

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Thursday, May 21

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, green beans, fruit, garlic bread.

Track at Webster, Noon.

Pickleball, 5:30 p.m., Elementary Gym

Sign up for swimming lessons and pass pre-sale at the pool, 7 a.m. to 10 a.m.



## Friday, May 22

Senior Menu: Breaded chicken on bun, oven roasted potatoes, California blend, fruit.

Cheer Tryouts, 10 a.m., Arena

## Saturday, May 23

Pickleball, 9:30 a.m., Elementary Gym

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

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# 1440

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

## Colbert Signs Off

The last episode of "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert" airs tonight on CBS at 11:35 pm ET after an 11-year run. The episode, an extended finale, marks the end of the "Late Show" franchise, launched in the post-Johnny Carson 1990s.

CBS announced last year it would end the show, citing financial reasons. Colbert led the time slot over competitors Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel, averaging 2.4 million viewers per episode last year. However, late-night viewership has dropped since the 2010s, while production costs have reportedly risen. The decision came amid long-standing tensions between Colbert and President Donald Trump (whom Colbert frequently mocked), and as Paramount sought regulatory approval for a merger with Skydance Media.

The "Late Show" slot will be filled by "Comics Unleashed," hosted by Byron Allen; Colbert will continue cowriting a "Lord of the Rings" film.

## US Indicts Castro

The Justice Department yesterday unsealed an indictment against former Cuban President Raúl Castro for murder and conspiracy to kill US citizens. The charges stem from the 1996 downing of two civilian planes that killed four Cuban exiles.

Survivors' and victims' relatives spent 30 years pressing for criminal charges against Raúl Castro, who served as defense minister at the time. His older brother, then-Cuban President Fidel Castro, took responsibility for the attack, claiming the activist group operating the plane had previously distributed anti-communist pamphlets. The group maintained it was searching for people fleeing the island nation by sea.

The indictment lays the groundwork for potential US military action to extract 94-year-old Castro from Cuba, similar to the January operation against Cuban ally and former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Since Maduro's capture, the US has imposed a de facto oil blockade to weaken Cuba's communist regime.

## The Crimson Letter

Harvard University's faculty voted yesterday to restrict the number of A's an undergraduate professor can award students. The new policy, set to go into effect in 2027, caps the number of A's in each course to 20%, with the flexibility to award up to four additional A's (A-minuses will not be impacted).

The decision comes as the number of A's awarded at Harvard has grown from 25% of grades in 2005-06 to 60% last year, with AI potentially expediting grade inflation. Faculty warn the trend could harm the university's credibility in the eyes of employers and graduate schools. One professor also suggested grade inflation negatively impacts enrollment in courses taught by professors who give out A's sparingly. The decision is unpopular with students, who are concerned the new approach will reduce collaboration between students and impact their mental health.

Harvard faculty also voted yesterday to replace GPA with percentile rank to determine honors such as cum laude.

## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

James Murdoch, son of media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, buys Vox Media's New York magazine, podcast network, and more in a deal reportedly worth over \$300M.

North Korean women's soccer team beats South Korea in first sports match between the political rivals since 2018.

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French Open players will limit media appearances in protest of 14.3% prize money revenue share; other major events offer 22%.

Taiwan Travelogue, written by Yáng Shuāng-zǐ and translated by Lin King, becomes the first book originally written in Mandarin Chinese to win the International Booker Prize.

## Science & Technology

Tyrannosaurus rexes and other meat-eating dinosaurs likely evolved smaller arms as they came to rely on their increasingly powerful skulls and jaws to attack prey—a phenomenon one researcher describes as “use it or lose it”.

Stability AI launches new music creation model that enables users to create up to six-minute songs with text prompts.

Small primates in South America were 4% heavier in 2023 than in 1999 as average temperatures rose, likely because warmer weather reduced energy needs for temperature regulation.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +1.1%, Dow +1.3%, Nasdaq +1.5%) as oil prices fall and US Treasury yields ease.

SpaceX publicly files for IPO on the Nasdaq composite index with a \$2T valuation goal.

Nvidia's revenue jumps 85% year-over-year in its first-quarter earnings report; chipmaker boosts its stock buyback plan by \$80B.

Intuit to lay off roughly 17% of its workforce as the software giant sharpens focus on AI initiatives.

Wendy's taps former Potbelly CEO Bob Wright to lead the burger chain after five straight quarters of same-store sales declines.

Airbnb adds hotels, car rentals, and grocery delivery to app in bid to become “Amazon for services”.

## Politics & World Affairs

Justice Department provides immunity to President Donald Trump, his family members, and businesses as part of settlement with the IRS.

Former Rep. Barney Frank (D, MA-4) dies at age 86; Frank was known for spearheading the 2010 Dodd-Frank Act, and was among the first openly gay members of Congress.

Two police officers who defended the US Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, sue the Trump administration, seeking to prevent rioters from accessing payouts from \$1.8B “Anti-Weaponization Fund”.

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## Tigers Rally Early, But Redfield Storms Back in Season Finale

The Groton Area Tigers varsity softball team appeared poised to finish the season with a victory Wednesday night after building a six-run lead, but the Redfield Pheasants answered with a late comeback to hand Groton a 13-10 loss in a high-scoring regular season finale.

Groton pounded out 13 hits in the contest and used a pair of explosive innings to take command early. After Redfield grabbed a 3-0 lead in the opening inning behind a pair of RBI singles, the Tigers responded in emphatic fashion in the second inning.

Groton erupted for six runs on six



**Talli Wright with the first varsity over the fence home run with one runner on.** (Photo courtesy Amanda Bisbee)

hits to move in front 6-3. Jerica Locke delivered one of the biggest hits of the inning with a two-run single as the Tigers strung together quality at-bats throughout the frame.

The Tigers kept the pressure on in the third inning, adding four more runs to extend the lead to 10-4. Talli Wright provided the highlight of the night when she blasted a two-run home run to right field. A wild pitch plated another run before Hannah Sandness added an RBI groundout.

Following the game, Wright joked about her memorable swing during an interview.

"I'm not gonna lie. I closed my eyes and just kind of hoped for the best," Wright said with a laugh.

When asked what it meant to homer in her final game as a Tiger, Wright said it was a special moment.

"It's pretty good. I'm definitely very proud of this team, and to end on a high note like that, it's really



**The team lines up one last time for the line-ups at Redfield. This completed the first year of high school girls fast pitch softball.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



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amazing and fun.”

Redfield slowly chipped away before taking control in the fifth inning. The Pheasants exploded for seven runs on six hits to surge ahead 12-10. Hayden Gall delivered one of the key hits in the inning with a two-run single.

Brenna Larson later added insurance for Redfield with a solo home run to center field in the sixth inning.

Despite the loss, Groton showed plenty of offensive firepower throughout the evening. Kinsley Rowen, Libby Cole and Sandness each collected two hits. Wright and Sandness both drove in two runs. Groton also stayed aggressive on the bases, stealing six bags, including two by Rowen.

Rowen started in the circle for the Tigers, striking out three while working 4 1/3 innings.

Redfield finished with 15 hits in the contest. Peyton O’Daniel led the Pheasants with three hits, while Kylie Hermann drove in three runs.

Although the Tigers came up short on the scoreboard, head coach Amanda Bisbee said the team showed tremendous growth throughout the season.

“Definitely our defense tonight. Our defense was killer,” Bisbee said. “They stopped every ball that came to them. They worked hard and came together as a team from the beginning to the end. They went from just a beginner softball team to a close-knit little family.”

Bisbee said one of the biggest focuses moving forward will be continuing to build softball knowledge during the offseason.

“Watch lots and lots of softball this summer,” Bisbee said. “Watch the college games and just gain that softball knowledge. Learn where we have to throw the ball, when we don’t throw the ball, and learn how to play those positions.”

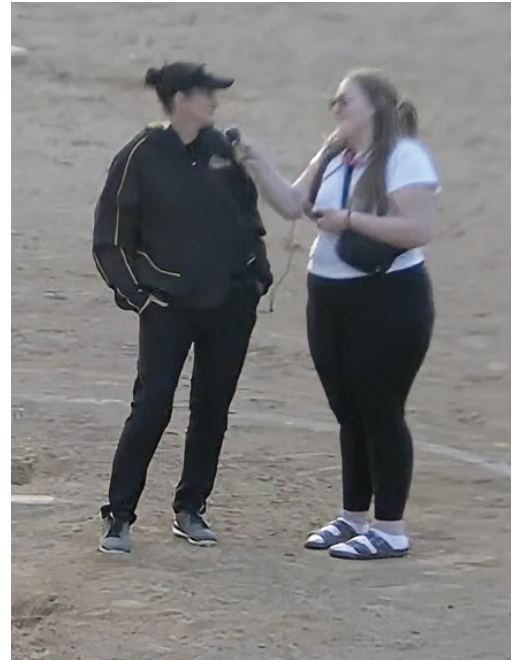
The coach also reflected emotionally on her first season leading the program.

“Being a head softball coach was on my bucket list, and this team helped me get there,” Bisbee said.

Asked to sum up the season, Bisbee pointed to the team’s late-season improvement.

“We started out a little slow, and we ended on such a huge high note,” she said. “I told the girls before today’s game that my quote was just to finish strong. And tonight we finished strong.”

In the junior varsity contest, Groton and Redfield battled to an 11-11 tie in a three-inning game. Arianna Dinger doubled for the Tigers, while Abby Fjeldheim added a double and an RBI. Jayden Penning drove in two runs, and Neely Althoff contributed a single.



**Mya Feser interviewed Coach Amanda Bisbee on GDILIVE.COM.** (Screenshot from GDILIVE.COM)



**Anna Fjeldheim interviewed Talli Wright on GDILIVE.COM.** (Screenshot from GDILIVE.COM)





## Trees planted at City Park

The Groton Senior Citizens and the Groton Garden Club along with help from three city employees worked together on a project to plant two young trees in the Groton City Park. Those working on this project were John Aldrich, Todd Gay, Karyn Babcock, Taylor Diegel, Eunice McColister, Korbin Kucker in the back row with Denise Sombke and Pat Larson in front. Two trees were planted near the Groton City Sign. There are now three blooming trees that surround the sign. (Photo by Dorene Nelson)



## Groton Area Tigers Varsity Loses Despite Out Hitting Madison Bulldogs Varsity

By GameChanger Media

Even though Groton Area Tigers Varsity collected six hits to Madison Bulldogs Varsity's three, they still fell 4-3 on Wednesday at Madison. Lincoln Krause led Groton Area Tigers Varsity with two hits. This was the North Super Region High School Baseball Tournament held Wednesday in Madison.

Groton Area Tigers Varsity fought back after falling down by four runs in the fourth inning. The comeback fell just short though. Groton Area Tigers Varsity closed the gap by scoring on a solo home run, a single, and a walk.

Madison Bulldogs Varsity opened the scoring in the bottom of the third thanks to two home runs. Madison Bulldogs Varsity first got on the board when JD Prorok homered to left field, scoring two runs.

Groton Area Tigers Varsity scored one run in the top of the fifth on a solo home run to right field by Krause following a 7-pitch at-bat.

Prorok earned the win for Madison Bulldogs Varsity. The pitcher allowed one hit and zero runs over four innings, striking out nine and walking three. Jarrett Erdmann took the loss for Groton Area Tigers Varsity. The lefty went six innings, giving up four runs on three hits, striking out five and walking three.

Krause led Groton Area Tigers Varsity with two runs batted in. The outfielder went 2-for-4 on the day.

Prorok provided pop in the middle of the lineup, and led Madison Bulldogs Varsity with two runs batted in. The 3-hole hitter went 1-for-3 on the day. Quincy Kurtz, Braylon Oftedal, and Prorok each collected one hit for Madison Bulldogs Varsity. Madison Bulldogs Varsity turned one double play in the game.

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**Carly Johnson and Claire Schuelke  
have qualified for the state golf meet.**

(Courtesy photo)

## Johnson, Schuelke qualify for the state golf meet

The Groton Area girls golf team competed Wednesday at the Region 1A Golf Meet in Dell Rapids, finishing fifth in the team standings with a score of 440.

Aberdeen Roncalli claimed the regional championship with a 339 team score, followed by Madison at 348 and Sioux Valley at 401. Those three teams advanced to the State A Girls Golf Tournament to be held June 1-2 at Two Rivers Golf Course in Sioux Falls.

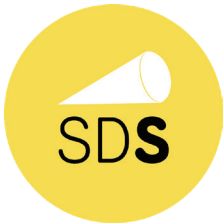
Groton was led by Carly Johnson, who tied for 13th place individually with an 18-hole score of 97. Claire Schuelke added a 105 to place 17th overall. Halee Harder carded a 117, while Rylie Rose finished with a 121.

The low 55 percent of individual golfers, along with players from qualifying teams, advanced to state. Johnson and Schuelke both finished above the cut line, while Harder and Rose narrowly missed qualifying.

Sienna Maxwell of Madison earned medalist honors with a round of 81. Grace Seyer of Aberdeen Roncalli finished second at 82, while Kenzley Heath of Sisseton was third with an 83.

Team standings included Aberdeen Roncalli (339), Madison (348), Sioux Valley (401), Sisseton (409), Groton (440), Dell Rapids (453), and Milbank (563).





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### **Project opponent files federal lawsuit; uranium drilling permit hearing paused**

**BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN**

The status of a hearing on an exploratory uranium drilling permit was left uncertain Wednesday after a state board adjourned until further notice, following a private session to discuss legal matters.

The permit application is from Clean Nuclear Energy Corporation, which is seeking to drill dozens of holes up to 700 feet deep on state land. The proposed site is near the rim of Craven Canyon in South Dakota's southern Black Hills.

Dozens of people and some organizations have raised formal complaints about the project to the Board of Minerals and Environment, which will decide on the permit. Opponents have said the drilling could disturb ancient Native American petroglyphs on the canyon's walls, disrupt Lakota ceremonies and potentially contaminate groundwater, among other concerns.

On Monday, the board started a hearing in Hot Springs on the permit application. The hearing was scheduled to continue through Friday.

On Wednesday, the third day of the hearing, project opponent Elizabeth Lone Eagle filed a federal lawsuit against the board, the state's Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Clean Nuclear Energy and state employees involved in evaluating the permit application, alleging violations of due process. Lone Eagle filed the lawsuit herself, without representation by an attorney.

Lone Eagle, along with six other people, including five described as Lakota first-language speakers, are listed as plaintiffs in the suit. The suit alleges "systematic, ongoing, and deliberate denial of meaningful participation to Lakota first-language speaking" project opponents.

Lakota is spoken by western South Dakota tribes, which once controlled the Black Hills as part of the Great Sioux Reservation. The board agreed prior to the hearing that the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources would provide a Lakota interpreter for the proceedings. The department failed to provide an interpreter on Monday, but provided interpreters Tuesday. At times on Tuesday, project opponents objected from seats in the audience when parts of the hearing proceeded without interpretation.

The lawsuit also alleges that a "significant multi-jurisdictional law enforcement presence" creates an "atmosphere of intimidation" at the hearing.

The board did not provide a date to resume the hearing, which was being held at the Mueller Civic Center in Hot Springs, a little more than 20 miles from the proposed drill site. Several project opponents who'd been attending the hearing told South Dakota Searchlight on Wednesday evening that they were going home to await a further announcement.

Neither the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources nor Clean Nuclear Energy immediately responded to Searchlight's requests for further information.

*Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.*

## Advance voting for South Dakota primary election picks up after delayed start

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

Advance voting for the June 2 primary election is outpacing or on track to match the 2024 primary election in South Dakota, several county auditors say, despite a weeklong delay at the start.

Ballot printing was delayed this year due in part to a calendar quirk that created an unusually short window between the filing deadline for candidate petitions and the start of advance voting. South Dakotans can vote absentee before Election Day by mail or in-person at local county offices.

The South Dakota Secretary of State's Office has not published turnout information leading up to the June primary. The office published weekly updates during the 2024 election. South Dakota Searchlight has not received a response to a records request for the absentee ballot information.

Brown County Auditor Lynn Heupel said she expected her office to be busier this year because of the four-way race for the Republican nomination for governor and a local sheriff race. Aberdeen, the state's third-largest city, is in Brown County.

As it has turned out, this year has been about the same as 2024.

"2024 was kind of slow, too," Heupel said. "Turnout just isn't as good as we were hoping."

Statewide turnout in the 2024 primary election was 27% among Republicans and 7% among Democrats, independents and non-politically affiliated voters. Non-Republicans typically have shorter ballots in South Dakota primaries, and sometimes have nothing to vote on.

Heupel's office had received 555 ballots as of May 14 — on track to match 2024, when the office received 1,370 absentee ballots by Election Day.

"Maybe people are waiting and will vote on Election Day," Heupel said.

Harding County is slightly ahead of schedule. The remote county in the state's northwest corner had 16 ballots cast as of Monday. In 2024, the county had 54 absentee ballot requests, 13 of which were returned by this time, said Auditor Kathy Glines.

Glines had raised concerns about mail-in absentee ballots being affected by the delayed start, but said the turnout so far hasn't been impacted.

"At this point, there's a lot of interest. People are asking if they can come in and vote, and they're asking about absentee, but they haven't voted yet," Glines said. "They say, 'As soon as I decide who I'm going to vote for.' I think that's the holdup."

Auditors across the state said they expect in-person voting to pick up by the end of this week and into next week. The primary, which includes races for the Republican nominations for U.S. Senate, U.S. House and governor, along with legislative primaries, is combined with local elections statewide.

Voters had requested 1,034 ballots as of Tuesday in Lincoln County, which includes part of Sioux Falls. Auditor Sheri Lund's office had received 724 returned ballots. In 2024, Lincoln County voters returned 516 ballots before the primary election — meaning the county has already surpassed its 2024 total with weeks to spare.

"We usually get bombarded the last few days," Lund said.

*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.*



## South Dakota public university tuition rising at least 2.4%, with some steeper hikes

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

The board overseeing South Dakota's public university system increased in-person tuition by 2.4% systemwide at its Wednesday meeting in Custer, while approving a higher increase of 5% for South Dakota Mines.

Heather Forney, South Dakota Board of Regents vice president of finance and administration, told board members the increase is tied to staff and faculty salary increases. The Legislature approved a 1.4% raise for state employees during its 2026 session.

Forney said the tuition increase is also driven by "significant" increases in technology costs across the system, which rise annually around 4% to 7%.

Griffin Petersen, the student representative to the South Dakota Board of Regents, called the increases "pretty modest."

"It ensures we continue to deliver a level of quality that prepares our students for the workforce and for their lives beyond school," Petersen said.

Tuition at South Dakota Mines will rise 5% due to more experiential and "cost intensive" learning, Forney said. The Rapid City university specializes in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

This is the second straight year the system has increased tuition, after three years of legislatively aided tuition freezes. The average annual tuition and mandatory fee cost for an in-state undergraduate student will increase from \$9,651.50 to \$9,914.90, an increase of \$263.40.

In a regional survey of surrounding states during the 2025-26 school year presented to the board in April, South Dakota ranked fourth highest among seven states for undergraduate resident tuition and fees and third highest for graduate resident tuition and fees. For nonresidents, South Dakota ranked second lowest for both undergraduate and graduate tuition and fees.

Tuition will also beyond 2.4% for several programs: an 8% increase in Ph.D. programs at Dakota State University and 5% increases at the University of South Dakota's law and medical schools. Forney said the medical school increase is tied to "significant costs we'll be dealing with" as the school moves from Vermillion to Sioux Falls.

The board also approved a 2.2% increase in the mandatory general activity fee students pay systemwide, with exceptions at South Dakota State University and Black Hills State University where the fees will hold steady.

At South Dakota State University, a wellness center bond will be paid off, and the \$1.83 per credit hour general activity fee previously covering that debt will be redirected toward career development, student organization funding and student union maintenance. Black Hills State University is in a similar position — a bond expiring there will free up \$6.57 per credit hour, which the university will redirect to comparable student services.

Dual credit tuition for South Dakota high school students taking college courses will increase 2.4%, raising the student cost per credit hour to \$80.37. The state Department of Education covers the other half.

*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.*

## Trump won't give up on stalled SAVE America bill, as Dems prep election protections

**Thune says chamber held a 'robust debate' but indicates senators are unlikely to return to the legislation**

**BY: JONATHAN SHORMAN**

President Donald Trump is again demanding Congress pass a sweeping set of voting restrictions and refuses to rule out sending troops to the polls, as Democrats and voting rights groups assemble a sprawling effort to guard against federal election interference.

The fight over election security is intensifying in Washington, D.C., as the White House and its allies seek to rewrite rules around voter registration and mail-in ballots ahead of the November midterm elections. The stakes of the contests are massive — control of Congress and the future of Trump's legislative agenda.

Trump wants lawmakers to attach the SAVE America Act to unrelated housing and surveillance legislation after it stalled in the U.S. Senate. The SAVE bill would require individuals to show documents, such as a passport or birth certificate, proving their citizenship to register to vote. It would also mandate voters show photo ID to cast a ballot.

"Voter I.D., and Proof of Citizenship, must be approved, NOW," Trump wrote Saturday on Truth Social, his social media platform. On Wednesday, he took to social media again to call for the firing of the Senate parliamentarian and suggested she's an impediment to passage of the bill.

"We need THE SAVE AMERICA ACT passed, and NOW," Trump wrote.

Democrats and voting rights advocates say the measure would cause chaos if passed this close to the election. They warn it would disenfranchise voters and create additional obstacles to voting for married women and others who have changed their names.

### **Vote possible soon**

The Senate may hold another vote as early as this week on adding the SAVE America Act to a budget reconciliation bill. Senators rejected a prior effort to advance the legislation in a 48-50 vote in April, but Sen. John Kennedy, a Louisiana Republican, has vowed to try again.

The SAVE America Act is popular among Republicans in the U.S. House, which passed the bill in February. But a handful of Senate Republicans have joined Democrats in opposing the proposal, which doesn't have enough support to overcome a filibuster.

"It is voter suppression with a suit and tie," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a New York Democrat, said Tuesday in a speech at a progressive conference.

Some House Republicans have kept up pressure on the Senate to act. During a House Administration Subcommittee on Elections hearing Wednesday, Rep. Mary Miller, an Illinois Republican, called for the passage of the bill multiple times.

"American citizens deserve secure elections and to know that their votes are guaranteed," Miller said.

### **Thune blames Democrats**

Senators spent several weeks this spring debating the legislation before moving on to other business. Senate Majority Leader John Thune, a South Dakota Republican, on Monday said the chamber held a "robust debate" but indicated senators were unlikely to return to the legislation.

Speaking about the bill in the past tense, Thune cast the measure as a political cudgel that Republicans would use against Democrats in November.

"Democrats are on the record against all of it," Thune said on the Senate floor. "And we'll be sure the American people know that Democrats are blocking commonsense policies that have broad support from the American people."

Democrats, fearing that Trump may try to assert unilateral control over elections regardless of whether the legislation advances, have begun outlining how they plan to combat any attempted election takeover.



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Schumer on Tuesday said Senate Democrats are launching an election protection task force. The group, which will include 11 senators and election experts, will be prepared to mount "lawsuit after lawsuit" throughout the election process.

"Let me be very clear: local officials run elections. Voters decide elections. Donald Trump does not," Schumer said.

## **Troops at polling places**

In describing their concerns, Schumer and others point to Trump's refusal earlier this month to close the door on deploying troops to polling places. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also recently dismissed the possibility as a "gotcha hypothetical" without actually ruling it out.

Federal law prohibits federal troops and agents at election sites in nearly all circumstances.

"I'd do anything necessary to make sure we have honest elections," Trump told reporters when asked about sending troops of immigration agents to the polls.

