.

The building is nearly empty. The gates are locked. Those who do escape, like Namkyi, arrested at 15 for protesting Chinese rule, often have to wait for weeks confined indoors until they're smuggled out again to the Tibetan capital in exile in India.

Silence has become survival.

"They know they are being watched," she said. "Even though we are free, the surveillance cameras mean we're actually living in a big prison."

From clients to competitors

From the start, U.S. companies eager for China's vast markets exchanged technology for entry.

Many were required to start joint ventures and research operations in China as a precondition for being allowed in. Dozens, if not hundreds, complied, transferring valuable know-how and expertise — even in sensitive areas like encryption or policing.

Little by little, Chinese companies chipped away at the lead of American tech companies by luring talent, obtaining research, and sometimes plain copying their hardware and software. The flow of technology continued, even as U.S. officials openly accused China of economic espionage and pressuring American companies for their technology.

"China is by far the most egregious actor when it comes to forced technology transfer," Robert D. Atkinson, then-president of a think tank focused on innovation, warned Congress in a 2012 hearing.

American tech resistance came to a final, definitive end later that year with Edward Snowden's revelations that U.S. intelligence was exploiting American technology to spy on Beijing. Spooked, the Chinese government told Western firms they risked being kicked out unless they handed over their technology and provided security guarantees.

After companies like HP and IBM agreed, their former partners became their fiercest global competitors — and unlike American firms, they faced few questions about the way their technology was being used. Companies like Huawei, Hikvision and Dahua have now become global behemoths that sell surveillance systems and gear all over the world.

American technology was key to this:

- Uniview, the Chinese AI-powered CCTV camera supplier, supplied the first phase of Nepal's safe city project in 2016, installing cameras in Kathmandu. Uniview was carved out of California-based HP's China surveillance video business.

- Hytera provided data infrastructure for the Nepali police, such as walkie-talkies and digital trunking technology, which enables real-time communication. Earlier this year, Hytera acknowledged stealing technology from U.S. company Motorola in a plea agreement, and had acquired German, British, Spanish, and American tech businesses in their growth phase.

- Hikvision and Dahua, China's two largest surveillance camera suppliers, sell many of the cameras now in Nepal. They partnered with Intel and Nvidia to add AI capabilities to surveillance cameras. Those ties ended after U.S. sanctions in 2019, but AWS continues to sell cloud services to both companies, which remains legal under what some lawmakers call a loophole. AWS has advertised to Chinese companies expanding overseas, including at a policing expo in 2023.

- Chinese tech giant Huawei has become one of the world's leading sellers of surveillance systems, wiring more than 200 cities with sensors. In Nepal, they supplied telecom gear and high-capacity servers at an international airport. Over the years, the company benefited from partnerships with American companies like IBM, and has been dogged by allegations of theft — including copying code from Cisco routers wholesale, a case which Huawei settled out of court in 2004.

Huawei said it provides "general-purpose" products "based on recognized industry standards." Intel has said it adheres to all laws and regulations where it operates, and cannot control end use of its products.

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Nvidia has said it does not make surveillance systems or work with police in China at present.

IBM and Cisco declined comment. Policing gear maker Motorola Solutions, a successor company to Motorola after it split, did not respond to requests for comment.

U.S. technology transfer to Chinese firms has mostly stopped after growing controversy and a slew of sanctions in the past decade. But industry insiders say it's too late: China, once a tech backwater, is now among the biggest exporters of surveillance technologies on earth.

Few realized "the U.S. shouldn't be selling the software to China because they might copy it, they might use it for these types of surveillance and bad stuff," said Charles Mok, a Hong Kong IT entrepreneur and former lawmaker now living in exile as a research scholar at Stanford. "Nobody was quick enough to realize this could happen."

'The great big eye in the sky'

Inside a 15th-century monastery in Lo Manthang in Nepal's Mustang district, light slants through wooden slats, catching motes of dust and the faded faces of bodhisattvas.

Crumpled notes of Chinese currency lie at the feet of deities in the walled city along the Tibetan border. Here, shops stock Chinese instant noodles and cars with Chinese plates rumble down mountain roads.

A gleaming white observation dome just inside Chinese territory looms over the city. Visible from 15 kilometers (9 miles) away, it's trained on the district that has long been a refuge for Tibetans, including a guerrilla base in the 1960s.

The dome is just one node in China's vast 1,389-kilometer (863-mile) border network with Nepal — a "Great Wall of Steel" of fences, sensors and AI-powered drones.

Chinese forces have barred ethnic Tibetans from accessing traditional pastures and performing sacred rites. They have pressured residents of Lo Manthang to remove photos of the Dalai Lama from shops. And a "China-Nepal joint command mechanism" meets several times a month on border patrols and repatriations, according to a post by the Chinese-run Tibetan government.