Trump's critics also emphasize his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss and his continuing portrayal of the contest as stolen. He has pardoned rioters who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, disrupting Congress' certification of the election.

On Monday, the Justice Department announced the creation of a \$1.776 billion fund to compensate Trump allies who say they were victims of past administrations.

"This is pure fraud and highway robbery," Rep. Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, said in a statement.

## **Executive orders**

Preparations for possible interference in the midterms come amid a series of steps by the Trump administration over the past year aimed at giving the White House greater authority over elections — though the U.S. Constitution says they are administered by the states.

Trump signed an executive order last year that sought to mandate proof of citizenship to vote in federal elections, but the measure was blocked in court. He signed another order in March restricting the sending of ballots through the mail; a federal judge is expected to rule soon on a request to halt its enforcement.

Trump this week attacked Maryland officials over a mistake that caused voters to receive incorrect mail-in ballots for the state's June primary. Maryland election officials have faulted a vendor for the error and are resending the ballots, but the president has called for a Justice Department investigation.

"You want to have proof of citizenship, you want to have voter ID, you want to have all these things. But to me, maybe the worst of all is the mail-in ballots," Trump told reporters on Monday.

## **DOJ battles states**

For months, the Department of Justice has demanded states turn over sensitive personal data on voters, such as driver's license numbers, partial Social Security numbers and dates of birth.

It has sued 30 states and the District of Columbia for the information, which it plans to run through a computer program called SAVE at the Department of Homeland Security to identify possible noncitizens.

Federal judges have so far ruled against the Justice Department. Several voting rights groups have also sued to block the DOJ effort, alleging the Trump administration wants to build an illegal national voter database.

Anthony Nel, a Texas resident and one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit, said in a statement that his voter registration was canceled a month after SAVE wrongly identified him as a possible noncitizen.

"The DOJ should not be building a national database out of our most sensitive, personal information when it can't even get this right," Nel said.

Jonathan Shorman covers democracy for States Newsroom. Based in Kansas City, his coverage area includes elections and voting rights, fights over state and federal power, civil liberties and more. An alumnus of the University of Kansas, he previously covered politics for The Kansas City Star.

## US House passes sweeping 'gender ideology' bill aimed at trans kids in schools

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House passed a bill Wednesday that would require parental consent before a public elementary or middle school can update a student's pronouns, gender markers or preferred name on records in order to receive federal funding.

The measure — which succeeded 217-198 — would also bar federal funding under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 that provides federal aid to schools from being used "to teach or advance concepts related to gender ideology."

Eight Democrats broke ranks with their party to vote for the Republican-led effort, including: Reps. Vicente Gonzalez and Henry Cuellar of Texas, Don Davis of North Carolina, Cleo Fields of Louisiana, Laura Gillen of New York, Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, Marie Gluesenkamp Perez of Washington state and Eugene Vindman of Virginia.

Fifteen House members did not vote.

### Parental consent

The bill would also require schools to get permission from parents before changing "sex-based accommodations" to allow a student to access a locker room or bathroom consistent with their gender identity.

Rep. Tim Walberg, chair of the House Committee on Education and Workforce, said during floor debate the measure "takes monumental strides to restore parental rights and educational sanity."

The bill "affirms the right of parents to be in charge of their children's upbringing and ensures schools remain partners in a child's education" and "also establishes clear guardrails to ensure taxpayer dollars are used to support learning, not indoctrinate kids in radical ideology and agendas," the Michigan Republican added.

Walberg led the bill alongside Rep. Burgess Owens, a Utah Republican who brought forth a separate measure that was later looped in and bars the use of federal funds "to teach or advance concepts related to gender ideology."

The bill draws on a definition of "gender ideology" in a January 2025 executive order signed by President Donald Trump.

The order defines "gender ideology" as "the idea that there is a vast spectrum of genders that are disconnected from one's sex."

GLAAD, an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, noted in a fact sheet that "gender ideology" is "an inaccurate term deployed by opponents to undermine and dehumanize transgender and nonbinary people."

### House Dems, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups blast bill

Rep. Bobby Scott, ranking member of the House Education and Workforce panel, blasted the measure during floor debate, saying it would "impose a rigid federal mandate that ignores context, disregards students' safety and prioritizes politics over people."

The Virginia Democrat noted that the bill "bars any discussion of transgender people or topics in the classroom, including "banning books with transgender characters" or discussing "the existence of transgender people."

Scott noted that the bill "takes away state and local control of curriculum on education — the very thing that the current administration claims they're giving back to states by illegally dismantling the Department of Education."

### Fears students will be outed

Rep. Mark Takano, chair of the Congressional Equality Caucus, criticized the legislation ahead of floor debate as the "Don't say trans bill."

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The California Democrat told States Newsroom he was concerned the measure would force school officials to out students to their parents, regardless of whether the official knew the student could suffer harm.

Takano, who also sits on the House education panel, also expressed concern that in the case where parents are supportive of their child using different pronouns, "if the teacher uses a different pronoun, that could be interpreted as 'promoting gender ideology.'"

He said "we can't discount that this administration will use a maximalist interpretation of the law, which would make even the case where" a student with supportive parents of trans children "could not go by the preferred nickname."

David Stacy, vice president of government affairs for the Human Rights Campaign, condemned the bill as "cruel" and noted the LGBTQ+ advocacy group was "prepared to fight it," in a statement shared with States Newsroom ahead of the vote.

"Trans kids are not a political agenda — they are students who deserve safety and affirmation at school like anyone else," Stacy added.

"Despite the many pressing issues facing our nation, House Republicans continue their bizarre obsession with trans people," he said.

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

## Summit pipeline opponents, supporters seek action from Iowa Utilities Commission

BY: KADIN LUHMANN

Iowa property owners asked the Iowa Utilities Commission Wednesday to deny Summit Carbon Solution's recent filing seeking to modify its pipeline project, while ag group members and some others called for approval of the plan.

Summit announced May 13 that its new proposal would remove previously planned routes through Shelby, Pottawattamie, Montgomery, Adams, Page, Fremont, Mitchell and Worth counties and reduce pipeline mileage that runs through Sioux, Crawford, Floyd and Dickinson counties.

Summit added that the changes would affect 400 fewer landowners and reduce the extent of the project by about 200 miles.

Colleen Tucker, a Mitchell County landowner and resident, said she feels "cautious optimism" about the proposed changes, but emphasized that there are still many Iowa landowners still impacted by the pipeline. She and others asked the IUC during the public comment period of its monthly meeting to deny Summit's proposal.

"The question is, when will those landowners finally see an end to this nightmare that has been dragged on since 2021," Tucker said. "The citizens of Iowa are asking you to uphold the U.S. and Iowa constitutions by denying a private company the extraordinary power of eminent domain for this project. You have the authority to stop this, and you should use that authority."

Jann Reinig, a Shelby County landowner, said despite her county being exempt from the new proposal, uncertainty about other parts of Iowa and the potential for Summit's return after their initial project is completed leaves little room for celebration.

"We landowners have no right to celebrate. We've tried to be Iowa nice for five years and that's running kind of thin," Reinig said. "We aren't Iowa stupid. Even though this proposal has been cut back, there are still almost 4,000 parcels of Iowa land that we have no idea what's going to happen to."

Darlene Partlow, a Guthrie County landowner, said she has attended Iowa legislative sessions for the past two years and believes that Summit has a hidden agenda behind its new proposal.

"I've come to the conclusion that our state government, starting with the governor, Senate leadership and some senators, are bought and paid for," Partlow said. "Why else will we be fighting this battle when



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our state constitution specifically states eminent domain can only be used strictly for public use.”

While most public comments asked the IUC to deny Summit’s proposal, some asked the commission to expedite the request.

Steve Kuiper, the vice president of the Iowa Corn Growers Association, encouraged the IUC to expedite and approve Summit’s proposal, adding that the pipeline would be “tremendous help” to Iowa farmers.

“Currently, the Iowa farming economy has some serious financial difficulties ahead,” Kuiper said. “Other states are competing against us for this ... low-carbon fuel initiative. If we don’t do low-carbon ethanol, we will start to lose ethanol business in the state of Iowa. It’ll detrimentally affect the price of Iowa’s corn.”

Under Summit’s new plan, the pipeline will continue to operate through Nebraska and parts of Iowa, and captured emissions will be stored in Wyoming, deviating from its original sequestration plan to store emissions in North Dakota.

Kuiper added that he has friends in Nebraska who have “picked up that price, and it has helped their bottom line tremendously. I respectfully ask that you folks take up this debate this summer, so construction can begin as soon as possible. We would like to see the construction phase start this winter and get this pipe in the ground.”

The Iowa Renewable Fuels Association (IRFA) filed a formal request to IUC on Tuesday to schedule a hearing for the approval of Summit’s proposal, saying that IUC’s permit request was submitted six months ago.

Colin Gorton, IFRA’s policy director, said in a news release the repeated delays hurt Iowa’s rural economy, and asked the commission to take swift action.

“After six months, the IFRA can see no reason to delay holding a scheduling conference for this important issue,” Gorton said. “The 27 ethanol plants that are part of the Summit project stand to generate nearly \$2 billion annually in additional revenue from carbon capture, use and sequestration. To underscore the urgency of the situation, that is nearly \$5.25 million of forgone revenue for Iowa’s ethanol plants each and every day. At a moment when farmers are struggling and rural economies are hurting, this is incredibly critical.”

The commission has not set a timeline for its next order in the Summit Carbon Solutions docket, an IUC spokesperson said Wednesday in an email response to Iowa Capital Dispatch.

*This story was originally produced by Iowa Capital Dispatch, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network which includes South Dakota Searchlight, and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity.*

*Kadin Luhmann is an Iowa State University student who has reported on transparency in Iowa’s ESA program, student perspectives on global conflicts and candidate profiles featuring Iowa politicians.*

## Governor candidate Hansen: SD’s approach to economic development a ‘breeding ground of corruption’

BY: MEGHAN O’BRIEN

HANSEN I’m a conservative Republican. And so I want to conserve those things that make South Dakota great, and for me that’s faith and that’s family and that’s freedom, and that will always be my focus.

O’BRIEN Welcome to a special episode of the Searchlight Report, a podcast from South Dakota Searchlight.

I’m your host, Meghan O’Brien. I sat down for an interview with each of the Republicans seeking their party’s nomination for governor in the June 2nd primary election. I asked each of them the same set of questions.

In this series of episodes, you’ll hear more from each candidate about their goals for state policy on abortion, data centers and economic development, among other topics. I also asked each candidate to share their big idea for South Dakota.

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You just heard from current state Speaker of the House Jon Hansen, a lawyer from Dell Rapids. He's served 11 total years in the state House of Representatives. Hansen is also the co-founder of the anti-abortion Life Defense Fund.

0513 HANSEN INTERVIEW: (35:30)

O'BRIEN: This past legislative session, there was quite a focus on abortion legislation, including new legislation to restrict abortion pills coming into the state, and defining further what an abortion procedure is. As governor, do you see the need for further regulations, and legislation regarding to abortion in the state, and what would that look like?

HANSEN: Well, just by way of background, you know, the life issue is one of the reasons I really got involved in the crazy political arena in the first place. I was just really convicted that, you know, I wanted to help protect unborn babies and their moms and their dads in these crisis pregnancy situations. And this was really saddened by the loss of innocent life through abortion. And so, that was really something that convicted me and inspired me to get involved in the first place. And so, some of my first things I ever did in terms of volunteering or doing anything like that in the political realm was back on the statewide abortion campaigns back in 2006 and 2008, where there were a large group of pro-lifers that were trying to make South Dakota more pro-life. Both of those efforts failed back then. And ever since then, in my time in the Legislature and beyond, I've just been a real solid advocate for unborn life and for moms and dads in the state. And just recently, there was an abortion amendment that was attempted to be written into our state constitution that would have legalized abortion all the way up to the point of birth. That was called Constitutional Abortion Amendment G. It was on the ballot last November, or I should say the last November election. And when I saw that that was coming down the pike, I formed an organization called the Life Defense Fund and took the reins and led the way to keep South Dakota pro-life. And so, in spite of a lot of people who said we can never defeat that constitutional abortion amendment, in spite of the polls saying that we were going to lose every single time, we did defeat Constitutional Abortion Amendment G by 59 to 41%, and we kept South Dakota pro-life, through my leadership in, fighting that constitutional abortion amendment. And so, that's my, that's my track record on the life issue. I'm always gonna be a strong defender of unborn life and doing everything that we can do to look out for moms and dads in those, sometimes crisis pregnancy situations. So this last legislative session, there were a couple of bills that came through that I was supportive of. And you mentioned those, one of which was dealing with these chemical abortion pills and you know, now South Dakota, of course, after Roe versus Wade was overturned, we prohibit abortions in South Dakota, and yet we've seen a real flood of chemical abortion pills come into South Dakota. Obviously that's, you know, deadly to the unborn baby, but it's also been very risky to mothers, and I've, I've actually, you know, seen cases where mothers in South Dakota ordered these chemical abortion pills online, and they came from somewhere overseas. They shipped them to South Dakota. The mother got them and said, boy, something just doesn't seem right about this. So she brought them in for help. And I, I was talking to a doctor after all of this went down, and I asked the doctor, what would have happened if she would have taken those pills as she was prescribed? And the doctor said, well, it's, it's she might, she might have bled out and died. And so we cannot have an unregulated market of illegal chemical abortion pills coming into South Dakota. It's really dangerous. And so this session, we passed a law to allow our state's attorneys and our attorney general just some more authority to go after those individuals who are sending those pills or trafficking in those chemical abortion pills into South Dakota. So I think that was a good thing that we did. And, you know, going forward, it's really, really difficult to know what exactly is going to be needed in terms of additional statutes. You know, I would have never thought after Roe versus Wade was overturned that we'd have so many chemical abortions coming into the state. At least not in these numbers. And so, you know, we just always have to remain vigilant, we always have to keep focused on protecting life, on looking out for moms and dads, and so whether that requires a statute or whether that just requires being there with mothers and fathers in those situations, as friends and neighbors and family members, we're gonna keep focusing on keeping

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South Dakota pro-life and really building a culture of life and family in the state.

O'BRIEN: OK, but for now, would you see, there's abortion is already illegal in the state, except to preserve the life of the mother. Do you see, kind of right now, any other kind of avenues that you would want to kind of introduce statute or introduce further restrictions on abortion access?

HANSEN: No, I mean, I think our, I think we've got some of the strongest laws in the country right now as it relates to our pro-life laws. And so I'm pretty comfortable with where things are at. And again, you know, sometimes it's not, it's not additional laws that are needed. It's just, you know, being there for your friends and your family and your neighbors when they are in those situations. And that's on us as citizens of the state of South Dakota. So I really don't see a need. I mean, I don't have anything in mind particularly for any law. I don't have anything that I'm particularly aiming for on this issue because I do think that our laws are really strong and so, you know, you never quite know what could come up in the future, but as of right now we've got, I think, the strongest pro-life laws in the country, and we're just going to make sure that we stay that way.

O'BRIEN: OK. Gotcha. And so then, obviously too, property tax reduction was a pretty big topic in the Legislature this year, with a lot of focus on reducing property taxes for all homeowners in the state. But there were also a lot of legislative conversations around expanding existing relief programs for people who are veterans, people who are part of the elderly or disabled populations. Would you want to increase the amount of South Dakotans who are using those programs, and what would that promotion for those programs look like if, if you do want to increase that usage?

HANSEN: Yeah, I would. This last interim, this last summer, we did a property tax task force which I sponsored and created through the Legislature. And we went around the state to all different corners of South Dakota and, really for two reasons, to develop concepts of legislation to bring to session, but then also, to hear from people all across South Dakota and how high property taxes are affecting them. And we heard in a particularly striking way from grandparents on fixed incomes. And I remember very vividly, a lady, her name was Kay from Piedmont. An 82-year-old grandma, and she came to testify before our committee, and she was there with her grandson. She had a tank of oxygen that she was wheeling next to her, and she came up to the table to start testifying and she said, I need help. I am on a fixed income and I can't afford my property taxes. And even with the existing program that we have for seniors on a fixed income, I can't afford my property taxes. And then when I go into town and I work so that I can afford more, I no longer qualify for the programs. And so, Kay and others were in this situation where literally because of high property taxes, they're being forced out of their homes, or an 82-year-old grandmother is being forced to go into town to take a job because she can't afford the property taxes. And I just think that's totally wrong, and particularly because it's an issue that we can help solve at the state level and at the local level. And so, I took it upon myself to do that. This interim we did pass out of the task force expansions for programs for seniors on a fixed income and also for disabled vets. Unfortunately, those bills died over in the Senate, never made it over to the House of Representatives where I'm the speaker. But I did support those coming out of the task force, and I'm going to continue to fight for those things as I've talked to more seniors on fixed incomes, and of course I was just, oh, about three weeks ago with a group of veterans, and this issue came up and it's really important to them. And so I'm going to continue to fight for that going forward. I'm not done on that issue with those particular programs. You know, we did pass a property tax relief measure that next year when this kicks in, it takes a little while for property tax relief to kick in just the way we pay property taxes, but when this kicks in, homeowners are gonna see anywhere from 15 to 22% savings in their owner occupied property tax bill. And so that will be a relief for those individuals, but I do think we need to do more, to target help and support our grandparents on fixed incomes and our disabled veterans. It's something I've supported in the past and I'm gonna continue to fight for them going forward.

O'BRIEN: The South Dakota State Department of Social Services estimates that more than 1,000 Medicaid enrollees in the state could lose coverage once the federal work requirements kick in, next year. What will you as governor do about that?



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HANSEN: Well, I do support work requirements for the Medicaid expansion program, because it's important that we encourage those who are taking part of those systems to actually go out and work, and I think work is a good thing. And it brings dignity and purpose to individuals. And so I, you know, I don't hesitate for a second in my support of work requirements for those programs. It's not for the entire population. I think we're just talking about Medicaid expansion here, which is a population of able-bodied working adults. And not all the other people who are taking usage of our Medicaid program. So, I've always been a supporter of work requirements for that program and I'm gonna continue to be a supporter of that as well.

O'BRIEN: What do you think that the state's role in economic development should be, and if elected, how would you establish or continue that role?

HANSEN: Well, you know, that's been a real source of division amongst Republicans lately out in Pierre. And I will say there, you know, there are some, including some of my opponents who really believe that in order to have economic development in South Dakota, that you have to tax all of the small businesses and all the entrepreneurs in the state and redistribute it to massive, sometimes out of state, sometimes foreign companies. And I have disagreed with that approach on many different levels. I mean, we've seen not only deals that go terribly bad, that cost the taxpayers millions of dollars in wasted spending, but it's also a breeding ground of corruption, and I don't want a South Dakota where we have D.C. -style deals getting made between politicians and businesses where the politicians give away tax money and then expect political contributions in return, or like we saw with the CJ Schwan's deal with the state that I know your, your paper, your outlet reported on, quite extensively, where an individual who was giving away the money from the state then ended up getting a major executive branch or executive position within that company. So, I don't think that the state of South Dakota should be having bureaucrats give away money and then get executive positions within companies. That's the kind of misdealing that I think that has come with some of these programs. And so we, we don't, we reject that. What I believe in is supporting South Dakota small businesses and entrepreneurs, our Main Street businesses that make up all of our communities and are a part of what makes South Dakota special. And I think they should just be treated fairly just like everybody else. I want a low tax, low regulation environment for those businesses so that they can do what they do best, which is create great products and services and to create great jobs for their communities. I don't want to be taxing them in order to take their money and redistribute it to South Korean companies or Minnesota companies where those businesses that were taxed or South Dakota small businesses will never really see any benefit from that whatsoever. So my focus is on small businesses, on medium sized businesses right here in South Dakota through a low tax, low regulation, free market environment, and that will always be my focus in addition to our farming and ranching communities. We are not going to just sit by and let all of their money be redistributed by bureaucrats in Pierre to massive, out-of-state, foreign-backed companies. I just think that's wrong. That approach needs to be ended in South Dakota, and I'm gonna end those programs in favor of, support for South Dakota small businesses and entrepreneurs.

O'BRIEN: A lot of recently enacted laws in South Dakota could make it harder to vote, including new requirements for proof of citizenship when registering and a new way to challenge a person's ability to vote. What policies would you pursue when it comes to voting access?

HANSEN: Well, you know, we've taken many steps towards making sure we have secure elections in South Dakota. That's been my focus and that's what I'm going to continue to focus on. You know, I saw a story recently on that topic, but here's the reality, I mean, there were people who weren't from South Dakota and who never lived in South Dakota, who were voting in South Dakota elections. I remember very vividly, we were doing a committee hearing once on one of these bills, and an individual testified from Germany. And he had been an Iowa resident. He took a federal contracting job and he ended up living in Germany. And he said, you guys, you can't pass this bill that you're attempting to pass because if you do, I won't be able to vote in South Dakota. And so I asked him in the question and answer segment, have you ever actually lived in South Dakota? And he said no. This guy had never lived in South Dakota, and yet he was wanting to vote in South Dakota elections. There were numerous people like that, a lot

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of people like that, and I think that's wrong. I think we should all be able to agree that that's wrong, that only South Dakotans should be voting in our South Dakota elections. And so, we fought on that issue and we ended up passing some really important protections to make sure that our South Dakota elections are by South Dakotans and for South Dakotans and so that's what we did. I'm gonna continue to make sure that we have secure and fair elections in South Dakota. That's been an important aspect of my work as a legislator, and something that I'm going to continue to focus on in the future. If we don't have secure elections, we got real problems. We need to make sure that the citizens of South Dakota and America have confidence in our election system because if that's eroded, we're gonna have some big problems going forward. So, secure elections are very important. I'm going to continue to fight for those.

O'BRIEN: Regulations for data centers were also pretty talked about during the session. A lot of regulations were on the table for lawmakers this year. How do you as governor plan to regulate them, if at all?

HANSEN: Well, we actually passed a bill this session that I led on called the Data Center Bill of Rights for Citizens. And so, you know, one of the differences really in this race between me and my opponents is, that we just, we don't just talk the talk on these issues, we actually go out and we fight and we lead and we deliver for conservative Republican values. And on this issue, you know, there's a broad coalition of support for the measure that we passed called the Data Center Bill of Rights for Citizens. And so, that data center Bill of Rights for Citizens really ended up doing three things. Number 1, it addresses the concerns of skyrocketing electricity bills, because as we've seen across the country, in some places where there are data centers that are being constructed, electricity bills are going up north of 240%. I mean, it's crazy the amount of money that electricity bills are going up due to the construction of hyper-scale data centers. We didn't want that in South Dakota. We want to look out for affordability, you know, electricity bills are already getting too high. It's already really hard to pay your electric bill. We don't want them going up anymore because you have to subsidize the electricity for a big tech data center. And so one of the very important provisions that we put into that bill, it's now the law of South Dakota says that they have to pay, that is a data center, has to pay for all the costs associated with the provision of electricity and that your electricity bills cannot go up one cent due to the construction of hyperscale data centers. That was very important and it's going to protect a lot of people's money in South Dakota from being lost due to the construction of hyperscale data centers. The other thing that it did is it looks out for local water resources because hyperscale data centers can take a massive amount of water to cool them. And there's a lot of concerns around the country and here in South Dakota about protecting our water resources. And so we put a protection in there to say that a data center would need to go to the local water provider and make sure that there's enough water resources for the people who are already living there first. And if that's not the case, if they can't serve that data center because of the amount of water usage, then that data center can't be constructed in that community. And then finally it looked out for local control so that local citizens in towns and counties that they have the final say and that the state cannot come in and override their decisions that they're making at the local level. Those are really important protections for South Dakotans. And again, something that we led on, while others in this race, you know, they just weren't there on that fight, but we were looking out for the people of South Dakota. And then finally, the last thing that we did this legislative session was when there were bills to give big massive tax breaks to these data centers, we opposed those bills and we killed those bills in the House of Representatives. There are also bills in the Senate that got killed over there. I just don't think that Mark Zuckerberg needs tax breaks from the citizens of South Dakota. These are some of the world's richest tech companies, and if they want to come into South Dakota, they're welcome to do so, but we should just treat them fairly, just like every other small business in South Dakota that's paying their fair share of the taxes. There's no reason that massive tech companies shouldn't also have to pay their fair share. So when those bills came in, we killed those bills. And so at the end of the day, if they want to come into South Dakota, they're going to be treated just like anybody else, any other South Dakota small business, and, in addition to that, we're going to look out for the people of South Dakota first to make sure that your water resources are protected, that your electricity bills aren't going up, and that locals have the final say.

O'BRIEN: Do you see then, future conversations around further restrictions or kind of adapting those

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restrictions to how data centers are coming into the state?

HANSEN: Well, you never know in terms of, you know, protections that South Dakotans might need. I mean, we'll see what develops, you know, this, this industry is ever changing, and I remember, I think we all do, the photos of the first computers that took up the size of pretty big rooms. And now you have more powerful computers in your pocket with your cellphone. And so I anticipate that this hyperscale AI industry is going to be rapidly changing as well. We just don't know what that's going to look like in the future. I know that SpaceX is in talks to put hyperscale data centers in outer space and put them up there. So we don't know exactly what that's going to look like, and so it would be premature to talk about any, I think future legislation at this point, but I will say when it comes to looking out for the people of this state, we've been in the driver's seat on that, we've been leading on that, and we're going to continue to make sure that we're putting South Dakotans first, again, and not massive, big money, out of state lobbyists, and it's been a real focus of mine. It's going to continue to be a focus of mine as governor.

O'BRIEN: The western part of the state saw significantly less snow this year, and multiple wildfires burned through thousands of acres in western counties. How do you as governor see approaching positive changes when it comes to environmental change and climate change, environmental disaster? How do you see making those changes?

HANSEN: Well, first of all, I don't subscribe to the notion of man-made climate change, and so, I'm not concerned about carbon in the atmosphere. You know, that came up in a big way over on the east side of the state when we dealt with the carbon sequestration pipeline that was part of the Green New Deal scam. And they wanted to come in and take people's land using condemnation proceedings, eminent domain, and lay a carbon sequestration pipeline across the ground. And if it burst, it would create such a plume of carbon, it displaces all the oxygen and it literally could kill anybody around that area where the pipeline bursts. And they were going to put that right up against people's property, close to people's houses and so we fought back against that in a big way and we ended up passing a law to make sure that private property rights are protected in South Dakota. We ended eminent domain abuse by Green New Deal scam carbon pipeline companies. Carbon is plant food, and so, I don't think it's necessary to be sequestering it up in North Dakota, for example. But, on the, you know, west side of the state, you know, we do need to make sure that we're looking out for our beautiful Black Hills. And so, you know, we should be working along with the federal government on forest management to make sure that we're employing the best practices out in the Black Hills, to help prevent wildfires or help prevent the spread of wildfires. I think that's really important. Every time that I go out west, I'm just struck by the beauty of the Black Hills. I absolutely love it. And it's such a gift from God and a treasure to the people of this state. And so we do need to be making sure that we're engaging in really good forest management practices and not only at the state level, but that we're also making sure the federal government is doing the same thing. And depending on who's in the administration, boy, we've had some real problems with that in the past. But I will always be a strong advocate for looking out for the beautiful creation that God has blessed us with in this state and in a particular way out west with our Black Hills. I think it's absolutely just incredible what we've got. And we need to make sure that we're good stewards of that and we keep it that way. And so whether it's out there, whether it's on the east side of the state, you know, where, you know, I live in Dell Rapids, and so we've got the Big Sioux River flowing through Dell Rapids. And it's not in the best of shape. I mean, it's not looking very good. And so we've supported bills in the past to do voluntary buffer strips along the river. If landowners choose to engage in that sort of practice, the state is ready to partner with them to try to clean up our rivers, to try to clean up our streams, and so we're looking out for our natural beauty in South Dakota. I think it's important, and I think, you know, we have an obligation as citizens of the state to leave South Dakota in an even better place than how it was given to us. And I want to answer that call, to do just that. and so we're gonna focus on all sorts of policies from east side to west side, but at the end of the day, we want to leave South Dakota even more beautiful than we're blessed to receive it.

O'BRIEN: Where do you think that the state's relationship stands with tribal nations in the state, and



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how would you plan to continue or develop that relationship as governor?

HANSEN: Well, it's been hurting over the last number of years, I would say. And you know, where there were a lot of tensions between the governor's office and our tribal nations here in South Dakota. And I hate to see that. And we really need to get back to a point where we just come into these conversations with open hearts and do what we can do to partner together for a better life, both on the reservations and off the reservations, and that's something that I look forward to doing. You know, I don't think that our partners on the tribal lands really want me to come in and, you know, just try to dictate what they should be doing. I know that's not what they want. But I do want to go, just with an open heart and say, OK, well, here are the problems that we can identify from really major crime issues to education issues, to some brokenness in the family institution, and what can we do? How can we partner together, to bring about some healing, to bring about some security, and to bring about better education? And, you know, there's some things happening right now that I think show real strong opportunity. There's some education opportunities that are taking place on some of the reservations that bring me a lot of hope for the future. And so we're just gonna continue to pursue those, but not in the way where I'm ever gonna go in and just try to tell our tribal communities what they should be doing. I don't think that's the right approach. I think we have to come at this from a place of collaboration, a place of openness, and a place where we all recognize the problems and that we just come together to try to build solutions.

O'BRIEN: About half of the existing inmates in the state end up returning to prison within three years of their release. How will you as governor work to redirect those inmates?

HANSEN: Well, we've had some major problems when it comes to recidivism in South Dakota, and you know, a lot of that is rooted in some of our DOC policies and how they've conducted their affairs over in the Department of Corrections, which, of course, falls under the governor's office. And we need some real reforms. You know, I've talked to a lot of prisoners who were in prison and then got out of prison and didn't reoffend. And so I think they're the perfect people to listen to when you try to think about, OK, how do you not reoffend? How do we get recidivism down in South Dakota? And I can just share, I mean, you can wrap this up in any kind of program or whatever that you want, but there's really three key ingredients in all of those conversations that I've had to making sure people stay out of prison once they've been in there. And the three key ingredients are faith, family, and purpose beyond themselves. And I truly believe if you go and foster those three things, you're going to see a recidivism rate rapidly decline in South Dakota. And unfortunately, under the DOC leadership, those three things were really pulled back. The three key ingredients that we need were pulled back. Prison ministry opportunities were pulled back. Prison ministers who used to be able to go into the prison and minister to inmates weren't allowed to go in anymore, services were delayed, family visits were limited. And vocational opportunities like welding programs that were in behind bars, they were completely eliminated too. And I think that's a failure of leadership at the DOC under the governor's office. We really need to make sure that we restore and foster those programs, and so that's what I'm going to continue to do. And then in addition to that, we need to look at the Board of Pardons and Parole, because at the end of the day, if somebody presents a risk that when they get out of prison, they're going to reoffend, they should not be let out into our society. Our number one goal needs to be protecting the citizens of South Dakota, and it's a massive injustice if somebody is let out on parole, and they go reoffend and they harm you or your neighbor or your friend or your family member, I do not want that for South Dakota and I will not let that happen. And so we're gonna get tougher to make sure that if you're not ready to be out of prison, you're not getting let out of prison. And then if you are on parole, because we've determined that you're a low risk of reoffending, the DOC needs better supervision of our parolees. And so we're going to focus on that as well and get them the resources that they need to make sure that these individuals are properly supervised who are out on parole. So it runs the gamut from programs that we need to do in the bars to what we need to do when people are on parole. We've got the right answers for this. We just need the good, the right leadership to implement those programs, and that's what I'm gonna do as governor.

O'BRIEN: And then when you look back at past governors, some have had very defining impacts on

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South Dakota, kind of among other accomplishments, Peter Norbeck founded Custer State Park. George Mickelson had his year of reconciliation, to strengthen that relationship between Native Americans and the state. And Bill Janklow used prison inmates to wire the state's K-12 and university buildings for internet access. What's your big specific idea for the future of South Dakota?

HANSEN: Well, you know, I think South Dakota needs a governor who is going to put the people and families first again, and foster goodness and what makes South Dakota really special. I mean, we are conservative Republicans. I'm a conservative Republican. And so I want to conserve those things that make South Dakota great, and for me that's faith and that's family and that's freedom, and that will always be my focus. I want to make sure that South Dakota stays a great place to raise a family, the best place in the country to raise a family, where it's safe, where we have great education for our kids. Because at the end of the day, I mean, my focus is that what I think is most important to all of us in our lives. You know, obviously, career, jobs are very important. We're gonna, we're gonna foster a strong economy through the free market, through low taxes and low regulation. We also can't lose sight of the fact that even beyond that, what's more meaningful is our relationships with our neighbors and our friends and our family. And so, I want to foster strong, loving, warm communities in South Dakota where families are safe, where they're getting a great education, and where, at the end of the day, there's opportunities for our kids to stay in South Dakota and build a family of their own. That's what I want for South Dakota. And so that's what I'm going to continue to focus on. We're going to focus on the three things that, you know, we strongly are passionate about: faith and family and freedom. And if we do that in South Dakota, more than any other program that we can do, if we foster those three things, South Dakota is going to be such a great place and an even better place than it is today. And so that's really what I want to bring, that kind of leadership to the governor's office.

O'BRIEN: OK. As the final question, is there anything else that you want the voters of South Dakota to know?

HANSEN: No, I think that's great.

O'BRIEN: Hansen is one of four Republican candidates running for governor. The Republican primary election is June 2nd, and early voting is underway. The winner of the Republican primary will advance to the November general election to face Democratic candidate Dan Ahlers.

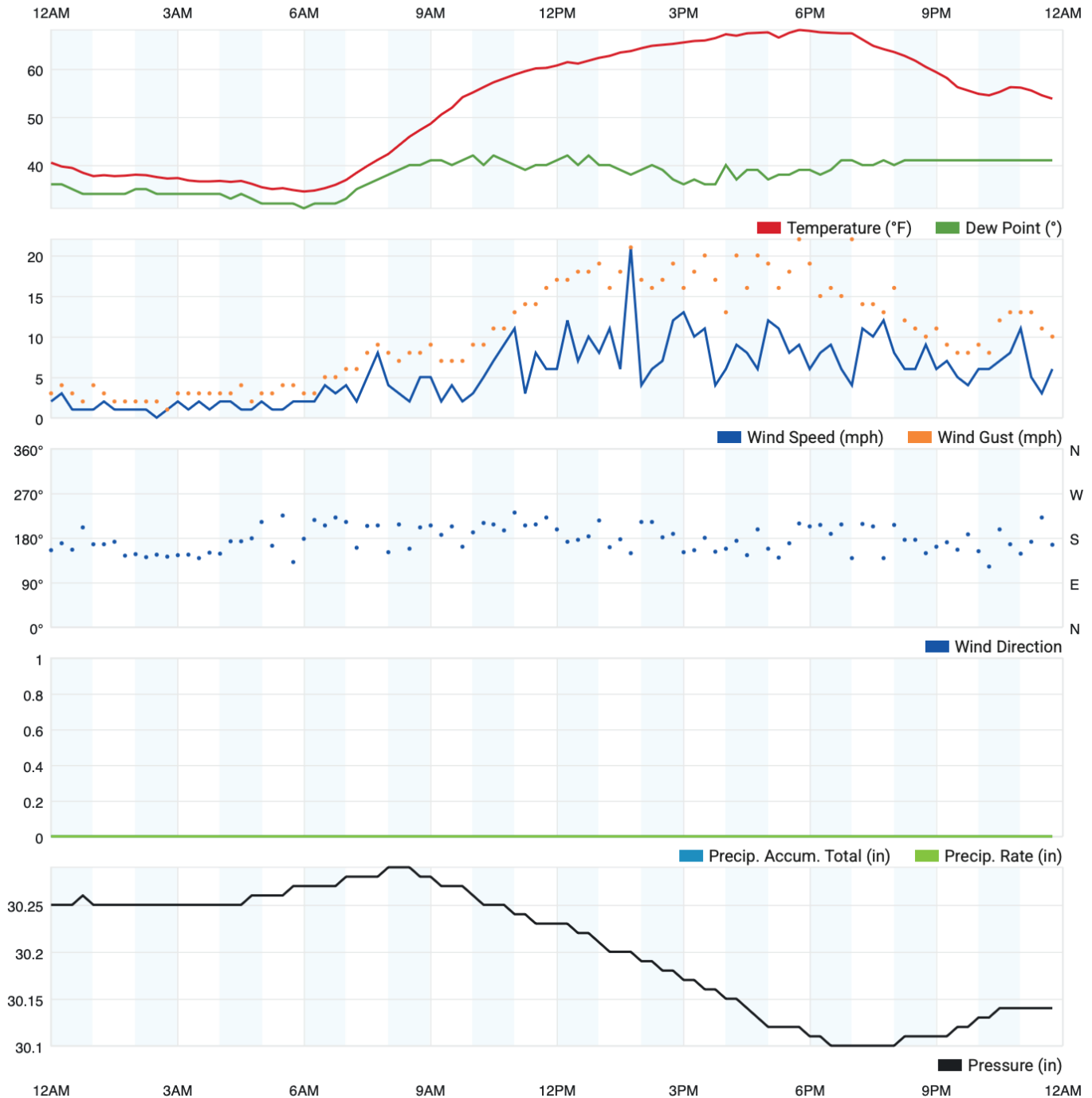
That's all we have for this episode of Searchlight Report. Audio for this episode of the podcast came from recordings by South Dakota Searchlight. The podcast is based on reporting by South Dakota Searchlight's staff — editor Seth Tupper, senior reporter John Hult and reporters Joshua Haiar, Mackenzie Huber and me. I write the scripts and produce the audio, with editing by Seth Tupper. South Dakota Searchlight is part of States Newsroom, the nation's largest nonprofit news organization. Until next time, I'm South Dakota Searchlight's Meghan O'Brien with the Searchlight Report.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

May 20, 2026





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Today



**High: 69 °F**

Slight Chance  
Showers then  
Partly Sunny

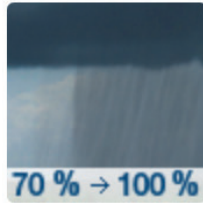
Tonight



**Low: 43 °F**

Increasing  
Clouds

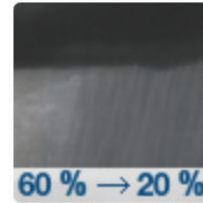
Friday



**High: 57 °F**

Showers  
Likely then  
Showers

Friday Night



**Low: 39 °F**

Showers  
Likely then  
Slight Chance  
Showers

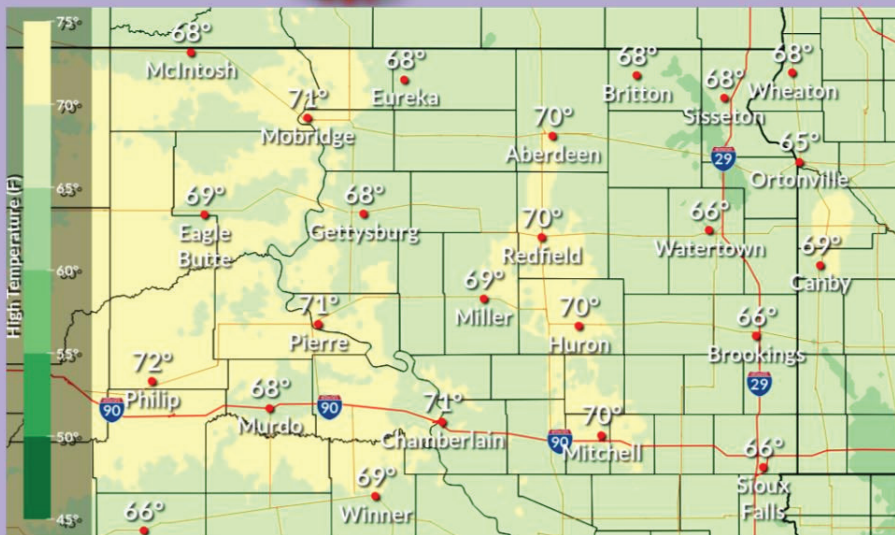
Saturday



**High: 69 °F**

Partly Sunny

**Today**  **66 to 71°** Isolated light spotty showers (20% chance) early this morning



**Tonight**



**42 to 46°**

70% chance of  
showers and  
isolated  
thunderstorms  
west of the  
Missouri River

**Friday**



**50s**

Rain,  
continuing into  
Friday evening

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

[weather.gov/aberndeen](http://weather.gov/aberndeen)



Today will be partly to mostly cloudy with temperatures rising into the mid 60s to low 70s. There is a 20% chance of light spotty showers early this morning. For tonight, temperatures will fall into the 40s, with a 70% chance of showers and isolated thunderstorms west of the Missouri River. These rain showers will expand across northeastern South Dakota and western Minnesota on Friday as temperatures top out in the 50s.

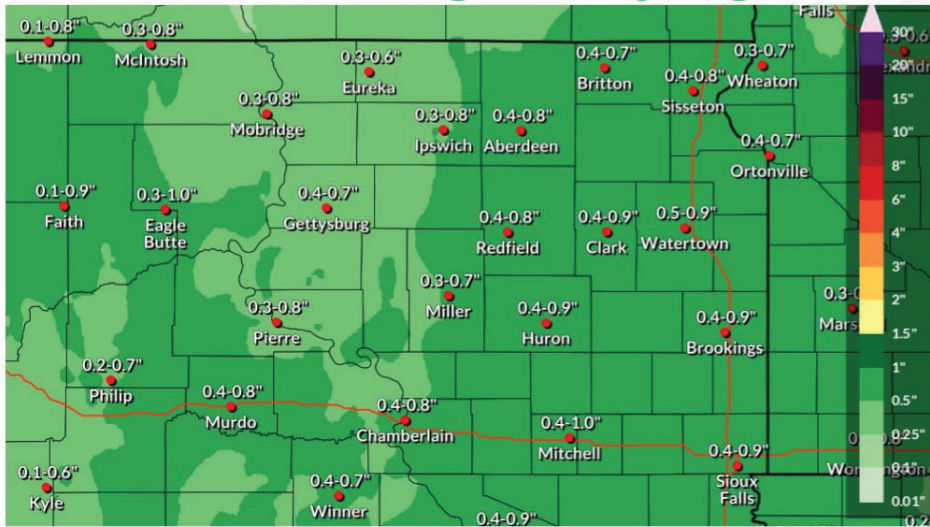
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## Rain Showers Friday



### Rainfall through Friday Night



- Rain Showers start over central South Dakota tonight
- Rain expanding over northeastern South Dakota and western Minnesota Friday
- Rain ending Friday night

**Total Rainfall expected  
0.3 to 0.9"**

[weather.gov/aberndeen](http://weather.gov/aberndeen)

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

Wet weather will bring 0.3 to 0.9 inches of rain to central to northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota tonight through Friday night. Rain showers will start west of the Missouri River tonight, and expand northeast Friday, before coming to an end Friday night.



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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 68 °F at 5:43 PM**

**Low Temp: 34 °F at 6:06 AM**

**Wind: 22 mph at 1:17 PM**

**Precip: : 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 94 in 1925

Record Low: 25 in 1895

Average High: 72

Average Low: 47

Average Precip in May.: 2.31

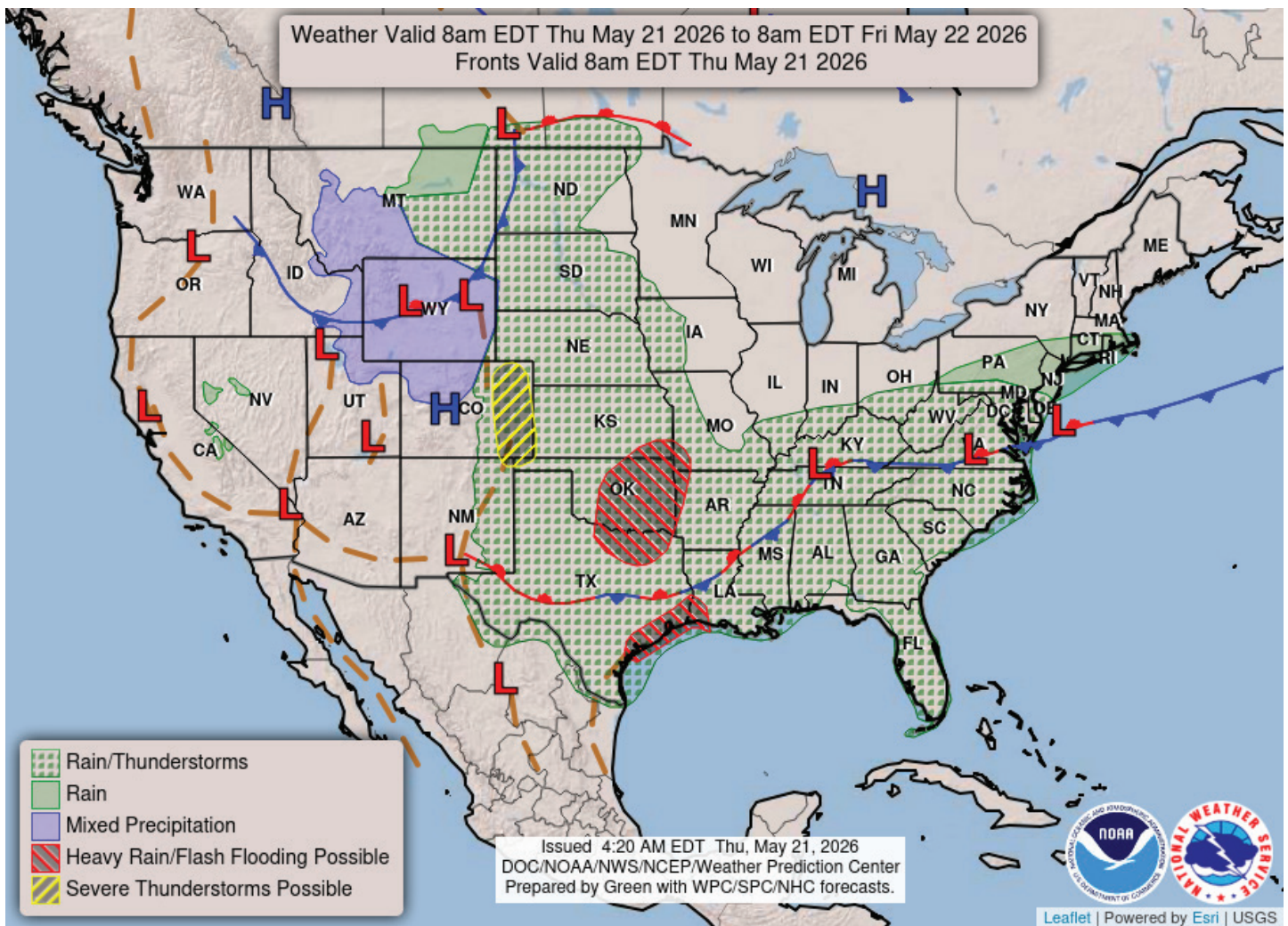
Precip to date in May.: 0.72

Average Precip to date: 6.28

Precip Year to Date: 3.84

Sunset Tonight: 9:02 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 5:54 am





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## Today in Weather History

May 21st, 1977: Observers south of Clear Lake saw five tornadoes. One was five miles south of town, moving northeast. Another was four miles south and one mile west of Clear Lake. Both destroyed trees and some small buildings. Three other tornadoes were sighted about two miles south of town. These touched down only momentarily, with no damage occurring.