The result is that the once-porous frontier is now effectively sealed, and China's digital dragnet reaches deep into the lives of those who live near it.

In April 2024, Rapke Lama was chatting with a friend across the border on WeChat when he received an invitation to meet. He set out from his village and crossed into Tibet — only to be arrested almost immediately.

Lama believes his WeChat exchange was monitored; Chinese police appeared with unsettling precision, as if they knew where to look. After accusing him — wrongly, he maintains — of helping Tibetans flee into Nepal, the police seized his phone, which had photos of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan music. Then came months in a Lhasa prison, where isolation and inadequate medical care hollowed him out.

Lama did not return to Nepal until May 2025, gaunt and shaken. He later said he entered Tibet to harvest caterpillar fungus, valued in traditional Chinese medicine. Another friend who crossed the border remains in custody.

"Even now, I'm scared," Lama says. He wears masks when wandering the streets, he says, "because of that lingering fear."

The Chinese observation dome is a giant symbol of the same fear, towering over the border.

"It's the great big eye in the sky," said a 73-year-old Tibetan hotel owner in Nepal, who spotted the installation during a trip near the border last year. "For Tibetan refugees, Nepal has become a second China."

## Sofia Goggia gets overdue World Cup win in super-G and Lindsey Vonn is third

VAL D'ISERE, France (AP) — Lindsey Vonn heads to Aspen for the holidays happy with another good result Sunday, standing on the podium for a fourth time in five World Cup races to complete an impressive first act of her Olympic season at age 41.

Vonn was third in a super-G won by Sofia Goggia, who finally got a deserved first win this season one

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day after tears flowed when she wasted a fast start in a downhill and finished eighth.

"I really felt a lot of pain in my heart for the (chance) I threw away," Goggia said, revealing she had cried for an hour at her hotel Saturday.

The two former Olympic downhill champions — and biggest personalities in women's speed races — were split on a high-class podium Sunday by runner-up Alice Robinson, who is already a two-time winner this season on the World Cup circuit.

Goggia finished 0.15 seconds ahead of Robinson, who started before strong gusts delayed the race for 10 minutes.

High speed Vonn

Vonn then hit a high speed of 115 kph (71 mph) but the ideal racing line was elusive and she finished 0.36 behind Goggia.

"I was happy with my skiing today," Vonn told Swiss broadcaster RSI. "Sofia put an amazing run together and I knew it was going to be hard to beat her."

Vonn's second consecutive podium finish — after an impressive third in Saturday's downhill — was the 142nd of her storied World Cup career. It resumed exactly one year ago after a five-season retirement to target the Milan Cortina Olympics that start on Feb. 6.

Vonn's intense start to her World Cup season now reads one win, four podiums and a fourth place in five races across 10 days.

"I can't be too upset with that," the United States star said smiling. "Last year was really up and down and I had some pretty low points, nothing was really working.

"This year it's working. I'm making mistakes and I'm still on the podium and that's a totally different ballgame than where I was last year."

Speed races pause

Vonn now takes a three-week break from racing until a Jan. 10 downhill at Altenmarkt-Zauchensee in Austria.

"I'm going to go to Aspen with my sister," Vonn said of her travel plans. "Have some time off, hit the gym, recharge and then I'll come back over here (to Europe) for training."

Both Vonn and Goggia had looked pensive in the finish area knowing their times could have been faster before sharing a hug.

"I thought (my time) wouldn't have lasted for the victory, maybe not even for the podium," Goggia said later. "I'm glad I was wrong."

Goggia's relief

Goggia had an extra moment of anxiety sitting in the leader's box when unheralded No. 27 starter Camille Cerutti carried the fastest time though the third of five time splits. Cerutti, who turns 27 Monday, eventually posted a career-best fifth place nearly a half-second behind Vonn.

The 33-year-old Italian's 27th career World Cup win was her eighth in super-G.

Goggia has skied fast this season but her best results had been a pair of third places at St. Moritz, in downhill and a super-G won by Robinson in a tight race last Sunday where Vonn was fourth.

Vonn's downhill win at St. Moritz last weekend was her 83rd in World Cup racing that started for her in November 2000, before the 24-year-old Robinson was born.

Robinson earned 80 World Cup points for her second place Sunday, and closed the gap in the overall standings to 74 behind Mikaela Shiffrin, who rarely starts in super-G.

Shiffrin's pursuit of a record-tying sixth overall World Cup title should resume next weekend in Austria, where a giant slalom and slalom are scheduled at Semmering. Austrian downhill great Annemarie Moser-Pröll won six overall titles in the 1970s and Vonn has four.