Two tornadoes were seen in southern Codington County. One was seen at Grover, and the other was five miles south of Watertown. No damage was reported.

A tornado was on the ground near Revillo. A few barns and some outbuildings were damaged.

May 21st, 1992: A severe thunderstorm moved over Northwestern Edmunds County, causing high winds and penny-sized hail. In Bowdle, there was considerable wind damage. Tree limbs more than five inches in diameter were broken off and fell on a car. Other tree branches went through the roof of a home. Two pickup trucks were rolled on their sides. Three miles ENE of Bowdle, a garage was moved 20 feet off its foundation and stopped by a large tractor.

1860 — A swarm of tornadoes occurred in the Ohio Valley. Tornadoes struck the cities of Louisville, KY, Cincinnati, OH, Chillicothe, OH, and Marietta, OH, causing a million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1895 — The temperature at Norwalk, OH, dipped to 19 degrees to set a state record for the month of May. (The Weather Channel)

1896 — The mercury soared to 124 degrees at Salton, CA, to establish a U.S. record for May. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1980 — The temperature at Williston ND reached 102 degrees to set a record for May, and the next day the mercury hit 106 degrees. (The Weather Channel)

1987 — Severe thunderstorms, developing along a sharp cold front crossing the central U.S., produced 60 mph winds and golf ball size hail at Sedalia, MO, and drenched Hagerstown, IN, with six inches of rain in one hour. Temperatures soared into the 90s ahead of the cold front. Paducah, KY, hit 94 degrees for the second day in a row. Light snow blanketed Montana, with three inches reported at Butte. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Severe thunderstorms swept across southern Louisiana during the morning hours spawning six tornadoes, and producing wind gusts to 88 mph at Jennings. Thunderstorms also produced five inches of rain in two hours at Lake Charles, causing local flooding. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Thunderstorms moving southeastward across the Central Plains Region into Oklahoma and Arkansas produced severe weather through the day and night. Thunderstorms spawned just four tornadoes, but there were 243 reports of large hail and damaging winds. Baseball size hail was reported at Augusta, KS, and thunderstorm winds gusted to 98 mph at Johnson, KS. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 — Thunderstorms produced severe weather across the southeastern U.S. for the second day in a row. Severe thunderstorms spawned five tornadoes, including one which injured a person at Richmond KY. There were eighty-seven reports of large hail or damaging winds, with hail three inches in diameter reported at Austin TX. Thunderstorms produced up to five inches of rain in Macon County GA, and heavy rains left nearly eight feet of water over roads near Stepstone KY. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



## The Importance of Prayer Partners

**The Lord doesn't expect us to fight our battles alone—  
be willing to accept or give help when needed.**

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12: 9 Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor.

10 For if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up.

11 Furthermore, if two lie down together they keep warm, but how can one be warm alone?

12 And if one can overpower him who is alone, two can resist him. A cord of three strands is not quickly torn apart.

Try holding your arms up in the air for as long as you can. No matter how strong you are, you'll eventually find it impossible to keep them raised.

In Exodus 17:8-16, Moses was faithfully praying on a hill while his soldiers were below, fighting the Amalekites. As long as his arms were raised, the Israelites prevailed. But he couldn't maintain this posture on his own for very long. He needed Aaron and Hur to hold up his hands.

The Lord never expected Moses to do the job by himself. Nor does He expect such a thing of us—that isn't how He operates. God has built His church in such a way that the world will recognize Christians by their love toward one another (John 13:35). We are ultimately dependent on God, but as believers, we're likewise interdependent upon each other. Everybody needs an Aaron and a Hur—people who can hold us and help us in our intercessions before the Lord.

Ask God to bring people into your life who can faithfully and lovingly lift you up in prayer without judging you or expecting anything in return. And ask the Lord to open your eyes to those around you who need an Aaron and a Hur in their life.

*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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## The Groton Independent

Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MILLIONAIRE FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
05.20.26

14 23 27 44 50 4

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$1,000,000/year**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 37 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:  
05.19.26

10 26 34 56 64 6

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$296,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 22 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
05.20.26

5 14 26 39 46 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$27,340,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 37 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
05.20.26

5 9 15 20 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$99,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 52 Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
05.20.26

12 27 37 40 66 17

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

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 21 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
05.20.26

10 28 30 46 57 25

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$131,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 21 Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### **Documents show Queen Elizabeth was eager for ex-Prince Andrew to become trade envoy**

LONDON (AP) — Documents show Queen Elizabeth II was “very keen” that the former Prince Andrew be given the job of UK trade envoy.

The U.K. government on Thursday released the confidential papers related to Andrew’s appointment, just months after lawmakers accused the king’s brother of putting his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein ahead of the nation.

“The Queen is very keen that the Duke of York should take on a prominent role in the promotion of national interests,” the head of Britain’s trade body wrote in a letter.

Another document, a government memo sent to U.K. trade staff around the world, says that “HRH’s high public profile” will require “careful and sometimes strict media management,” in a reference to Andrew.

The involvement of the late queen will confirm previously held beliefs that the monarch held a soft spot for her son — an empathy that might have influenced her lack of decisiveness in dealing with allegations of Andrew’s connection to Epstein.

Trade Minister Chris Bryant said in a written statement to lawmakers that “we have found no evidence that a formal due diligence or vetting process was undertaken” before Andrew was appointed to the role.

“There is also no evidence that this was considered. This is understandable since this new appointment was a continuation of the royal family’s involvement in trade and investment promotion work following the Duke of Kent’s decision to relinquish his duties as Vice-Chairman of the Overseas Trade Board,” he said.

He said that the government was cooperating with Thames Valley Police on their investigation into Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor and possible misconduct in public office.

Mountbatten-Windsor was stripped of his royal title last year as King Charles III tried to insulate the monarchy from the growing fallout from the Epstein scandal. The former prince served as a special envoy for international trade from 2001 to 2011, when he was forced to give up the role because of concerns about his links to questionable figures in Libya and Azerbaijan.

The move followed the U.S. Justice Department’s release of millions of pages of documents related to Epstein. Those files showed how the wealthy financier used an international web of rich, powerful friends to gain influence and sexually exploit young women and girls.

Nowhere has the fallout from the document release been felt more strongly than in the U.K., where the scandal has raised questions about the way power is wielded by the aristocracy, senior politicians and influential business owners, known collectively as “the Establishment.”

### **Ukraine says its drones hit another refinery deep inside Russia as long-range strikes escalate**

By SUSIE BLANN and BARRY HATTON Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukrainian drones smashed into another Russian refinery overnight, starting a fire that produced huge clouds of black smoke, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday, in what appeared to be the latest long-range attack on Moscow’s vital oil industry.

The drones targeted the Syzran oil refinery, located more than 800 kilometers (500 miles) inside Russia, Zelenskyy said on social media, where he posted a video of the aftermath.

It was not possible to verify the video or independently confirm the attack. The governor of Russia’s Samara region, Vyacheslav Fedorishchev, said that two people were killed by Ukrainian drones in Syzran but he didn’t mention the refinery. Russia’s Astra news outlet said that Ukrainian drones struck the Syzran refinery owned by oil and gas giant Rosneft.

Ukraine has expanded its mid- and long-range strike capabilities, deploying eye-catching drone and

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missile technology that it has developed domestically as it battles to defeat Russia's 4-year-old invasion. Ukrainian weaponry and expertise are now sought by other countries, whereas earlier in the war Kyiv had to plead for massive foreign military aid.

Ukrainian drones hit another refinery the previous day, Zelenskyy said, as attacks on Russian oil assets that play a key part in funding the invasion have become almost daily occurrences.

"Overall, our long-range plan for May is being carried out largely in full," Zelenskyy said in a social media post late Wednesday. "The key targets are Russian oil refineries, storage facilities, and other infrastructure tied to these oil revenues."

The escalating attacks have hurt Moscow's revenue at the same time as it feels the economic pinch of international sanctions. With some attacks reaching more than 1,500 kilometers (900 miles) into Russian soil, the strikes have contributed to some Russians feeling unsafe due to the war and heaped pressure on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Ukraine's new reach has also helped it push Russian troops back along parts of the front line, with Ukrainian forces making their most significant battlefield gains since 2024, according to the Institute for the Study of War.

"Ukraine's intensified midrange strike campaign against Russian logistics, military equipment, and manpower since early 2026 has also degraded Russian forces' ability to conduct offensive operations across the theater and has also likely supported recent Ukrainian advances," the Washington-based think tank said in an assessment late Wednesday.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that air defenses downed 121 Ukrainian drones between late Wednesday and early Thursday.

In the Belgorod region that borders Ukraine, eight people were injured by Ukrainian drones, according to the regional governor, Alexander Shuvayev.

Russia has also invested heavily in drones, using them to bombard civilian areas of Ukraine throughout the war and killing more than 15,000 civilians, according to the United Nations.

Ukraine's air force said Thursday it shot down 109 out of 116 drones that Russia launched overnight.

One civilian was killed and at least six others were wounded in the strikes in the north, south and east of the country, emergency services said.

## **UK government to release papers related to former Prince Andrew's appointment as trade envoy**

LONDON (AP) — The U.K. government is set on Thursday to release confidential papers related to the former Prince Andrew's appointment as trade envoy, just months after lawmakers accused the king's brother of putting his friendship with Jeffrey Epstein ahead of the nation.

Lawmakers approved a motion in February demanding publication of the documents after the one-time prince, now known simply as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, was arrested on charges related to allegations that he shared government reports with Epstein while he was trade envoy.

The move followed the U.S. Justice Department's release of millions of pages of documents related to Epstein. Those files showed how the wealthy financier used an international web of rich, powerful friends to gain influence and sexually exploit young women and girls.

Nowhere has the fallout from the document release been felt more strongly than in the U.K., where the scandal has raised questions about the way power is wielded by the aristocracy, senior politicians and influential businessmen, known collectively as "the Establishment."

During the parliamentary debate on Mountbatten-Windsor's links to Epstein, government ministers and other lawmakers demanded more accountability from the royal family.

Trade Minister Chris Bryant said Mountbatten-Windsor was engaged in a constant "self-enriching hustle" during his time as a working member of the royal family.

Mountbatten-Windsor was a "rude, arrogant and entitled man who could not distinguish between the public interest, which he said he served, and his own private interest," Bryant said at the time.



Mountbatten-Windsor was stripped of his royal title last year as King Charles III tried to insulate the monarchy from the growing fallout from the Epstein scandal. The former prince served as a special envoy for international trade from 2001 to 2011, when he was forced to give up the role because of concerns about his links to questionable figures in Libya and Azerbaijan.

## **This hard-line Iranian general is a major player in talks with US over war**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — As negotiations with the United States hang in the balance, a hard-line Iranian general linked to notorious attacks at home and abroad over the past decades is believed to have seized a place near the center of power.

Brig. Gen. Ahmad Vahidi, who heads Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, has become a major player in formulating Iran's tough stance in negotiating a possible end to the war with the United States, experts say. He is believed to be part of a small clique in direct contact with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, who remains in hiding after being reportedly wounded in the Feb. 28 Israeli strikes that killed his father, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Like everything in Iran since the war began, who ultimately controls decision-making remains uncertain. As people within the upper ranks of Iran's theocracy vie for power, they can gain or lose favor quickly. Vahidi himself hasn't been seen publicly since Feb. 8, weeks before the war began. On Thursday, Iranian media carried contradictory reports on Vahidi meeting with Pakistan's interior minister in Tehran, who carried a message regarding negotiations with the U.S. and met with other top Iranian officials.

A longtime veteran of the ruling system, Vahidi helped shape Iran's support of militant groups across the region, is accused of a role in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish center in Argentina, and in 2022, led domestic security forces in a bloody crackdown on protesters.

Elevated to Guard commander this year after his predecessor was killed early in the war, he leads the most powerful force in Iran, with its arsenal of ballistic missiles and its fleet of small boats threatening Persian Gulf shipping.

"Vahidi and members of his inner circle have likely consolidated control over not only Iran's military response in the conflict but also Iran's negotiations policy," the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War said.

Iran's war strategy has been to keep a stranglehold on the Strait of Hormuz, blocking oil and gas exports and causing a global energy crisis. At the same time, it has struck hard against oil facilities, hotels and infrastructure in Gulf Arab nations.

In negotiations, it has held out against U.S. demands that it surrender its stockpile of highly enriched uranium, betting that it can outlast the U.S. in the ongoing standoff and that President Donald Trump will be reluctant to resume outright war that could bring greater damage to America's Gulf allies.

That likely reflects Vahidi's confrontational style. "He comes from that mindset of unending revolution, unending resistance," said Kenneth Katzman, a senior fellow at the The Soufan Group, a New York-based think tank. Vahidi believes "the U.S. needs to be challenged at every turn," said Katzman, a senior Iran expert who advised the U.S. Congress for over 30 years.

Vahidi boasted in January that Iran's defense power has developed to make it a "high risk for any military action by an enemy."

Vahidi now a focal point in talks

Pakistan hosted talks in April between an Iranian delegation, led by parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf and an American one, headed by U.S. Vice President JD Vance. But it ended without any deal.

Qalibaf and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi returned home to face criticism from inside the theocracy suggesting they were too willing to make concessions. Qalibaf had to insist publicly that the talks had the support of the supreme leader.

Since then, Vahidi has become the main point of contact for those negotiating with Iran, said a regional

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official with direct knowledge of the mediation. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive diplomacy.

The extreme seclusion and unknown condition of the supreme leader have fueled speculation about jockeying among leaders for access to Khamenei and influence over him. In early May, President Masoud Pezeshkian, who many see as sidelined from influence by the Guard, went out of his way to say he “got to see our dear leader” and spoke to him for around two hours.

But Holly Dagres, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said it’s likely the new supreme leader “is in lockstep with a more hard-line (Guard) — similar to his father, but in a more emboldened and uncompromising form.”

Analyst Kamran Bokhari wrote that figures like Vahidi “are not just managing war — they are actively reshaping succession, consolidating authority around a weakened supreme leader, and effectively ‘capturing’ the state through crisis governance.”

Vahidi forged by years leading Quds Force

Born Ahmad Shahcheraghi in Iran’s southern city of Shiraz in 1958, Vahidi like many young men after the 1979 revolution joined the Revolutionary Guard and fought against the invasion by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein that sparked a bloody, eight-year war.

Vahidi entered the Guard’s nascent intelligence arm and soon was overseeing operations outside Iran. He gained the favor of powerful patrons, including Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a later president. Rafsanjani said in his autobiography that Vahidi was involved in the 1980s Iran-Contra scandal, in which the Reagan administration sold weapons to Tehran in an effort to free hostages held by Iranian-backed militants in Lebanon. The U.S. later used the money from those sales to fund Contra rebels in Nicaragua.

Rafsanjani later intervened to protect Vahidi when then-Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini sought to prosecute members of the Guard who failed to stop an incursion by armed fighters from an Iranian exile group in the late 1980s during the war.

Around this time, Vahidi took over the newly formed Quds, or Jerusalem, Force. Over decades, the Quds Force helped create a network of proxy militant groups and allied governments around the Middle East. The Quds Force under Vahidi helped mastermind the 1994 bombing targeting Argentina’s largest Jewish community center, killing 85 people and wounding 300 others, prosecutors say. Iran has denied involvement.

American investigators also believe that under Vahidi, Iran organized the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 U.S. service members and wounding hundreds. Tehran has denied being involved in that attack as well.

Vahidi left the Quds Force in 1998. In 2010, while he was defense minister, the United States imposed sanctions on him over alleged involvement in Iran’s nuclear program and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

More recently, as interior minister, Vahidi oversaw police units involved in a bloody, monthslong crackdown on protests over the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini, who died in police custody after being arrested for not properly wearing the mandated headscarf to the liking of authorities.

An Iranian newspaper later published a classified document that showed Vahidi’s Interior Ministry ordered security agencies to monitor and photograph women not wearing the hijab, something he had denied was taking place.

At around that time, Vahidi said in public comments that calls to remove the hijab were a “colonial plan” by Iran’s enemies trying to undermine the Islamic Republic. “The hijab has been a big barrier against the progress of effete Western culture,” he said.

Vahidi’s role makes reaching an accord with Iran that much more difficult for the U.S. — as does the continued obscurity over Iran’s leadership.

Trump wants a single interlocutor in Iran for negotiations, but “the whole system has changed,” said Hamidreza Azizi, an Iran expert at the Middle East Institute.

“It is not a one-man show. Vahidi is one alongside others,” Azizi said. “Some we know and some we don’t know.”

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## World shares are mixed, Kospi gains 8.4%, as tech-led rally fades

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

Shares opened lower in Europe on Thursday after a mixed session in Asia, where a rebound in oil prices eclipsed another broad rally on Wall Street.

South Korea's Kospi soared 8.4% to 7,815.59, helped by strong buying of technology shares such as Samsung Electronics, which gained 8.5% after its labor union and management reached an agreement late Wednesday that averted a potentially costly strike. Shares in SK Hynix, a computer chipmaker partnering with Nvidia, surged 11.2%.

The advance was partly powered by a stronger-than-expected quarterly report from chipmaker Nvidia, whose profit rocketed more than 200% higher in the February-April quarter from a year earlier, while revenue jumped 85%.

Nvidia has been one of the biggest beneficiaries from the boom in artificial intelligence, thanks to powerful demand for its high-end AI chips. Its shares rose 1.3% on Wednesday before its earnings report was released, but they fell 1.3% in afterhours trading after the announcement.

The Kospi has been breaching records, recently exceeding 8,000 for the first time.

U.S. futures slipped, with the contract for the S&P 500 down 0.3%, while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 0.2%.

In early European trading, Germany's DAX gave up 0.3% to 24,669.59, while the CAC 40 in Paris lost 0.2% to 8,102.25. Britain's FTSE 100 shed 0.4% to 10,393.56.

In other Asian trading, Tokyo's Nikkei 225 jumped 3.1% to 61,684.14 after the government reported that Japan's exports rose nearly 15% in April from a year earlier, despite shocks from the Iran war.

Technology-related shares were among the biggest winners, with Tokyo Electron gaining 5.9% and Advantest up 4.4%.

Taiwan's Taiex, also heavily weighted toward technology shares, gained 3.9% as major chipmaker TSMC's stock gained 3%.

Chinese markets declined, with Hong Kong's Hang Seng losing 1.2% to 25,352.82. The Shanghai Composite index dropped 2% to 4,077.28.

Indonesia's share benchmark dropped 3.3% as the market absorbed the impact of a government decision to put strategic natural resource exports such as coal under state control.

Australia's S&P/ASX 200 picked up 1.5% to 8,621.70.

Oil prices pushed higher early Thursday, a day after Brent crude had dropped 5%. Brent, the international standard, gained \$1.46 to \$106.48 per barrel, while U.S. benchmark crude added \$1.53 to \$99.79 per barrel.

Brent remains well above its roughly \$70 level from before the war with Iran. Prices have been yo-yoing on rising and falling hopes that the United States and Iran can reach an agreement to allow oil deliveries to fully resume from the Persian Gulf to customers worldwide.

On Wednesday, U.S. stocks bounced back, with the S&P 500 gaining 1.1% for its first rise in four days. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 1.3% and the Nasdaq composite rallied 1.5%.

Stocks got a lift from easing yields in the bond market, as the yield on the 10-year Treasury fell to 4.57% from 4.67% late Tuesday. That's a significant move for a market that measures things in hundredths of a percentage point.

The 10-year Treasury yield had been rising from less than 4% before the war with Iran began, along with other government bond yields around the world, because of worries that the fighting will keep oil prices high, among other factors.

High yields slow economies and weigh on prices for stocks, cryptocurrencies and all kinds of other investments. Besides driving up rates for mortgages, they could also curtail companies' borrowing to build the artificial-intelligence data centers that have been supporting the U.S. economy's growth recently.

With the easing of yields, technology stocks helped lead Wall Street higher. Advanced Micro Devices jumped 8.1%, while Intel gained 7.4%.



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Smaller companies can feel even bigger relief from lower yields than their bigger rivals because many need to borrow to grow. The Russell 2000 index of the smallest U.S. stocks jumped 2.6%, more than double the gain of the S&P 500, which measures the biggest U.S. stocks.

Most big U.S. companies have reported better profits for the start of 2026 than analysts expected, which has helped stocks run to records. Stock prices tend to follow the path of corporate profits over the long term.

In other dealings early Thursday, the U.S. dollar rose to 159.05 Japanese yen from 158.92 yen. The euro slipped to \$1.1601 from \$1.1624.

## **US military boards Iranian-flagged oil tanker suspected of trying to breach blockade**

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military said Wednesday that it boarded an Iranian-flagged oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman that was suspected of trying to violate the American blockade, the latest action by the Trump administration to try to push Tehran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

But President Donald Trump is facing his own pressure at home for shipping to resume through the vital corridor off Iran's coast. Fellow Republicans in Congress are battling political headwinds ahead of November's midterm elections as gasoline prices skyrocket and global energy markets churn.

Meanwhile, the Senate on Tuesday advanced legislation seeking to force Trump to withdraw from the Iran war, with a growing number of Republicans defying the president in the 50-47 vote.

U.S. Central Command said on social media that the M/T Celestial Sea was searched and redirected after being suspected of trying to head to an Iranian port. It's at least the fifth commercial vessel to be boarded since the Trump administration imposed the blockade on Iranian shipping in mid-April, several days into a ceasefire, to pressure Tehran into opening the strait and accepting a deal to end the war.

The military boarded the tanker after Trump said Monday he had called off renewed military strikes on Iran in an effort to make progress in negotiations to end the war. Trump said he had planned "a very major attack" for Tuesday but put it off, saying America's allies in the Gulf asked him to wait for two to three days because they feel they are close to a deal.

Trump has repeatedly set deadlines for Tehran and then backed off.

Before the U.S. blockade, Tehran had allowed some ships perceived as friendly to pass while charging considerable fees, leading to accusations it is holding the global economy hostage.

The U.S. military recently said that 1,550 vessels, from 87 countries, are currently stranded in the Persian Gulf.

Nearly three months since the war began with U.S. and Israeli airstrikes on Feb. 28, Iran maintains a chokehold on the strait, while the U.S. military has enforced its blockade on Iran's ports as well as Iranian-linked ships that are far away from the Middle East.

Last month, U.S. forces boarded an oil tanker previously sanctioned for smuggling Iranian crude oil in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean. A couple days later, the U.S. seized another tanker associated with smuggling Iranian oil in the Indian Ocean between Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

In early May, Trump said the U.S. military would begin to "guide" stranded ships from the Iran-gripped strait. The next day, he announced that the effort to protect ships was paused to see if an agreement could be reached.

Days later, U.S. forces fired on and disabled two Iranian oil tankers after exchanging fire with Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S. military said the tankers were trying to breach the blockade. The day before, the military said it thwarted Iranian attacks on three Navy ships and struck Iranian military facilities in response.

## Europe faces stray Ukrainian drones as Kyiv targets Russian oil exports

By EMMA BURROWS AP European Security Correspondent

Over the past months, Ukrainian drones have crashed into the chimney of a power plant in Estonia, hit empty fuel tanks in Latvia and been shot down by Romanian fighter jets stationed in Lithuania.

For the first time in a NATO and European Union capital, Lithuanians were pictured sheltering in underground car parks in Vilnius on Wednesday, as authorities warned of unidentified drone activity in neighboring Belarus.

No one has died or been injured recently, but the increasing airspace incursions have prompted some Baltic ministers to chastise Ukraine for the violations, which also led to the collapse of the Latvian government in May.

As U.S. President Donald Trump's war in Iran has driven up the price of oil, a key revenue stream for the Kremlin, Ukraine has ramped up attacks on Baltic Sea ports used for Russian energy exports in an attempt to hit Moscow's war chest.

As Ukraine's drones have snaked up north, they have skirted the borders of NATO members Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Finland. Some of them were not detected before they crash landed in some of the Baltic states.

Ukrainian officials apologized and said the drones were aimed at military targets inside Russia but were sent off course by Russian electronic interference.

The string of airspace violations has prompted questions about the state of air defenses on NATO's eastern flank.

Here's a look at the situation:

Ukraine is targeting Russian ports on the Baltic Sea

Ukraine has ramped up its attacks against Russia, focusing on arms factories, ports on the Baltic Sea and energy facilities as the war in Iran has boosted the oil price.

It has particularly targeted the ports of Ust-Luga and Primorsk, close to the borders of Estonia and Finland. Russia uses the ports to load up ships taking its oil exports through the Baltic Sea.

During one attack in May, which set part of the port of Primorsk on fire, more than 60 Ukrainian drones were shot down, Leningrad region governor Alexander Drozdenko said.

After stray Ukrainian drones entered Latvian airspace on May 7, the country's Defense Minister Andris Spruds and Prime Minister Evika Silina resigned.

On May 19, a Romanian fighter jet based in Lithuania shot down a Ukrainian drone over southern Estonia. Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur said it was likely aimed at targets in Russia and that he told Ukraine to send its drones "as far from NATO territory as possible."

Russian electronic interference sends drones off course

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Nordic and Baltic nations have increasingly warned about electronic interference from Russia disrupting communications with planes, ships and drones.

In the Baltic region, Russia often uses jamming and spoofing to send drones off course.

Satellite communications systems — known collectively as the Global Navigation Satellite System, or GNSS — receive precise time signals from satellites around 20,000 kilometers (12,400 miles) away in space. A smartphone, car, marine or aircraft navigation system compares how long it takes to receive signals from several different satellites to calculate an exact location.

Jamming occurs when a receiver is overwhelmed by a strong radio signal transmitted in the same frequency range as GNSS and other satellite navigation signals, leaving the receiver unable to fix its location or time. Spoofing involves transmitting fake signals that imitate a real GNSS satellite signal, commonly known as GPS, to mislead a phone, ship, or aircraft into thinking it is in a different place.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys said Tuesday that Russia is "deliberately" redirecting Ukrainian drones into Baltic airspace with electronic interference.

Drones have been entering Baltic airspace for many months

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In September 2025, about 20 Russian drones flew into Poland, putting the spotlight on holes in NATO's air defenses, as multimillion-dollar jets were scrambled. Those drones were not detected in advance, Estonia's defense minister said at the time.

Neither was a Ukrainian military drone which crashed with explosives in Lithuania last week, Vilmantas Vitkauskas, chief of Lithuania's National Crisis Management Centre said on Sunday.

While Poland and Romania responded to the drone incursions last year by deploying new anti-drone technology — the first used by the NATO alliance aimed specifically at countering drones — that system is not in place across the entire Baltic region.

Defending against drones requires solving a complex set of technological, financial and bureaucratic problems and "there is no one solution against every type of drone," Colonel Janno Märk of the Estonian Defense Forces said.

There are various types of drones that operate at different speeds and altitudes, requiring a layered air defense response, Märk said during military exercises in southeastern Estonia.

Budrys, the Lithuanian foreign minister, told AP in an interview Saturday that the Baltic countries are likely going to have to continue to counter incursions from Ukrainian drones as Kyiv now has the capability to reach targets "deep in Russia" as well as ports on the Baltic Sea. The way to counter those drones, he said, is actually with Ukraine's help as the most effective anti-drone systems have been developed in the country.

Russia has threatened to retaliate

Writing on X, Budrys accused Moscow of "waging smear campaigns" after Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, the SVR, claimed on Tuesday without providing evidence, that Ukraine is preparing to begin launching drone attacks against Russia from the territory of the Baltic countries.

The SVR claimed Ukrainian military personnel had already deployed to Latvia and warned that the country's NATO membership wouldn't protect it from "just retribution."

Ukrainian foreign ministry spokesman, Heorhii Tykhyi, said Tuesday that none of the Baltic states or Finland have ever allowed Ukraine to use their airspace for strikes against Russia.

Budrys called the SVR claim a "transparent act of desperation" and an attempt to sow chaos and distract from a "simple reality" — that Ukraine is hitting Russia's military machine hard.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte praised on Tuesday the alliance's reaction to the drone incidents, saying that they had been met with "a calm, decisive and proportionate response."

"This is exactly what we planned and prepared for," Rutte said, blaming Russia's war on Ukraine for the incursions.

## **The teens who attacked the Islamic Center of San Diego were latest to cite prior atrocities**

By GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story includes discussion of suicide. If you or someone you know needs help, the national suicide and crisis lifeline in the U.S. is available by calling or texting 988.

In rambling writings full of vitriol against a wide range of people, the teenagers who attacked the Islamic Center of San Diego this week, killing three men and themselves, left little doubt about the models for their violence.

Chief among them: the shooter who killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019.

Researchers who study extremism have long noted the resonance of the Christchurch attack among far-right assailants, attributing it to the extent of the violence, the document the killer posted concerning his views and actions, and — especially — his decision to livestream the massacre. Among those who apparently modeled attacks after Christchurch was a shooter who months later killed 22 people in a Texas



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Walmart.

"Part of what we're seeing in violent extremist communities online is wanting to emulate the attacks that have had the most kills — which is a disgusting thing to say, but it's the reality," said Katherine Keneally, director of threat analysis and prevention at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, an anti-extremism organization. "There is this obsession and it's just sort of gamifying of attacks."

Cain Clark, 17, and Caleb Vazquez, 18, stormed the Islamic Center on Monday before being driven back outside by a security guard who exchanged gunfire with them as he initiated a lockdown, helping to protect 140 children, authorities have said.

The pair killed the guard, Amin Abdullah, and two other men before taking their own lives in a vehicle nearby.

Writings heavy on hate and grievance

They left behind a 74-page document — the same length as the one written by Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant. Like Tarrant's, it cited a range of far-right ideological inspirations, including the notion that white people are being replaced by other populations, and offered self-interviews detailing their motives and goals.

And they called themselves "Sons of Tarrant."

The writings include hateful rhetoric toward Jewish people, Muslims and Islam, as well as the LGBTQ+ community, Black people, women, and the political left and right. They indicated they were trying to accelerate the collapse of society. In his section, Vazquez wrote of having "some mental health issues" and being rejected by women.

Brian Levin, the founding director of the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University in San Bernardino, noted that while white supremacist writings dating to the 1970s offered a narrative blueprint for decentralized terror attacks, neo-Nazis decades ago favored an approach sometimes called the "propaganda of the deed" — the attack on its own was supposed to inspire copycats, even without written explanations.

The internet has made it easier to spread writings by attackers, and since a far-right attacker killed 77 people in Norway in 2011 and released a 1,500-page document, it has become more common for writings to accompany such atrocities, Levin said. Frequently the writings quote from past white-supremacist texts.

"This strategy of being another chapter in a continuing chain of extremism not only telegraphs that the movement is bigger than it is, but also its resilience — that it is reoccurring with a different set of violent actors, some of whom die in the process," Levin said.

A contagion of mass violence

The shooting was the latest in a series of attacks on houses of worship. Threats and hate crimes targeting the Muslim and Jewish communities have risen since war began in the Middle East, forcing increases in security.

Keneally said she had mixed feelings about the media attention on the attacks: The public needs to understand what happened, but it also risks amplifying the killers' message and spreading the contagion of mass violence. She said she has struggled with questions she has gotten about whether such attacks are motivated by nihilistic extremism, or accelerationist, neo-Nazi, or white supremacist ideologies.

"We're trying to put people in buckets and we're asking the why, but we're not going back and looking at the how," Keneally said. "How did these kids end up going down this route? How is social media playing a role in that?"

At 17 and 18, she said, healthy teenagers should be excited about graduating high school or entering young adulthood, not engaging with extremist ideologies.

Another form of inspiration

While hateful extremism inspired the teens to attack the Islamic center, it inspired the security guard, Abdullah, in another way: to defend it.

In an interview, his friend Khalid Alexander said Abdullah was increasingly concerned about negative rhetoric toward Muslims, including from politicians.

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"He recognized a direct kind of correlation between the threat of the community he was protecting and the types of, really, hate that was being spewed on television in an anti-Muslim, anti-Black, anti-immigrant feeling," Alexander said. "And so he was keenly aware of the dangers of his job. And that's exactly why he chose to do it."

## Stephen Colbert is saying goodbye to 'The Late Show.' How it ends is still a secret

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Stephen Colbert's long goodbye to late-night TV ends Thursday night when the host of "The Late Show" appears behind his CBS desk for the final time.

What is planned for the finale has not been revealed but the folks at "The Late Show" have had months to prepare for the end of the network's 33-year franchise.

Guests in the final week have included Michael Keaton, Jon Stewart, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Steven Spielberg, David Byrne and Bruce Springsteen, while there's been a wacky version of "It's Raining Men" remade into "It's Raining Fish."

CBS announced last summer that Colbert's show would end, citing economic reasons after 11 seasons. But Colbert is the ratings leader in late-night TV. Many — including Colbert — have expressed skepticism that President Donald Trump's repeated criticism of the show wasn't a factor.

The decision to shutter the show came after parent company Paramount's \$16 million settlement of Trump's lawsuit over a "60 Minutes" interview as Paramount awaited his administration's approval of a pending sale to Skydance Media. Colbert had called it a "big fat bribe."

Dustin Kidd, a professor of sociology at Temple University, notes that Colbert leaves at the top of his game and as the ratings leader on late night. Canceling him can't be explained strictly through economics, he said.

"I would argue that it's answerable, frankly, through politics," Kidd said. "There's been a lot of political pressure levied against this show and a lot of political pressure at work within CBS more generally. And I think that has a lot more to offer in terms of explaining why this show, at this time."

Colbert's chief rivals, ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" and NBC's "The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon," will both run reruns on Thursday night at the same time as Colbert's goodbye.

CBS will fill "The Late Show" slot with "Comics Unleashed," in which comedians share stories. Host Byron Allen has vowed to avoid politics.

## Republicans expected to abandon \$1B security proposal for White House and Trump's ballroom

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, KEVIN FREKING and JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican leaders are expected to abandon a proposal for \$1 billion in security money for the White House complex and President Donald Trump's ballroom on Thursday after members of their own party questioned the timing and the lack of detail in the Secret Service request.

Pressured by the White House, Republicans have tried to add the money to a roughly \$70 billion bill to restore funding to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol. But the security proposal met with backlash from some GOP lawmakers who are questioning the cost and how the taxpayer dollars would be used.

The bill's text has not yet been released, but the Senate hopes to pass it this week and send it to the House before leaving for a weeklong Memorial Day recess. Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., acknowledged "ongoing vote issues" on Wednesday as leaders tried to measure Republican support, as well as "ongoing parliamentary issues" as they try to figure out what will be allowed in the bill under the chamber's rules.

Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., said Wednesday that the bill would be "back to square one" without the se-

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curity money because “the votes are not there.”

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said the effort to add the security package to the bill was a “bad idea” and he does not think there is enough backing to pass it, even if the cost were reduced.

The wrangling comes as Democrats have criticized Republicans for trying to fund Trump’s ballroom when voters are concerned about basic affordability issues — and as some GOP lawmakers have grown increasingly frustrated with Trump. Several GOP senators have spoken out against the administration’s \$1.776 billion settlement fund designed to compensate Trump’s allies who believe they have been persecuted, and many were upset by the president’s endorsement Tuesday of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton in the party primary runoff next week against Sen. John Cornyn.

“There’s always a consequence with taking on United States senators,” Thune said Wednesday. The president “obviously has his favorites and people he wants to endorse and that’s his prerogative. But what we have to deal with up here is moving the agenda, and obviously that can become slightly more complicated.”

Republicans could set parameters on Trump’s settlement fund

The “anti-weaponization” fund, part of a settlement that resolves Trump’s lawsuit against the Internal Revenue Service over the leak of his tax returns, has unexpectedly become one of the main complications in the bill. Democrats said they would force votes to block it or place restrictions on it.

Democrats have an opening because Republicans are trying to pass the immigration enforcement bill through a complicated budget process that requires a long series of amendment votes. Democrats are considering multiple amendments, potentially to block that new fund outright or to ban any payments to Trump supporters who harmed law enforcement officers in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

Those amendments, along with others, could pass as a growing number of Republicans have voiced reservations about the fund. So Republicans are now discussing their own last-minute additions to head that off, potentially placing some parameters on the settlement and who could receive compensation, according to two people with knowledge of the private discussions who requested anonymity to discuss them.

Thune — who said Tuesday that he is “not a big fan” of the settlement and doesn’t see a purpose for it — said Wednesday that any new language potentially putting restrictions on the settlement is “a work in progress.”

It’s unclear how any Senate Republican changes would be received in the House, even as some Republicans there have also criticized the settlement.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Wednesday that the House will pass the bill “whatever form it takes.”

Tensions rise between Senate and White House

As Republicans challenged the settlement and parts of his agenda, Trump unloaded on the Senate in a social media post.

He urged Republicans to fire the Senate parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough, who said over the weekend that parts of the \$1 billion security proposal cannot remain in the ICE and Border Patrol bill. Trump also renewed his long-standing calls for the Senate to pass the SAVE Act, a Republican bill that would require all voters to prove U.S. citizenship, and to end the Senate filibuster.

Republicans need to “get smart and tough,” Trump said, or “you’ll all be looking for a job much sooner than you thought possible!”

While they have been loyal to Trump on most issues, Senate Republicans have resisted his repeated calls — even in his first term — to kill the filibuster, which triggers a 60-vote threshold in the Senate.

Hanging over the growing GOP rift is Trump’s surprise endorsement of Paxton. That intervention has Republican senators privately fuming that it could cost them their majority in November as they view the incumbent, Cornyn, as the better candidate in the November general election.

Secret Service request falters as Republicans want more detail

Under the Secret Service’s request, about \$220 million would fund security improvements related to the ballroom. The rest would go for a new screening center for visitors, training and other security measures.



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Tillis said the bill should not have included the other security improvements “because it’s just giving everybody the ‘billion-dollar ballroom.’”

Several other Republicans in the House and Senate have questioned the request, and senators left a briefing with the director of the Secret Service last week saying they needed a lot more information.

People “can’t afford groceries and gasoline and healthcare, and we’re going to do a billion dollars for a ballroom?” asked Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who lost reelection in his GOP primary on Saturday after Trump endorsed one of his opponents.

Left in the bill is the money for ICE and Border Patrol, which Democrats have blocked for months in protest of the Trump administration’s immigration enforcement crackdown.

Democrats demanded reforms for the agencies, but negotiations with the White House yielded little progress. So Republicans are using the complicated budget maneuver called reconciliation — the same process that allowed them to pass Trump’s tax and spending cuts bill last year — to fund the agencies through the end of Trump’s term with a simple majority and no Democratic votes.

Still, passage requires signoff from the parliamentarian and unity from Republicans.

“We’re working on it,” Thune said as he left the Capitol on Wednesday evening.

## Trump’s false claims about the 2020 election are casting a shadow over Georgia’s GOP runoffs

By BILL BARROW and KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — For Donald Trump, it seems the 2020 presidential election is never over. That’s especially true in Georgia.

The Republican president’s years of false claims that his defeat to Democrat Joe Biden was due to widespread fraud have shadowed many elections since in the presidential battleground. The issue is almost certain to play a role in a four-week runoff campaign as GOP voters choose nominees for governor, secretary of state and the U.S. Senate.

Among the contenders: one of Trump’s alternate electors in his attempt to overturn Biden’s win in the state, a Trump acolyte who won his first congressional race while saying Trump won in 2020 and a secretary of state hopeful who echoes Trump’s conspiracy theories as he vies to become Georgia’s top elections official.

To be clear, Georgia’s presidential votes were counted three times, including once by hand, and each one affirmed Biden’s victory.

The primary came amid continued legal and political wrangling over how elections are managed in Fulton County — home to heavily Democratic Atlanta. Trump’s questioning of the Georgia results and longtime criticism of Fulton County elections were supercharged earlier this year when the FBI searched the county’s election office, seizing ballots and records from 2020.

The primary election’s first-round results showed that siding with Trump, even on his election lies, is good politics within the GOP. Georgia candidates who opposed Trump’s efforts in 2020 got trounced. But some conservatives worry that misplaying the issue — or emphasizing it at all — could backfire with the general electorate in November.

“We’re going to look stupid,” warned Debbie Dooley, an early tea party organizer who supported Trump from the outset of his first presidential campaign. “What are you going to say — Trump won, and he was always the president? It serves no purpose.”

She said Republicans should instead focus on the economy, and that any mention of election procedures should look to “securing future elections, looking forward.”

Whether Trump sees it that way is another question. The president already has endorsed Burt Jones, one of his 2020 alternate electors, in the governor’s race. Dooley, who is backing Jones, said she wouldn’t be surprised if Trump comes to Georgia to campaign — and air his 2020 grievances again.

“I don’t know if the president gets it or not,” she said.

A 2020 Trump fake elector in the governor’s race

Jones was a state lawmaker in 2020 when he joined Trump’s cause to overturn Biden’s 11,779-vote margin

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in Georgia. He parlayed that loyalty into winning the lieutenant governor's office in 2022 and getting Trump's early endorsement in his bid for a promotion. On Tuesday, he won about four out of 10 Republican votes.

Trump and Jones don't revisit the details, but Trump has praised Jones multiple times on his Truth Social platform for his loyalty while Jones has promoted "election integrity."

Jones' runoff rival, billionaire and political newcomer Rick Jackson, is among the Republicans who does not talk much about the 2020 election. But he spent a slice of the \$83 million he invested in his own campaign on an ad attacking outgoing Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, another GOP candidate for governor who resisted Trump's urging to help find "find 11,800 votes" to reverse Biden's victory in 2020.

In the ad, a child is shown asking his mother why she chose the name Brad. The mother replies that her second choice was "Judas" – in the New Testament account, the name of the disciple who betrays Jesus to Roman authorities. The full name "Brad 'Judas' Raffensperger" appeared on the screen at the end of the spot.

Raffensperger finished a distant third in this week's primary, with just 15% of the vote.

Senate primary leader said Democrats stole 2020

Rep. Mike Collins, who led the Senate GOP primary with about 40% of the vote, has never backed off his false claims that Biden's win was rigged, an argument he featured when he first ran for Congress in 2022.

"You count the legal votes that were cast in the state of Georgia, Donald Trump won this state. Period," he said in one ad, in which he held a long gun and bemoaned the "federal hijacking" of the 2020 election. He concluded with shooting a mock voting machine.

Collins' runoff rival, former college football coach and political newcomer Derek Dooley, has been more circumspect. But both men are pledging fealty to Trump, with the president thus far not endorsing in the race to determine who will challenge Democratic Sen. Jon Ossoff.

It's notable that Dooley's main political benefactor is outgoing Gov. Brian Kemp, who like Raffensperger drew Trump's ire in 2020 for certifying Biden's slate of electors.

Kemp ran for and won reelection in 2022, saying Republicans should look forward instead of relitigating the 2020 election. Trump eventually made up with Kemp during the 2024 presidential campaign, and advisers to both men say Kemp has discussed the Senate contest with the president.

A conspiracy theorist in the race to succeed Raffensperger

State Rep. Tim Fleming, a former deputy secretary of state, and former state Rep. Vernon Jones, a Trump loyalist and perennial candidate, were the top vote-getters in the contest for secretary of state and will face off next month.

Jones, a former Democrat, embraced Trump's "stop the steal" movement and said during an Atlanta Press Club debate last month, "I stand with those who believe there was election fraud."

Fleming, who worked under Kemp when the governor was secretary of state, has said there were "irregularities" in the 2020 election — a buzz word among Republicans who stop short of echoing Trump without refuting him. But Fleming said he believes the state has made great strides since then in improving elections and said he wants to focus on future elections.

Fleming and Jones far outpaced one of Raffensperger's top aides, Gabriel Sterling, who gained attention in December 2020 for urging Trump to help discourage threats of violence against election workers. Sterling got 12% of the primary vote, finishing fourth.

Heavily Democratic Fulton County remains a Trump, GOP target

Trump has long fixated on Fulton County, alleging it was the center of Georgia fraud in 2020. The FBI seized 2020 ballots and documents from the county elections offices in January, and the county remained a punching bag for Republicans through vote tabulations on Tuesday.

During voting hours, two voting precincts were closed for four hours in an Atlanta suburb after police received a call about possible gunfire and a suspicious person wearing military-style clothing. While the incident was unrelated to the primary, a judge ordered the precincts to stay open until 11 p.m. to make up for the lost time, and Fulton officials said the law prevented them from releasing any results until those precincts were closed.

State Sen. Greg Dolezal, a Republican runoff candidate for lieutenant governor, tried to capitalize on the delay, despite the fact that he's seeking an office with no role over tabulating ballots or certifying elections.

"Here we are on Election Night, Georgians are anxiously awaiting the results, and which county hasn't even started reporting? It's always Fulton County," Dolezal posted on social media. "It's time for Georgia to takeover the process. We will not have another 2020 this November!"

## **Prosecutors seek 50-year sentence for nonprofit leader at center of sprawling Minnesota fraud case**

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The former leader of a Minnesota nonprofit who was convicted for her role at the center of a staggering \$250 million fraud case that helped ignite a federal immigration crackdown should spend 50 years in prison, prosecutors argued in a court filing.

Aimee Bock, who ran the organization Feeding our Future, which claimed it helped provide millions of meals to children in need during the pandemic, is set to be sentenced Thursday in federal court in Minneapolis.

"Feeding Our Future operated like a cash pipeline, open to anyone willing to submit fraudulent claims and pay kickbacks," prosecutors said in the Monday filing. "The ripple effects of her actions are profound, immeasurable, and will have lasting consequences for both Minnesota and the nation."

Bock was convicted last year of multiple counts involving conspiracy, wire fraud and bribery. She has long insisted she is innocent.

Her lawyer, Kenneth Udoibok, argued in a separate filing that she shouldn't have to serve for more than 37 months in prison, saying she had provided information to investigators. He argued that Bock had been unfairly painted as the mastermind and insisted that two co-defendants were responsible for running the scams.

The nonprofit sat atop a fraud network that included a web of partner organizations, phony distribution sites, kickbacks and fake lists of children supposedly being fed, prosecutors say. Dozens of people, many from the state's large Somali community, have been convicted for their roles in a series of overlapping food fraud cases that have spent years in the courts.

President Donald Trump, who has long derided Somalis, last year blasted the state as "a hub of fraudulent money laundering activity." He criticized the leadership of Gov. Tim Walz, the Democrats' vice presidential nominee in the 2024 election, and pointed to the frauds as justification for launching the immigration crackdown that shook the city.

"Somali gangs are terrorizing the people of that great State, and BILLIONS of Dollars are missing. Send them back to where they came from," Trump wrote on social media.

Bock is white and the U.S. Attorney's Office says the overwhelming majority of defendants in the cases are of Somali descent. Most are U.S. citizens.

## **Some see white livestreamer's freedom of speech claims as cover for race-baiting**

By TERRY TANG and COREY WILLIAMS Associated Press

A shooting involving a white livestreamer known for filming himself provoking people with racist words that left a Black man wounded has reignited debate over freedom of speech and content creators who monetize hate-filled interactions.

As more users of livestreaming social media platforms find being performative with bigoted language can draw big bucks, the line is blurring between freedom of expression and freedom for people to feel safe. Even within livestreaming communities, some assert they have a right to say whatever and earn revenue while others support having boundaries.

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Racial justice advocates worry throwing money into the equation will only heighten and normalize racist antics. As for regulation, it can feel lawless out on the social media landscape. It is often left up to platforms to self-regulate and hold users accountable for obscene and abusive words. But, experts say, at some point laws for offline behavior can trump online freedoms.

Dalton Eatherly, who goes by the moniker "Chud the Builder," is facing charges including attempted murder after allegedly shooting another man last week outside the Montgomery County Courthouse in Clarksville, Tennessee, authorities said. Eatherly, now held on a \$1.25 million preliminary bond, has a full bond hearing scheduled Thursday.

Eatherly, 28, and the victim got into a "physical altercation that escalated to gunfire," the local sheriff's office said. A witness described the man, who was shot multiple times, as Black. Eatherly is white.

In an audio stream from just after the shooting, Eatherly said he shot in self-defense. It's unclear if the men exchanged any words beforehand. His attorney, Jacob Fendley, didn't comment on the charges when contacted by The Associated Press two days after Eatherly's arrest.

Freedom of speech or hate speech?

An online fundraiser for Eatherly raised over \$100,000 within a day for his legal assistance. He also has defended his videos on the crowdsourcing site as "mild jokes, unfiltered thoughts."

While he has sometimes defended using a racial slur as "edgy, harmless humor," Eatherly wrote, "I know it's controversial, but it's my right to speak freely."

It is reminiscent of an incident from a year ago when a white Minnesota woman was captured on cell-phone video admitting to calling a child a racist slur. She amassed over \$800,000 on GiveSendGo and also pointed to her First Amendment rights.

The freedom of speech argument does not hold water in such instances, according to the 41-year-old live-streamer and content creator who goes by SendaRoni Slosclu online.

"When you get to terrorizing and doing all this hate speech, that's when the line gets drawn, especially when nobody is bothering you," said Los Angeles-based SendaRoni. "Whatever platform is allowing him to get away with that is basically race-baiting, and I just think in this day and time you got people who are going to laugh at it or people who will beat you to death about it."

"Race-baiting" content creates immediate risk for Black bystanders, said Brandon Tucker, senior director of government affairs for civil rights organization Color of Change. There's a "power imbalance" with a livestreamer who is attracting an audience.

"The same free speech that this individual wants to advocate for doesn't recognize the chilling of my response to know that I cannot react in any reasonable way because my face, my safety, my family's safety is in jeopardy and being broadcast to an audience that most likely aligns with this person's views," Tucker said.

These streaming platforms cannot claim neutrality if they're essentially financially rewarding users for using racist language to agitate, he said.

Platform regulation can feel like the 'Wild West'

Eatherly was streaming on Pump.fun, a platform where users create and trade cryptocurrency tokens. Token creators have used the livestream feature to gain notice in some outrageous ways such as dangerous stunts and threatening violence. In November 2024, Pump.fun paused the feature because people were violating terms of service by uploading abusive, obscene or dishonest messages.

"It's not clear what was done to improve that situation before it was reinstated," said Kate Ruane, director of the free expression program at the Center for Democracy and Technology. "If you're relying on users to report and none of the users that are viewing these livestreams disagree or have a problem with what they're seeing, you might not be getting the user reports that you should."

Pump.fun did not respond to an email sent Wednesday requesting comment.

Brandon Golob, a criminology, law and society professor at University of California, Irvine, said the number of livestreaming platforms has grown but self-regulation can still feel like 'the Wild West.'

The First Amendment, however, is not a blanket shield from real-world laws against harassment, hate crimes and provocation.



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"The reality is that when it involves two private individuals, state law is going to govern," Golob said. "We just want to make sure that we're not conflating government responsibility or government censorship with private accountability."

SendaRoni says he's been livestreaming for a few years and has "tens of thousands" of followers across a number of social media platforms.

"I usually talk about social issues. I speak on trending events, news," he said adding that a number of livestreamers addressed Eatherly's antics following the shooting in Clarksville.

"I think he tried to find people he'd get a reaction out of," SendaRoni said. "When you do things such as that the end results are not going to be exciting. You're acting like no one has a reason not to be disgusted and you made a mockery of yourself."

Leading livestream platforms such as YouTube and Twitch do have an infrastructure for content moderation — and community guidelines barring hate speech and slurs. They utilize automated detection and user reports.

Both Golob and Ruane advise people to know their rights on how to handle livestreamers who are making them uncomfortable. Ruane says it's OK "to film them right back."

"Make sure that you're sharing a different version of the story because whatever First Amendment rights they might be exercising, you have them too," Ruane said. "Make sure that is being published at the same time and that can serve as a form of pushback in and of itself."

## 3 dead in New Mexico and first responders decontaminated after exposure to unknown substance

By SAVANNAH PETERS and SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press

MOUNTAINAIR, N.M. (AP) — Three people are dead and more than a dozen first responders had to be quarantined and assessed Wednesday for possible exposure to an unidentified substance after being called to a suspected drug overdose at a rural New Mexico home, authorities said.

Four people initially were found unresponsive inside the Mountainair home east of Albuquerque, New Mexico State Police said. Three died, while the fourth was being treated at an Albuquerque hospital, police said. Their names weren't released.

First responders who arrived at the home were exposed to the substance and began experiencing symptoms, including nausea and dizziness, authorities said.

Antonette Alguire, a volunteer firefighter in Mountainair, helped perform CPR on a woman outside the home and watched as EMTs and firefighters started coughing, vomiting and becoming dizzy at the heliport, she said. Alguire said the experience was scary, even though she didn't go inside and didn't experience any symptoms.

She wondered if first responders might have to do more to protect themselves in the future.

"It's getting to that point where we just have to live in fear, even saving lives," she said.

Investigators are working to identify the substance. Mountainair Mayor Peter Nieto said he saw drugs at the scene and pointed to that as a possible factor in the deaths. He said the health issues people experienced were not related to carbon monoxide or natural gas exposure.

New Mexico State Police said there was no threat to the public.

"At this time, investigators believe the substance may be transmitted through contact and do not believe it to be airborne," said Officer Wilson Silver.

Nearly two dozen patients were assessed and decontaminated after being exposed to the substance, the University of New Mexico Hospital said. Most of those were first responders who were showing no symptoms and later were discharged, hospital officials said. Three symptomatic patients were being monitored Wednesday evening, the hospital said.

As law enforcement officers from multiple agencies remained on the scene late Wednesday afternoon, three bodies were placed onto gurneys and then loaded into a white van and driven away.

Yellow tape surrounded the home along a dirt road. A singlewide trailer could be seen in the home's

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backyard, with several cars, trucks and vans in the driveway.

The mayor described Mountainair as a tight-knit community of fewer than 1,000 people. Town hall will be closed Thursday because of the emotional toll on employees, he said.

"A tragedy like this is horrific," he said.

Residents voiced frustration on social media about drug use in the community and elsewhere. New Mexico had the fourth-highest rate of drug overdose deaths of any U.S. state in 2024, with 775 deaths, according to the most recent data available by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Nieto said on social media that the town's law enforcement officers and first responders work daily to protect the community and respond to difficult situations.

"But the reality is that addiction and substance abuse are issues affecting communities all across our state and nation," Nieto said. "There is no simple or immediate solution. Lasting change requires family support, accountability, education, and most importantly, individuals who are willing to accept help."

## SpaceX reveals plans for what could be the biggest-ever initial public offering

By BERNARD CONDON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Elon Musk announced plans Wednesday for one of the biggest stock sales ever by taking public a space company that is currently losing billions of dollars a year.

A filing shows that his SpaceX lost \$2.6 billion from operations last year on \$18.7 billion in revenue, and the losses kept piling up at the start of this year, too.

The prospectus did not put a dollar figure on the amount Musk hopes to raise, but various reports have put it at \$75 billion or so. An offering of that size would easily surpass the current title holder, Saudi Aramco, the oil giant that went public seven years ago and raised \$26 billion.

SpaceX, formally known as Space Exploration Technologies Corp., has said the money will help finance projects to put people on the moon and Mars in its quest to make humans an intergalactic species as they face existential threats that could wipe out civilization.

"We do not want humans to have the same fate as dinosaurs," the filing states.

The prospectus reads in part like a Hollywood fantasy version of the future, detailing in one section how part of Musk's compensation will be granted only if he maintains "a permanent human colony on Mars with at least one million inhabitants."

Short of that, the stock sale alone could make Musk, a major owner who founded SpaceX in 2002, the world's first trillionaire. Forbes currently puts his net worth at \$839 billion.

In addition to making reusable rockets to hurl astronauts into orbit, SpaceX has other businesses, some successful, some struggling — and with plenty of question marks.

The document shows that Starlink, the world's largest satellite communications company, is a big source of cash for the company, generating \$4.4 billion in operating income last year. The business uses 10,000 satellites in low orbit to provide internet service to 10 million people in 150 countries and territories.

Among the struggling businesses are two Musk units that were recently acquired by SpaceX — his social media platform X, formerly Twitter, and his artificial intelligence business, xAI. Those purchases were blasted by some SpaceX investors as bailouts because they are big money losers.

The prospectus said its AI business lost \$6.4 billion in operations last year.

The original SpaceX business, making rockets and staging launches, has been helped by massive government contracts, which raises questions that could come back to haunt the company. Given Musk's close relation to the Trump administration, government ethics lawyers and watchdogs have asked if he has gotten special treatment to win taxpayer money and whether that good luck will run out once President Donald Trump is out of office.

SpaceX has won contracts worth \$6 billion from NASA and the Defense Department and other government agencies in the past five years, according to USAspending.gov. The company noted in its filing that a fifth of its revenue last year was from the federal government.

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Musk was the biggest donor to Trump's presidential campaign and is still a big backer despite their sometimes rocky relationship after his stewardship of the government cost-cutting effort called DOGE early last year.

Like many corporate CEOs, Musk's compensation will go far beyond his annual salary, which was \$54,080 in 2025 and has remained unchanged since 2019, according to the filing.

The prospectus says stock grants for him would be sliced into 15 nearly equal amounts — 67 million shares each — and would vest only as the company achieves preset market cap goals. In addition to the Martian colony, SpaceX's stock market value would have to reach \$7.5 trillion for him to receive the full award.

He would get even more stock awards if SpaceX manages to get giant data centers the size of football fields in space.

The document shows Musk will be able to exert big control over the business.

It says he and certain other shareholders will receive shares in a special class of stock that gives them 10 votes for each share they hold. Those shareholders will be able, among other things, to elect a majority of the company's board of directors.

"This will limit or preclude your ability to influence corporate matters and the election of our directors," SpaceX said in a warning to prospective investors.

SpaceX will be able to pitch the offering to investors — in what's known in Wall Street parlance as a "road show" — 15 days after making its prospectus public. In this case, that works out to June 4.

## **Ebola fears surge on the ground in Congo over rapid spread of a rare type**

By JUSTIN KABUMBA and MONIKA PRONCZUK Associated Press

BUNIA, Congo (AP) — Anxious healthcare workers in eastern Congo said Wednesday they are under-protected and undertrained in a rapidly spreading Ebola outbreak of a rare type of the virus in one of the world's most remote and vulnerable places.

Long the scene of attacks by an array of armed groups, the region's volatility now further complicates efforts to handle the crisis. Local leaders said an attack by militants linked to the Islamic State group killed at least 17 people on Tuesday night in Alima village in Ituri, a province that has become the hot spot of the outbreak.

The World Health Organization, which noted a low risk globally, has said "patient zero" has not been found.

"It's truly sad and painful because we've already been through a security crisis, and now Ebola is here too," said Justin Ndasi, a Bunia resident,

Tons of health supplies have been airlifted to Bunia, where the first known death was announced last week, but residents said masks are harder to find and some disinfectants that previously sold for 2,500 Congolese francs (about \$1) now cost four times more.

A mother watches her son 'bleeding and vomiting'

At a treatment center in Rwampara, families cried and watched as healthcare workers in protective gear silently disinfected the bodies of their loved ones — suspected Ebola victims — and placed them into coffins for secure burial sites.

The disease struck suddenly, they said, describing a rapid deterioration after symptoms were mistaken for illnesses such as malaria.

"He told me his heart was hurting," said Botwine Swanze, who lost her son. "Then he started crying because of the pain. ... Then he started bleeding and vomiting a lot."

The Ebola virus is highly contagious and spreads in the human population through contact with bodily fluids such as vomit, blood or semen. Symptoms include fever, vomiting, diarrhea, muscle pain and at times internal and external bleeding.

WHO chief says the 'scale of the epidemic is much larger'

WHO has declared the outbreak a public health emergency of international concern, worried over its

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"scale and speed." The WHO chief in Congo says it could last at least two months.

The rare type of Ebola, known as the Bundibugyo virus, spread undetected for weeks following the first known death while authorities tested for another, more common Ebola virus and came up negative.

Investigations continued into where and when the outbreak started, but "given the scale, we are thinking that it has started probably a couple of months ago," said Anaïs Legand, with WHO's emergencies program.

So far, 51 cases have been confirmed in Congo's northern provinces of Ituri and North Kivu, and two cases in Uganda, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday. There are 139 suspected deaths and almost 600 suspected cases.

But "the scale of the epidemic is much larger," he said.

The London-based MRC Centre for Global Infectious Disease Analysis estimated that cases have been substantially undercounted and that the actual number could already exceed 1,000. "The true magnitude remains uncertain," it said.

This is Congo's 17th Ebola outbreak, and the WHO has said the country's health ministry has experienced staff and capacity to respond. Most outbreaks, however, were of the more common Ebola type.

Any potential vaccine is months away

Dr. Vasee Moorthy, a special adviser at WHO, said a vaccine to address Bundibugyo would not be available for at least six to nine months.

Eastern Congo already faced "immense pressure from conflict, displacement and a collapsing health system," said Dr. Lievin Bangali, senior health coordinator for the International Rescue Committee in Congo, adding that years of underfunding have weakened the response.

The outbreak highlights the effects of the Trump administration's deep cuts in foreign aid. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said the administration set a priority on funding 50 emergency clinics in affected areas. The U.S. pledged to contribute \$23 million.

Anxiety grows with little protection in affected places

In Bunia, schools and churches remain open while some residents wear masks. Elsewhere in Ituri province, suspected Ebola patients share a ward with others injured or ill at Bambu General Hospital.

A Doctors Without Borders team identified suspected cases over the weekend at Bunia's Salama hospital but found no available isolation ward in the area, said Trish Newport, an emergency program manager.

"Every health facility they called said, 'We're full of suspect cases. We don't have any space.' This gives you a vision of how crazy it is right now," she said on social media.

In Mongbwalu, where the body of the first known death was taken, the nearby border with Uganda remains open and gold mining continues, said Chérubin Kuku Ndilawa, a civil society leader.

"There's no panic. People continue with their normal lives, but they're also starting to spread the word," said Ndilawa, and noted a lack of public handwashing stations.

There were around 30 Ebola patients at Mongbwalu General Hospital, where a student from the local medical technology institute died on Wednesday, Dr. Didier Pay said.

"The patients are scattered here and there," said Dr. Richard Lokudu, the hospital's medical director. "We hope for the proper triage and isolation facilities to be installed today, and if that doesn't happen, we will be completely overwhelmed."

They are understaffed and not trained to handle suspected cases, Lokudu said, and added that if confirmed cases surge, "we have no protection."

In the Ebola-affected city of Goma, where Rwanda-backed M23 rebels are in control, the "situation is complicated," said Dr. Anne Ancia, WHO's representative in Congo.

An American with Ebola is in isolation in Germany

A U.S. national who tested positive in Congo arrived in Berlin on Wednesday and was in a special isolation ward where a "comprehensive examination" was underway, German Health Ministry spokesperson Martin Elsässer said.

Elsässer declined to comment on the condition of the patient, who has not been identified by German or U.S. authorities. The ministry later said, without elaborating, that it would take in the patient's wife and three children at the request of U.S. authorities.



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A top health official in the Czech Republic said they are receiving an American doctor who was treating Ebola patients in Uganda and who is without symptoms. It was not clear whether any were infected.

Dr. Satish Pillai, incident manager for Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Ebola response, told reporters Wednesday that the Americans were being transported in coordination with the U.S. State Department and other agencies. One patient, who is in stable condition, is now being treated in Germany, Pillai said.

Asked whether the White House played a role in the decision to move the Americans to Europe, Pillai said the decision was based on conditions on the ground and the need to mobilize rapidly.

## US raises pressure on Cuba with indictment of former leader as island's president condemns charges

By JOSHUA GOODMAN and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Federal prosecutors on Wednesday announced criminal charges against former Cuban President Raúl Castro in the 1996 downing of civilian planes flown by Miami-based exiles as the Trump administration escalated pressure on the island's socialist government.

The indictment accuses Castro of ordering the shutdown of two small planes operated by the exile group Brothers to the Rescue. Castro, who turns 95 next month, was Cuba's defense minister at the time. The charges, which were secretly filed by a grand jury in April, included murder and destruction of an airplane. Five Cuban military pilots were also charged.

"For nearly 30 years, the families of four murdered Americans have waited for justice," acting Attorney General Todd Blanche said in Miami at a ceremony coinciding with Cuban independence day to honor those killed. "They were unarmed civilians and were flying humanitarian missions for the rescue and protection of people fleeing oppression across the Florida straits."

Asked to what lengths American authorities would go to bring Castro to face charges in the U.S., Blanche said: "There was a warrant issued for his arrest. So we expect that he will show up here, by his own will or by another way."

Asked what will happen next for Cuba, President Donald Trump said, "We're going to see." He added that the U.S. is ready to provide humanitarian assistance to a "failing nation."

The charges pose a real threat, observers said, following the capture by U.S. forces in January of former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to face drug charges in New York.

"He's going to have to keep his head pretty low from now on," said Peter Kornbluh, a specialist on the U.S.-Cuba relationship at the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

Cuban president condemns indictment

While it remains unclear whether Castro will ever step foot in a U.S. courtroom, the murder and conspiracy charges carry the potential for life in prison or the death penalty upon conviction.

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel condemned the indictment as a political stunt that sought only to "justify the folly of a military aggression against Cuba." In a message on social media, he accused the U.S. of lying and manipulating events surrounding the shutdown, including ignoring repeated warnings by Cuban officials at the time that they would defend against "dangerous violations" of their airspace "by notorious terrorists."

Among those attending Wednesday's ceremony in downtown Miami was Marlene Alejandre-Triana, whose father, Armando Alejandre Jr, was killed while she was away for her first year of college.

Over the years, she spoke to multiple federal investigators about charging Castro, referring to him as "one of the main architects of the crime." But none until now had the courage to seek justice for her family and the other victims.

"It has been long overdue," she said standing before a giant photo of her father.

Trump has threatened military action for months

Trump has been threatening military action in Cuba ever since U.S. forces captured Maduro, the Cuban

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government's longtime patron. After ousting the Venezuelan leader, the White House ordered a blockade that choked off fuel shipments to Cuba, leading to severe blackouts, food shortages and an economic collapse across the island.

Since Maduro's capture, Trump has ratcheted up talk of regime change in Cuba after pledging earlier this year to conduct a "friendly takeover" of the country if its leadership did not open its economy to American investment and kick out U.S. adversaries.

Trump's first administration indicted Maduro on drug-trafficking charges and used that to justify removing him from power and whisking him to New York to face trial.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Wednesday urged the Cuban people to demand a free-market economy with new leadership that he said will chart a new course in relations with the U.S.

"In the U.S., we are ready to open a new chapter in the relationship between our people," Rubio, the son of Cuban immigrants, said in a Spanish-language video message. "Currently, the only thing standing in the way of a better future are those who control your country."

Raúl Castro believed to wield power behind the scenes

Castro took over as president from his ailing older brother Fidel Castro in 2006 before handing power to a trusted loyalist, Díaz-Canel, in 2018.

While he retired in 2021 as head of the Cuban Communist Party, he is widely believed to wield power behind the scenes, underscored by the prominence of his grandson, Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro, who previously met secretly with Rubio.

Last week, CIA Director John Ratcliffe traveled to Havana for meetings with Cuban officials, including Castro's grandson. Two other senior State Department officials met with the grandson in April.

The investigation into Castro stretches back to the 1990s

In 1995, planes flown by members of Brothers to the Rescue buzzed over Havana dropping leaflets urging Cubans to rise up against the Castro government.

After Cuban protests, the Federal Aviation Administration also opened an investigation and met with the group's leaders to urge them to ground the flights, according to declassified government records obtained by the National Security Archive.

But those calls went unheeded and on Feb. 24, 1996, missiles fired by Russian-made MiG-29 fighter jets downed two unarmed civilian Cessna planes a short distance north of Havana just beyond Cuba's airspace. All four men aboard were killed. A third plane, carrying the group's leader, narrowly escaped.

Raúl Castro faced earlier indictment

Guy Lewis, who was a federal prosecutor in Miami in the 1990s, first uncovered evidence linking senior Cuban military officials to cocaine trafficking by Colombia's Medellín cartel. Following the shutdown, the investigation expanded, and prosecutors pursued charges against Raúl Castro for leading a vast racketeering conspiracy by Cuba's armed forces.

In the end, only the head of the Cuban air force and two of the MiG pilots involved in the downing of the planes were indicted but have never been apprehended.

A fourth individual was convicted of leading a Miami-based spy ring called Operation Scorpion that collected intelligence about the flights. He was later swapped for a U.S. intelligence asset imprisoned in Cuba as part of President Barack Obama's outreach to Cuba.

The shutdown led the U.S. to harden its position against Cuba, even though the Cold War had ended and the Castros' support for revolution across Latin America was a fading memory.

But Castro himself was spared as the Clinton administration raised concerns about such a high-profile indictment.

## Officers who defended Capitol from rioters sue to block payouts from \$1.8B 'anti-weaponization' fund

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two police officers who helped defend the U.S. Capitol from an attack by a mob of President Donald Trump's supporters sued on Wednesday to block anyone — including Jan. 6, 2021, rioters — from receiving payouts from a new \$1.776 billion settlement fund for people who claim to be victims of politically motivated prosecutions.

The officers' attorneys filed the federal lawsuit a day after acting Attorney General Todd Blanche defended the fund's creation during a congressional hearing. Blanche, a personal attorney for Trump before joining the Justice Department, wouldn't rule out the possibility that rioters who assaulted police on Jan. 6 would be eligible for fund payouts.

The lawsuit claims the government's "Anti-Weaponization Fund" is an illegal slush fund that Trump will use to "finance the insurrectionists and paramilitary groups that commit violence in his name." It describes the fund's creation as "the most brazen act of presidential corruption this century" and calls for dissolving it.

"No statute authorizes its creation, the settlement on which it is premised is a corrupt sham, and its design violates the Constitution and federal law," the suit says.

The fund stems from a settlement of Trump's \$10 billion lawsuit against the IRS over the leak of his tax returns. It's designed to compensate those who believe they were mistreated by prior administrations' Justice Department. Decisions on payouts will be made by a five-member commission appointed by the attorney general.

More than 100 police officers were injured during the Capitol riot. Nearly 1,600 people were charged with Jan. 6-related crimes, but Trump used his pardon powers to erase all of those cases in a sweeping act of clemency last year.

The plaintiffs suing Trump over the fund are Metropolitan Police Department officer Daniel Hodges and former U.S. Capitol Police officer Harry Dunn, who is running in Maryland for a seat in Congress. Hodges and Dunn both testified before Congress about their harrowing experiences on Jan. 6. Videos captured a rioter ripping a mask off Hodges as he was pinned against a door during a fight for control of a tunnel entrance.

The officers claim the fund "encourages those who enacted violence in the President's name to continue to do so."

"Dunn and Hodges already face credible threats of death and violence on regular basis; the Fund substantially increases the danger," the suit alleges.

A commission, whose members will be chosen by Blanche but have not yet been announced, will be charged with deciding who gets paid and how much.

Blanche said in a CNN interview on Wednesday that the board will have to consider the person's actions, among other factors, when deciding whether to give them money. But the attorney general added: "Whether the commissioners will give that person money — that claimant — it's up to them."

Blanche said "it's abhorrent" to harm law enforcement, but added that "people that hurt police get money all the time" from suing the government. He dismissed backlash to the fund as "fake outrage."

Blanche and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent also are named as defendants in the officers' lawsuit. Spokespeople for the Justice and Treasury departments didn't immediately respond to requests for comment on the suit.

One of the attorneys for the officers is Brendan Ballou, a former Justice Department prosecutor who handled Jan. 6 cases.

## Republicans mull dropping \$1 billion security money request for the White House and Trump's ballroom

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, KEVIN FREKING and JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican senators are considering whether to drop a proposal for \$1 billion in security money for the White House complex and President Donald Trump's ballroom after it has failed to win enough party support on Capitol Hill.

Pressured by the White House, Republicans have tried to add the money to a roughly \$70 billion bill to restore funding to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol. But the security proposal has met with backlash from some GOP lawmakers who are questioning the cost and the lack of detail from the White House and U.S. Secret Service about how the taxpayer dollars would be used.

Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., said Wednesday that the bill was "back to square one" without the security money because "the votes are not there."

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said the effort to add the security package to the bill was a "bad idea" and he does not think there is enough backing to pass it, even if it were reduced.

The text of the bill has not yet been released. But Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., acknowledged "ongoing vote issues" as leaders try to measure Republican support, as well as "ongoing parliamentary issues" as they try to figure out what will be allowed in the bill under the chamber's rules.

The wrangling comes as Democrats have criticized Republicans for trying to fund Trump's ballroom when voters are concerned about basic affordability issues — and as some GOP lawmakers have grown increasingly frustrated with Trump. Several GOP senators have spoken out against the administration's \$1.776 billion settlement fund designed to compensate Trump's allies who believe they have been persecuted, and many were upset by the president's endorsement Tuesday of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton in the party primary runoff next week against Sen. John Cornyn.

"There's always a consequence with taking on United States senators," Thune said Wednesday. The president "obviously has his favorites and people he wants to endorse and that's his prerogative. But what we have to deal with up here is moving the agenda, and obviously that can become slightly more complicated."

Republicans could set parameters on Trump's settlement fund

The "anti-weaponization" fund, part of a settlement that resolves Trump's lawsuit against the Internal Revenue Service over the leak of his tax returns, has unexpectedly become one of the main complications in the bill. Democrats said they would force votes to block it or place restrictions on it.

Democrats have an opening because Republicans are trying to pass the immigration enforcement bill through a complicated budget process that requires a long series of amendment votes. Democrats are considering multiple amendments potentially to block that new fund outright or to ban any payments to Trump supporters who harmed law enforcement officers in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol.

Those amendments, along with others, could pass as a growing number of Republicans have voiced reservations about the fund. So Republicans are now discussing their own last-minute add to head that off, potentially placing some parameters on the settlement and who could receive compensation, according to two people with knowledge of the private discussions who requested anonymity to discuss them.

Thune — who said Tuesday that he is "not a big fan" of the settlement and doesn't see a purpose for it — said Wednesday that any new language potentially putting restrictions on the settlement is "a work in progress."

It's unclear how any Senate Republican changes would be received in the House, even as some Republicans there have also criticized the settlement.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., said Wednesday that the House will pass the bill "whatever form it takes."

Tensions rise between Senate and White House

As Republicans challenged the settlement and parts of his agenda, Trump unloaded on the Senate in a social media post.



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He urged Republicans to fire the Senate parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough, who said over the weekend that parts of the \$1 billion security proposal cannot remain in the ICE and Border Patrol bill. Trump also renewed his long-standing calls for the Senate to pass the SAVE Act, a Republican bill that would require all voters to prove U.S. citizenship, and to end the Senate filibuster.

Republicans need to "get smart and tough," Trump said, or "you'll all be looking for a job much sooner than you thought possible!"

While they have been loyal to Trump on most issues, Senate Republicans have resisted his repeated calls — even in his first term — to kill the filibuster, which triggers a 60-vote threshold in the Senate.

Hanging over the growing GOP rift is Trump's surprise endorsement of Paxton. That intervention has Republican senators privately fuming that it could cost them their majority in November as they view the incumbent, Cornyn, as the better candidate in the November general election.

Secret Service request falters as Republicans want more detail

Under the Secret Service request, about \$220 million would pay for security improvements related to the ballroom. The rest would go for a new screening center for visitors, training and other security measures.

Tillis said the bill should not have included the other security improvements "because it's just giving everybody the 'billion-dollar ballroom.'"

Several other Republicans in the House and Senate have questioned the request, and senators left a briefing with the director of the Secret Service last week saying they needed a lot more information.

People "can't afford groceries and gasoline and healthcare, and we're going to do a billion dollars for a ballroom?" asked Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who lost reelection in his GOP primary on Saturday after Trump endorsed one of his opponents.

Left in the bill is the money for ICE and Border Patrol, which Democrats have blocked for months in protest of the Trump administration's immigration enforcement crackdown.

Democrats demanded reforms for the agencies, but negotiations with the White House yielded little progress. So Republicans are using the complicated budget maneuver called reconciliation — the same process that allowed them to pass Trump's tax and spending cuts bill last year — to fund the agencies through the end of Trump's term with a simple majority and no Democratic votes.

Still, passage requires signoff from the parliamentarian, and unity from Republicans.

"We're working on it," Thune said as he left the Capitol on Wednesday evening.

## What to know about the US indictment of former Cuban President Raúl Castro

By DAVE COLLINS and GENE JOHNSON Associated Press

Former Cuban President Raúl Castro has been charged in a U.S. indictment with murder and other crimes for his alleged role in the downing of two civilian aircraft operated by Miami-based exiles in 1996 off the coast of the Caribbean island.

The allegations come as part of escalating pressure by the Trump administration on Cuba's socialist government to open its economy to American investment and remove U.S. adversaries. In addition, a U.S. blockade of fuel and other goods has caused widespread blackouts, food shortages and an economic collapse on the island.

Castro, now 94, was Cuba's defense minister at the time the two small planes were shot down. They were operated by the exile group Brothers to the Rescue, which had been dropping leaflets over Havana urging Cubans to rise up against their government. Russian-made fighter jets downed the two unarmed civilian aircraft, killing all four men aboard the planes.

Here's what to know about Castro, the indictment and the 1996 incident.

What does the indictment allege?

Castro is accused in the indictment of authorizing the use of deadly force against Brothers to the Rescue, after the group had flown planes that dropped pro-Democracy leaflets over Cuba in January 1996. U.S. prosecutors said Castro and his older brother, Fidel Castro, who was president at the time, were the final

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decision makers on orders to kill.

In February 1996, Raúl Castro ordered Cuban military officials to begin training, using MiG fighter jets from Russia, on finding, tracking and intercepting the group's small planes off the island's coast, the indictment says. The two planes were shot down on Feb. 24, killing four U.S. nationals, including three U.S. citizens. A third plane managed to escape.

Castro and five other people, including MiG pilots, were charged in the indictment. Castro is accused of conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals and multiple counts of murder and destruction of aircraft. The murder and conspiracy charges carry a maximum punishment of the death penalty or life in prison upon conviction, but it's unclear whether Castro will ever set foot in a U.S. courtroom.

Will Castro ever face the charges in U.S.?

Acting U.S. Attorney General Todd Blanche, who announced the indictment Wednesday in Miami, said he expected Castro to appear in the U.S. for prosecution, either by "his own will or by another way."

Blanche said the federal government often indicts people who are outside the United States and uses a variety of methods to bring them to justice.

Former Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was indicted on drug-related charges before he and his wife were seized by U.S. Special Forces in the Venezuelan capital in January.

What happened in 1996?

At about 1:30 p.m. on Feb. 24, 1996, the three Brothers to the Rescue planes took off from an airport in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

Over international waters, outside of Cuban airspace, two of the three unarmed Cessna planes were shot down by the Cuban MiG pilots without any warning, U.S. prosecutors said. The MiG pilots then began following the third plane, which escaped being destroyed, authorities said.

A Cuban official, however, insisted at a United Nations Security Council meeting in late February 1996 that the two planes were violating Cuban airspace when they were shot down and one of the civilian pilots had ignored warnings to not enter that airspace, according to Security Council records. The official also alleged the U.S. took no effective measures to prevent such airspace violations by U.S. pilots, despite warnings from Cuba.

Brothers to the Rescue dates back to 1980, during the unexpected emigration of 125,000 Cubans to the United States. It aimed to help the Cuban refugees in the Florida straits by dropping supplies from small planes and alerting the U.S. Coast Guard during the monthslong crisis.

What has been the reaction to the indictment?

Cuba's current president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, condemned the indictment against Castro and accused U.S. officials of lying about the 1996 shootdown of the planes. He called it "a political action without any legal basis, that only seeks to bolster the case they are fabricating to justify the folly of a military aggression against Cuba."

He wrote on X that the shootdown of the planes was "legitimate self-defense" after repeated and dangerous violations of Cuba's airspace by "notorious terrorists."

The Cuban government said in a statement that the Cuban people fully support Castro. "Homeland or Death, We Will Prevail," the statement said.

Marlene Alejandre-Triana, whose father, Armando Alejandre Jr, was among those killed in the 1996 shootdown, called the charges "long overdue." She said her father only wanted to bring freedom to his Cuban homeland.

The charges against Castro were also welcomed by members of the Cuban community in Miami.

"He's a criminal," said Peter Hernandez, whose family owns a fruit and vegetable market in the Little Havana neighborhood and whose parents moved from Cuba to South Florida before he was born. He added he would support the U.S. sending its military to arrest Castro.

Who is Raúl Castro?

Castro served as minister of the Cuban military during his brother Fidel Castro's decades-long reign as president. He took over as president in 2006 while his brother was ailing and served until 2018, when he

handed over power to Díaz-Canel, a trusted loyalist.

In 2008, Castro launched a series of reforms that expanded Cuba's private sector and allowed citizens greater freedom to travel and access information. In 2014, he led historic talks with former U.S. President Barack Obama that resulted in the reopening of embassies and the re-establishment of diplomatic relations.

While he retired in 2021 as head of the Cuban Communist Party, he is widely believed to wield power behind the scenes.

## Arizona executes inmate who set a man on fire, killing him, in 2002 attack

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and JOSH KELETY Associated Press

FLORENCE, Ariz. (AP) — An Arizona prisoner convicted of killing another man by throwing gasoline at him and lighting a match was put to death Wednesday, the first of three executions planned this week around the U.S.

Leroy Dean McGill, 63, was pronounced dead at 10:26 a.m. PDT following a lethal injection at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Florence. McGill was convicted of murder in the death of Charles Perez, who was attacked with his girlfriend in a north Phoenix apartment on July 13, 2002.

It was the first lethal injection carried out this year in Arizona, and McGill didn't appear to be resisting at any point during the procedure. After a lethal dose of pentobarbital began flowing, he began breathing heavily and made a snoring sound. And, about 21 minutes after the IV insertion process began, he was pronounced dead.

While the state was criticized for having difficulty in inserting IV lines during executions in 2022, it took just one attempt on each of McGill's arms to successfully insert IVs.

"Today's process went according to plan," said John Barcello, deputy director of the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry. Barcello quoted McGill's last words as: "I just want to thank everyone for being so accommodating and nice."

Before the injection began, McGill looked at the witnesses, smiled and nodded. Media witness Josh Kelety from The Associated Press said he heard McGill at one point say: "I'm going home soon."

Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes, whose office pressed for the execution to be carried out, said her thoughts were with the victims.

Media witness Sean Rice from Phoenix television station KPN said the execution was carried out smoothly.

"I didn't see any issue at all finding a vein on either arm," he said. Rice said he also observed a slight twitching on the right side of McGill's head about four minutes before the inmate was pronounced dead.

Authorities said that in 2002 McGill threw gasoline at Perez and Perez's girlfriend, Nova Banta, as they sat on a sofa in the apartment, setting them on fire. Perez and Banta had accused McGill of stealing a gun from the apartment before the attack. At the time, McGill was using methamphetamine and hadn't slept in several days.

Banta survived, but Perez died.

Twelve people have been executed so far this year in the United States. Tennessee and Florida each are scheduled to carry out an execution Thursday.

At the Arizona trial, Banta testified that McGill had told her and Perez not to talk behind people's backs. Before they could respond, McGill lit them on fire, authorities said.

Perez and Banta ran out of the apartment. Another man who lived in the apartment used a blanket to put out the flames on Banta, who suffered third-degree burns over three-quarters of her body. Perez died later at a hospital in extreme pain, prosecutors said.

Banta identified McGill as the attacker at trial.

Jurors deliberated for less than an hour before convicting McGill of murder in Perez's death in October 2004. He also was convicted of attempted murder for attacking Banta, arson and endangerment of people who escaped without injuries when the fire forced them to flee the apartment and a nearby unit where flames spread.

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McGill's lawyers had argued for leniency by presenting evidence about abuse he suffered as a child as well as mental impairment and psychological immaturity. The jury ultimately returned the death sentence.

This spring, McGill's lawyers made a last-ditch bid to get him resentenced, but a lower-court judge rejected it. The Arizona Supreme Court also declined a request from McGill's lawyers to postpone the execution.

McGill, who declined an interview request from The Associated Press, waived his right to seek clemency.

Arizona last applied the death penalty in 2025, executing Richard Kenneth Djerf for the 1993 killings of four members of a Phoenix family and Aaron Gunches for the 2002 fatal shooting of his girlfriend's ex-husband.

The state carried out three executions in 2022 following a nearly eight-year hiatus brought on by difficulties obtaining execution drugs and by criticism that a 2014 execution was botched. In that 2014 execution, Joseph Wood was injected with 15 doses of a two-drug combination over two hours, leading him to snort repeatedly and gasp hundreds of times before he died.

The state's current execution protocol calls for administering two syringes of pentobarbital, a powerful sedative.

With McGill's death, Arizona now has 108 prisoners on death row.

## Aaron Rodgers says the 2026 NFL season will be his last: 'This is it'

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Aaron Rodgers took his time before deciding he wanted to come back for a 22nd season. The Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback already has made up his mind about a 23rd: There won't be one.

"This is it," Rodgers said Wednesday when the four-time NFL MVP was asked if this would be his final year.

The 42-year-old did not expand on why he came to that conclusion. Maybe because there was no need.

Rodgers acknowledged that he thought his time in Pittsburgh — and perhaps the league — was over when Steelers coach Mike Tomlin stepped down the day after a blowout first-round playoff loss to Houston in January.

Things changed when Pittsburgh hired Mike McCarthy a few weeks later, a decision that Rodgers said he may have played a small role in when he encouraged Steelers general manager Omar Khan to talk to McCarthy. Rodgers and McCarthy spent 13 years together in Green Bay, winning a Super Bowl while becoming a playoff fixture.

McCarthy and Rodgers stayed in constant communication in recent months as Rodgers weighed whether to run it back one last time. While there was no one tipping point, the relative health of his 42-year-old body and the chance to have his career come "full circle" with a team that spent the offseason upgrading the offense in hopes of ending a lengthy playoff victory drought led to a reunion he called "surreal."

"It is like a (bunch of) 'pinch me' moments that have happened in the last few days," Rodgers said following the second day of Pittsburgh's voluntary organized team activities.

Perhaps because McCarthy hardly came back to his hometown alone.

The familiar faces from Rodgers' time in Green Bay are everywhere inside the Steelers' facility, from defensive coordinator Patrick Graham to offensive line coach James Campen. There are "getting the band back together" vibes everywhere Rodgers looks.

When Rodgers plopped into a chair for a meeting on Monday, in many ways it felt like it was 2006, when he was entering his second year in Green Bay as Brett Favre's backup and McCarthy was a first-year head coach still finding his way.

"Took me back to being a 22-year-old kid," Rodgers said with a smile.

Only he's hardly that anymore. While the oldest player in the NFL turned back the clock enough last season to throw for 24 touchdowns against seven interceptions and guide the Steelers to the AFC North title, he also missed a game after breaking several bones in his left wrist and looked very much his age during the second half of what became a blowout loss to the Texans that ended both Pittsburgh's season and Tomlin's largely successful 19-year run as head coach.

Still, Rodgers believes he has enough left to attempt the rarest of exits for players of his stature: the



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ability to go out on his own terms.

McCarthy said Rodgers "can still throw it with anybody," though the time of year when Rodgers will be asked to really cut it loose is still months away. Perhaps Rodgers' most important job through OTAs, minicamp and training camp is helping the Steelers prepare for life without him.

While McCarthy and Rodgers stayed in constant communication as Rodgers hung out in Malibu, California, with his wife and weighed his options for 2026, the Steelers selected Penn State quarterback Drew Allar in the third round of the draft, and McCarthy has talked up 2025 sixth-round choice Will Howard at every turn since taking over.

Allar and Howard figure to be in the mix this time next year when the Steelers restart their quest to find a long-term solution at the game's most important position, a search that's been ongoing since Ben Roethlisberger's retirement in January 2022.

Rodgers' presence offers a cheat code of sorts. He knows all the answers to the test, particularly when the test is offered by McCarthy. Allar and Howard will get to spend the next seven or so months soaking up what they can from Rodgers about what McCarthy wants and perhaps more importantly, how he wants it.

McCarthy called Rodgers "a tremendous resource" who also happens to be a future Hall of Famer, giving him a certain cachet that might make him a better conduit for what McCarthy is trying to teach than the coach himself.

"It's like parenting," McCarthy said. "I could sit there and tell my kids something, and then, like if he'd walk in and tell my son George something, he'd jump out the window and do it."

While Rodgers took a friendly jab at Favre — whom he sat behind during the first three years of his career — by borrowing a phrase from Favre that mentoring is "not in my job description," the reality is it's a role he relishes.

Just not as much as the chance to win. When Rodgers signed with the Steelers a year ago, he called the decision "best for my soul." It's much the same this time around.

He likes what the team has done by trading for wide receiver Michael Pittman Jr., signing running back Rico Dowdle and drafting wideout Germie Bernard. The offensive line could be better with Troy Fautanu moving over to left tackle. The defense still has a pair of franchise icons in defensive lineman Cam Heyward and outside linebacker TJ Watt.

And now it has a quarterback eager to soak up every last bit of the final chapter of a career that will end with a gold jacket and a bust in the Hall of Fame. Just not quite yet.

"I am excited about these guys," he said. "I'm excited about the team."

## Stephen Colbert's long goodbye is coming to an end, leaving a void

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — On his very first time hosting "The Late Show" back in 2015, Stephen Colbert ripped into Donald Trump while gorging on Oreos, likening his inability to resist the cookies to his inability to resist going after the then-presidential candidate.

"Look, you don't own me. I don't need to play tape of you to have a successful TV show," he warned an image of Trump. "Someone on television should have a modicum of dignity and it could be me."

Over the next 11 years, Colbert couldn't curb his appetite for making Trump barbs, often turning his show into a full-throated rebuke of MAGA policies. Trump would call him a "dead man walking."

The on-air feud between the two men seemingly ends Thursday as Colbert's top-rated late-night TV program goes off the air for the final time, effectively silencing a high-profile White House critic.

"The legacy of this show needs to be that we remember it as the show that was canceled because a presidential administration wanted it off the air," says Heather Hendershot, a professor of communication studies and journalism at Northwestern University. "We haven't connected every single dot on that, but it's very clear that this was a political decision. And I think 20, 30, 40 years later, that is going to be strongly remembered about this show — that this was a moment of authoritarian triumph."

When comedy and politics collide

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When CBS announced last summer that Colbert's show would end in May, the network said it was for economic reasons but others — including Colbert — have expressed skepticism that Trump's repeated criticism of the show had nothing to do with it.

The cancellation came after CBS parent company Paramount agreed to pay \$16 million to settle Trump's lawsuit over a "60 Minutes" interview, as Paramount's sale to Skydance Media awaited the Trump administration's approval. Colbert had called the settlement a "big fat bribe."

Trump rejoiced over the cancellation in a Truth Social post, writing "I absolutely love" that the host "got fired." He followed it with: "I hear Jimmy Kimmel is next." Just two months later, ABC, buckling to pressure from Trump's Federal Communications Commission chair and affiliate networks, temporarily suspended Kimmel — the host of its own late-night show — following his remarks about the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk.

TV experts said there are not many other examples of a hit show being shuttered due to political pressure. In 1969, CBS abruptly canceled "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," which had aired comedy bits in opposition of the Vietnam War and in support of civil rights.

Colbert, a "Daily Show" alum, spent nine years playing a buffoonish, conservative commentator on Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report." He was not universally welcomed to "The Late Show" by those he had lampooned, with Rush Limbaugh saying "CBS has just declared war on the heartland of America."

Through Democratic and Republican administrations, Colbert and other late-night comedians have offered their take on the day's events that offered something different from traditional news media.

"In given moments, like when something big happened, you really do want that perspective that says, 'Here's another way to look at it,'" says Dustin Kidd, a professor of sociology at Temple University. "Or when it feels really overwhelming, you want that reminder that there's still some way to laugh at it. And so the more you lose those ways to laugh at it, the more we all decline."

Colbert put his own spin on late night

"The Late Show" had celebrities, musical guests and jokes about Arby's and Spirit Airlines, like other late-night shows. But Colbert put his own spin on things, like wearing his Catholic faith and his adoration of his wife and frequent guest, Evie McGee Colbert, on his sleeve.

After the monologue, he had oddball segments like "Meanwhile," a look at global affairs in "What's Going On Over There?," technology with "Cyborgasm" and youth slang in "Stephen Colbert Presents: That's Yeet. Dabbing on Fleek, Fam!"

"The Late Show," which began in 1993 with host David Letterman, won two Emmys under Colbert, as well as a Peabody Award. Come Friday, the 11:35 p.m. time slot goes to "Comics Unleashed," a talk show that host Byron Allen has vowed will eschew politics.

"There's just going to be a huge void," says Lisa Rogak, the author of the 2011 biography "And Nothing But the Truthiness: The Rise (and Further Rise) of Stephen Colbert." "And I don't think anybody's going to really want to step up and fill it."

Among those sorry to see Colbert go is astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson, a frequent guest. Johnny Carson used to book scientists, but Tyson notes wryly that not many TV hosts do these days. Colbert even had a segment highlighting new discoveries called "The Sound of Science."

"Science doesn't have many opportunities to access centerline pop culture," says Tyson.

In a departure from the infighting of decades ago, other late-night hosts have rallied around Colbert. Kimmel, Jimmy Fallon, John Oliver and Seth Meyers — who hosted the "Strike Force Five" podcast with Colbert during the Hollywood strikes — visited "The Late Show" recently.

NBC's "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon" and ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live!," which typically air against "The Late Show," will instead broadcast reruns on Thursday.

Catholics and Tolkien fans mourn, too

Catholics will also mourn the loss of a late-night host who could quote Psalms by heart and who brought up issues of faith with guests and even what happens when we die with "The Colbert Questionert."

"We're losing a very well-known Catholic and someone who shares his religious ideas freely and intel-

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lectually, too," says Stephanie Brehm, author of "America's Most Famous Catholic (According to Himself): Stephen Colbert and American Religion in the Twenty-First Century."

She pointed to poignant moments like Colbert's chat with then-Vice President Joe Biden about the death of his son, his discussion of grief with Anderson Cooper and his exploration of the relationship between faith and comedy with Dua Lipa.

Brehm saw Colbert make himself into a sort of moral authority and lean into the social justice camp of progressive Catholics: "He is playing up that moral quality by standing up for American moral values like freedom of speech, freedom of expression, and he's doing it with a Catholic jargon, with Catholic language."

Then there are devotees of author J.R.R. Tolkien. Colbert is a superfan of "The Hobbit" and "Lord of the Rings" and championed Tolkien in skits, references and competitions, memorably smoking James Franco in a few throwdowns.

"I think if you step back and reflect on his career, everything he's done is for the betterment of the community," says Duane Cronkite, head of live programming for the Fellowship of Fans forum and news site.

Timothy Lenz, part of the leadership committee of The Mythopoeic Society, a group dedicated to the study and appreciation of Tolkien, says Colbert inspired new readers.

"Stephen Colbert is easily the most enthusiastic celebrity fan of Tolkien's works," he says. "That sort of public, unapologetic enthusiasm for stories that in Colbert's youth would have been considered like nerdy and uncool, that really helps to encourage fans of all ages to let their geek flag fly."

Tolkien, fittingly, offers a next step for Colbert after his show goes dark. He's co-writing a new "Lord of the Rings" movie.

"He's living the fan dream right now," says Lenz.

## Barney Frank, a liberal congressman and trailblazer for gay rights, dies. He was 86

By STEVEN SLOAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Barney Frank, the longtime Democratic congressman and leading liberal who brought new visibility to gay rights and crafted the most significant reforms to the financial system in a generation, has died. He was 86.

Frank died late Tuesday, according to Jim Segel, Frank's former campaign manager and close friend.

After representing broad swaths of Boston's suburbs in Congress for 32 years, Frank and his husband moved to Ogunquit, Maine. He entered hospice there in April with congestive heart failure and is survived by his husband, Jim Ready, and sisters, the longtime Democratic strategist Ann Lewis and Doris Breay, along with brother David Frank.

A self-described "left-handed gay Jew," Frank was known for his acerbic wit, combative style and focus on marginalized communities. He represented the party's left wing while keeping close with Democratic leaders who sometimes frustrated progressives.

He is best known as a pioneer for LGBT rights. After decades of grappling with his sexuality, he publicly came out as gay in 1987, the first member of Congress to do so voluntarily. With his 2012 marriage to Ready, he became the first incumbent lawmaker on Capitol Hill to marry someone of the same sex.

But in an April interview as he entered hospice, Frank said he hoped he would be remembered for advocating a brand of politics that embraced progressive ideals without forcing them on voters prematurely. It is an approach he feared was being rejected as Democrats prepare for what could be a rollicking primary as they hope to retake the White House in 2028 and move past the Trump era.

"I hope I made the point that the best way to accomplish the improvements in our society that we need, particularly in making it less unfair economically and socially, is by conventional political methods," Frank said. "The main obstacle to our defeating populism and going further in the right direction is that mainstream Democrats have to make it clear that we oppose that part of the agenda of our friends on the left that is politically unacceptable. They're right about a lot of things but you have to have some discretion."

"You should not take the most unpopular parts of your agenda and make them litmus tests," he added.

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"And that's what my friends on the left have been doing."

Frank's path to public life

Born in 1940 in Bayonne, New Jersey, Frank wrote in his 2015 memoir that he was drawn to public life after Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old from Chicago, was lynched by white men in Mississippi. Frank would volunteer in Mississippi during the Freedom Summer of 1964, though he acknowledged the fast-talking style was a challenge in the Deep South.

"My direct organizing of Mississippi voters was limited by the fact that my accent (to this day more New Jersey than New England), my poor diction, and my rapid speech, especially when I got excited, rendered me largely incomprehensible to rural Mississippians of both races," he wrote.

He entered politics in 1968 as an aide to Boston Mayor Kevin White before winning a seat in the Massachusetts House in 1972. Frank was elected to Congress in 1980, an otherwise dismal year for Democrats as the party lost dozens of seats in the U.S. House and Republican Ronald Reagan won the White House.

Frank's pragmatic style surfaced early in his congressional career. He joined the liberal Democratic Study Group to help push then-Speaker Tip O'Neill, D-Mass., to respond more aggressively to the Reagan administration. But Frank said he found himself more often agreeing with O'Neill's less confrontational approach.

Years later, as Congress prepared to pass a massive tax overhaul package, Frank intended to vote "no," opposed to the bill's lowering of top tax rates. He changed his mind, however, when he worked out a deal boosting affordable housing tax credits.

"I was happy to sacrifice my ideological purity to improve legislation that was going to become law with or without me," he wrote.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the California Democrat and former House speaker, called Frank an "idealist to the nth degree."

"The goals, the vision, the promise of it all," she recalled in an interview. "Nobody could ever surpass what he brought to the table in that regard."

Making history in Congress

Through his early years in Washington, Frank led something of a double life.

Privately, he socialized in the city's gay circles and had relationships but did not publicly acknowledge his sexuality. The media at the time rarely reported that someone was gay unless that person was involved in a scandal. When Frank in 1987 invited a reporter to his office to formally ask whether the congressman was gay, Frank responded, "yeah, so what?"

Other elected leaders, perhaps most notably San Francisco's Harvey Milk, had come out years before. Members of Congress, including Rep. Gerry Studds, D-Mass., were previously outed through scandal.

Frank's approach made him the most prominent gay leader in national politics for much of the 1980s and 1990s. He helped secure AIDS funding and pressed the Democratic Clinton administration, unsuccessfully, to lift a ban on gays serving in the military.

But there were low points, too, most notably an overwhelming 1987 House vote to reprimand him for poor judgment involving a male prostitute he hired in 1985. Rep. Newt Gingrich of Georgia, the Republican whip at the time, pressed for the more severe punishment of censure, which was rejected by a large margin.

Frank became something of a punch line among conservative Republicans, with House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, calling him "Barney Fag" in 1995. Armey said he misspoke and later apologized from the House floor.

Along the way, Frank became known as one of the most quotable lawmakers in Congress.

Regarding abortion, he said Republicans believed "life begins at conception and ends at birth," criticizing the party's push to curb social programs. After Ken Starr released a report describing President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky in sometimes intimate detail, Frank said it required "too much reading about heterosexual sex."

Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., entered Congress the same year as Frank and he recalled his former colleague: "You may get a blow, but it was softened by the humor that came with it."

To Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass, Frank's "one-liners were wicked and wickedly funny. Barney delivered for working people, and the world is a poorer place without him."



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Presiding over a financial overhaul

By 2007, Frank was the chairman of the House Financial Services Committee, where he would leave his lasting policy mark as the U.S. economy careened toward collapse. He worked with the Republican Bush administration to pass a rescue package, providing vital support to financial institutions but spurring a populist revolt that still courses through American politics.

Once the initial crisis eased, Frank helped develop the most significant reform legislation since the New Deal. Working with then-Senate Banking Committee Chairman Chris Dodd, D-Conn., the Dodd-Frank Act would enhance consumer protections, impose new capital requirements for banks and boost the ability of regulators to monitor risk.

"Barney and I shared a fantastic relationship," Dodd said. "I had many good moments in those 36 years in Congress, but none more significant, joyful, or productive than those almost two years working with Barney on our banking bill."

During President Donald Trump's second term, his Republican administration has worked to roll back many of the legislation's provisions, arguing they were too onerous.

Frank faced his toughest reelection campaign in years in 2010 as the tea party wave swept over American politics. He opted against running again in 2012, though remained engaged in politics long after leaving Congress, including spending time as a contributor to the conservative Newsmax network.

He remained a fierce critic of Trump. Asked for his prediction on who might succeed the president, Frank said "unfortunately I won't get to vote for it."

## Neptune's mysterious moon Nereid may be an original, study shows

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Neptune's far-flung moon Nereid may be the last of the planet's original companions that managed to survive a cosmic crash, scientists reported Wednesday.

Sixteen known moons circle Neptune, our solar system's eighth and most distant planet. Neptune's biggest moon, Triton, barged in from the solar system's frigid outskirts billions of years ago, scattering the planet's original moons and putting them on destructive collision courses.

A team led by the California Institute of Technology used NASA's Webb Space Telescope to study Nereid. Their observations suggest that Nereid is no party crasher like Triton and likely survived by escaping into its extreme, elliptical orbit around Neptune.

"What we know about Nereid is very limited. For its size, Nereid is extremely understudied," said study author Matthew Belyakov, of Caltech.

Neptune has only been visited by one spacecraft, NASA's Voyager 2 in 1989. Nereid was discovered 40 years earlier by Dutch astronomer Gerard Kuiper, who named the moon after the sea nymphs in Greek mythology.

Roughly 220 miles (350 kilometers) across, Nereid has an extremely eccentric orbit for a moon. It takes practically an entire Earth year for Nereid to orbit Neptune, with the moon passing less than 1 million miles (1.4 million kilometers) from the giant icy planet at one end of its egg-shaped loop and as far as 6 million miles (9.6 million kilometers) at the other end.

Like so many other moons in the outer solar system, Nereid was long suspected of migrating to Neptune's neighborhood from the frigid outlying expanse known as the Kuiper Belt. But using the Webb telescope, scientists determined that Nereid's composition was inconsistent with Kuiper Belt objects — it had too much ice. That suggests it was part of Neptune's system all along.

"We don't have all that much evidence left around Neptune — the system doesn't have very many moons left," Belyakov said in an email. But the latest observations "strongly rule out" that Nereid wandered by like so many others and got ensnared by planetary gravity.

The findings appear in the journal Science Advances.

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This is "an exciting result," said Carnegie Science planetary astronomer Scott Sheppard, who was not part of the study.

The observations show for the first time that Nereid's peculiar orbit matches "the history we might expect from a moon that originally formed close to Neptune and was later pushed outward from the capture of Triton," Sheppard said in an email.

Neptune's innermost moons likely formed out of the shattered remains of the originals that were Triton's casualties, according to Belyakov and his team.

All three of the solar system's other giant planets have more moons, with Saturn topping the charts at 292.

A visiting spacecraft could clinch the Neptunian system's origin story, according to scientists, although none are currently planned.

## AP Was There when Cuban fighter jets shot down two exile planes from Miami

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — When Cuban fighter jets shot down planes flown by members of a Cuban exile group from Miami 30 years ago, The Associated Press was there. The AP is republishing that story, by AP writer Nicole Winfield, as it appeared on Saturday, Feb. 24, 1996:

Cuban fighters shot down two small planes belonging to a Cuban exile group from Miami on Saturday, the Coast Guard said.

The Coast Guard was searching international waters off Havana for four people aboard the Brothers to the Rescue planes. Two Navy ships were also in the area. Officials said there were no debris or signs of survivors.

The pilot of the third plane in the formation returned to Miami and said he saw survivors in the water. His wife said he denied entering Cuban airspace.

President Clinton condemned the shootdown of "two American civilian airplanes" and said he ordered the U.S. military to protect search-and-rescue operations.

He also ordered the U.S. interest section in Havana to demand an immediate explanation.

In Washington, a Pentagon official who spoke on condition of anonymity said details were still murky but early indications suggest that the planes may have been heading to Cuba to land, pick up people and fly them out of the country.

The Cessna 337 Skymasters had taken off from Florida after filing flight plans saying their destination was the Bahamas, White House press secretary Mike McCurry said.

Spokeswoman Mary Ellen Glynn later corrected McCurry, saying the flight plans was to take off from Miami, fly south and return, with no touchdown.

The search was in international seas 8 miles (13 kilometers) north of Cuban waters, Coast Guard Petty Officer David French said. The first Coast Guard jet on the scene reported seeing two oil slicks in the area.

The Coast Guard was using a C-130 cargo plane, a helicopter and two cutters from Key West, about 90 miles (150 kilometers) north.

Official news media in Cuba made no immediate mention of the shootdown.

Roberto Gutierrez, who answered the phone at the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, Cuba's diplomatic arm in the United States, said he knew nothing about the report.

Members of the Miami-based Brothers to the Rescue were meeting with the returned pilot, Arnaldo Iglesias, and his one-man crew at the group's headquarters at Opa-Locka Airport, said Mirta Iglesias, his wife.

"He told me they were definitely in international waters," she said. "He saw Cuban planes. He didn't tell me anything else."

Brothers to the Rescue, which in 1995 had five planes and a \$1.2 million annual operating budget, all from donations, is a group of Cuban exiles working to help Cuban rafters attempting to flee their island

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nation. It estimates that it has saved some 6,000 lives through its sightings and life vest drops.

The group's planes flew over Cuba in January and in July 1995, dropping anti-government and human rights pamphlets. The Cuban government warned that it would not tolerate such flights.

Every Saturday, Brothers to the Rescue flies to the Bahamas to drop supplies to refugees in camps.

Mrs. Iglesias said Bahamian officials refused give permission for Saturday's mission, so they flew over the Florida Straits in search of rafters.

She identified the missing four as Armando Alejandro, Mario de la Pena, Pablo Morales and Carlos Costas.

Brothers to the Rescue is a member of Concilio Cubano, a coalition of dissident organizations that postponed a meeting scheduled for Saturday in Havana following the arrest of at least 50 members of human rights groups. Most were freed within hours or days.

Cuban exile groups in Miami have been faxing out daily releases calling attention to the arrests and the State Department has condemned them.

The president of the Puerto Rico chapter of Cocilio Cubano, Sergio Ramos, said Iglesias claimed that he saw survivors in the water.

The head of the powerful Cuban American National Foundation in Miami, Jorge Mas Canosa, condemned the attack: "For two warplanes from the Castro government to shoot down two unarmed civilian planes with American flags on a humanitarian mission should be considered an act of war against the United States."

## **Residents of Lithuania's capital told to shelter as drone alarm underlines NATO's eastern jitters**

By LIUDAS DAPKUS Associated Press

VILNIUS, Lithuania (AP) — Residents of Lithuania's capital were told to take shelter and the president and prime minister were taken to safe locations on Wednesday after an alarm over drone activity near the border with Belarus, underlining jitters on NATO's eastern flank over incursions related to Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine.

An emergency announcement from the military urged people in the region of Vilnius, the country's capital, to "immediately head to a shelter or a safe place."

The alert, which lasted for about an hour, also led to the closure of the airspace over Vilnius Airport. President Gitanas Nausėda and Prime Minister Inga Rugienė were taken to shelters, and there was also an evacuation order at Lithuania's parliament, the Seimas, the BNS news agency reported.

It was the first major alert that sent residents and political leaders in a European Union and NATO capital rushing to shelters since Russia's invasion of neighbor Ukraine in February 2022.

It came hours after a NATO jet shot down a Ukrainian drone over southern Estonia. Ukraine apologized for that "unintended incident," without specifying what had happened.

In another sign of heightened tensions, Britain's military said Wednesday that two Russian jets "repeatedly and dangerously" intercepted a Royal Air Force spy plane over the Black Sea last month. The Ministry of Defense said one Su-35 aircraft flew close enough to trigger emergency systems on the unarmed RAF Rivet Joint plane and disable its autopilot.

The ministry said the British plane was in international airspace as part of operations to secure NATO's eastern flank.

NATO chief praises response to drone incursions

Lithuania borders Russia-allied Belarus to the east and Russia's Kaliningrad exclave to the west. Wednesday's alert came after the military said it detected drone activity in Belarus, but no drones were sighted over Lithuania.

"Based on the parameters we saw, it's most likely either a combat drone or a drone designed to deceive systems and lure targets," Vilmantas Vitkauskas, head of Lithuania's National Crisis Management Center, said in a news briefing. It wasn't possible to ascertain whether the drone had a warhead, he said.

Belarus reported the potential drone to Lithuania and neighboring Latvia, according to Brig. Gen. Nerijus Stankevicius, commander of the Lithuanian Army's Land Forces.

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NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte commended the alliance's reaction to several drone incidents in recent days, saying Wednesday in Brussels that they had been met with "a calm, decisive and proportionate response."

Vilnius residents sought shelter

Vilnius resident Maryia Malevich said she was terrified when the alert sounded.

"I and my colleagues, we went downstairs and waited probably for 30 minutes" before the all-clear notification came, she said. "We were unprepared and we didn't know what we should do. And even now, we don't know what really happened."

Another Vilnius resident, Iuliia Dudkina, said she wasn't scared because her friends live in Israel and frequently have to head to shelters. She said her husband had a different reaction.

"He was actually very worried and asked me to take our dog and go downstairs to the underground garage. So I did it," Dudkina said. "There were no people except me. So I guess no one really got very scared."

Drones crossing borders heighten tensions

In recent months, Ukrainian drones aimed at Russia have crossed or come down in NATO territory on numerous occasions. Western officials have blamed what they say is likely Russian electronic jamming of the drones. Russia, meanwhile, has renewed threats that it would retaliate if Ukrainian drones are launched from Baltic countries or if those countries are complicit in their use against Russia.

"Russia is deliberately redirecting Ukrainian drones into Baltic airspace while waging smear campaigns" against Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kestutis Budrys said late Tuesday. "It's a transparent act of desperation — an attempt to sow chaos and distract from a simple reality: (Ukraine) is hitting the Russian military machine hard."

Last week, Latvia's government collapsed following a dispute over the handling of multiple incidents involving stray drones suspected to be from Ukraine.

Russia and Ukraine hammer each other with drones

In a recent escalation of aerial attacks, Russia and Ukraine have sometimes fired hundreds of drones a day at each other.

Ukraine's air force said Wednesday that it shot down 131 out of 154 drones that Russia launched overnight. The ones that got past air defenses killed three civilians and wounded 18 others, including two children, officials said.

Ukraine, meanwhile, continued its aerial campaign against Russia's vital oil industry, with the General Staff reporting its drones struck a major Russian oil refinery and a pipeline pumping station overnight.

Russian media reports also indicated that a chemical plant in the southern Stavropol region was hit and caught fire, although local officials didn't confirm any direct hit.

Russia gets some relief from oil sanctions

The U.K. government, a strong supporter of Ukraine's war effort, loosened sanctions Wednesday on Russian oil refined into diesel and jet fuel in third countries as prices rise and fears grow about supplies due to the Iran war.

That step comes two days after U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent announced that Washington was granting a 30-day extension for countries to import Russian oil that is already in tankers at sea.

The move, designed to reduce the oil supply shortages, marked a continued policy reversal by the Trump administration, which had previously said the sanctions on Russian oil would resume. Originally announced in early March, the temporary waiver on the sanctions was first renewed in April.

## Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie charted his own way, until toppled by Trump

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

There aren't many lawmakers like Thomas Massie left in Congress.



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The renegade Republican who rose to prominence as an idiosyncratic yet consistent outlier in his party, popular in the Kentucky district that repeatedly sent him to the House, lost his primary bid for reelection Tuesday after a vicious and costly attack by President Donald Trump.

The stunning outcome caps a career like few others and shows the extent of the president's ability to badger, badmouth and eventually boot out his political adversaries — and that no lawmaker is apparently safe. Massie's defeat comes after the Trump-led ouster of Sen. Bill Cassidy in Louisiana over the weekend and the president's endorsement Tuesday of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton in his challenge to Sen. John Cornyn, which sent chills and anger through the Senate.

Trump had reserved his fiercest attacks for Massie, a quirky conservative who had become among the most powerful rank-and-file Republicans in the House because of his willingness to vote as he pleased, rather than as the party demanded. And now he's been toppled like so many other Republicans who crossed the president.

Massie was undaunted after losing to Ed Gallrein, a former Navy SEAL handpicked by Trump.

"If the legislative branch always votes with the president, we do have a king," Massie told cheering supporters Tuesday night. But if lawmakers follow the Constitution, he said, "we have a republic."

Massie also teased that his political career may not be over quite yet during the closing moments of his concession speech, as a raucous crowd broke into chants of "2028!" and "President!"

"You've made a compelling argument," he replied. "We'll talk about it later."

Trump said of Massie's defeat: "He deserves to lose."

Massie's rise from backbench to prominence to defeat

Massie rose from the House Republican backbench, charting his own path and showing again and again he was willing to buck his party and the president.

He voted against Trump's big tax cuts bill last year, worried the several trillion-dollar costs would add to the nation's deficits.

He rejected Trump's military forays against Iran and Venezuela, opposed to U.S. intervention overseas, and he routinely voted against U.S. foreign aid, including to Israel, drawing millions of dollars against him from pro-Israel interest groups.

And perhaps most remarkably, Massie, in partnership with Democratic Rep. Ro Khanna of California, persisted in a long-shot effort to force the Justice Department's release of the Jeffrey Epstein files.

It was his work on the Epstein files, perhaps more than any of his repeated votes against spending bills and other party priorities, that elevated Massie's profile.

Khanna said on X that Massie "lost because he had the guts to stand up to the Epstein class and against the war."

Trump lashed out at the "lowlife" Massie as the congressman pushed the issue last year, prolonging a political concern for the White House — a phrase the president repeated Wednesday.

Speaking to reporters as he prepared to travel to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy to deliver a commencement address, Trump celebrated the "great number of victories."

"Not just Massie. Massie's a low life," Trump said.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said he wasn't surprised that Massie lost, noting the power of the president's endorsements.

"We don't demand loyalty to the president," said Johnson, R-La. But he said the GOP needs people "who are not, you know, trying to carve out their own lane."

Off the grid and into Congress

First elected in 2012, at the tail end of the GOP tea party wave before Trump's Make America Great Again movement burst onto the scene, Massie stood out from the start.

An engineer by training, Massie designed several patents — some on display in his office — as well as a debt calculator that blinks in flashing red numerals as the nation's deficits pile up. He often wears a miniature version of the debt calculator as a lapel pin.

He married his high school sweetheart, Rhonda, and joined her at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. They raised their four children living largely off the grid in a solar-power home he designed himself,

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making him something of a legend among a generation of do-it-yourselfers. He raised cattle, drove an early Tesla and drank raw milk.

Inspired by fellow Kentuckian Rand Paul after having put up lawn signs for the senator's election, the libertarian-leaning Massie ran for office himself.

Once he won his own House seat, Massie declined to join the newly forming Freedom Caucus, his own far-right views not fully aligning with the conservative coalition. He voted against Johnson, at the start of this session, for House speaker.

Trump attacked Massie early and often

Trump set his sights on Massie in 2020 during his first presidential term, when the congressman dared to object to a \$2.2 trillion aid package to combat the coronavirus pandemic.

At the time, Massie refused to allow the COVID-19 package to be approved without a formal roll call, forcing hundreds of lawmakers back to the Capitol. Trump called him a "third rate Grandstander."

Trump did not let up his criticisms, even after Massie's wife died in 2024. Massie announced in 2025 that he had remarried, after proposing to Carolyn Grace Moffa, a former Paul staffer, on the steps of the Library of Congress. He said they planned to live on the farm.

The president suggested that Massie got remarried too quickly, writing on social media that "his wife will soon find out that she's stuck with a LOSER!"

## Tennessee man jailed over Charlie Kirk post wins \$835,000 settlement

By R.J. RICO Associated Press

Tennessee officials will pay \$835,000 to settle a lawsuit filed by a man who was jailed for more than a month over a Facebook post he made about the assassination of conservative activist Charlie Kirk.

While many people across the U.S. lost their jobs over social media comments about Kirk's death, Larry Bushart's case stood out as a rare instance in which such online speech led to criminal prosecution. The 61-year-old retired police officer spent 37 days behind bars before authorities dropped the felony charge against him in October.

During his time in jail, Bushart lost his postretirement job and missed his wedding anniversary and the birth of his granddaughter, according to a federal lawsuit Bushart filed in December against Perry County, its sheriff and the investigator who obtained the arrest warrant.

"I am pleased my First Amendment rights have been vindicated," Bushart said in a statement announcing the settlement Wednesday. "The people's freedom to participate in civil discourse is crucial to a healthy democracy. I am looking forward to moving on and spending time with my family."

Perry County Mayor John Carroll did not immediately respond to a Wednesday message left with his office seeking an interview.

Bushart was arrested in September after he refused to take down Facebook memes that joked about Kirk's killing, which had prompted an outpouring of grief among conservatives, including in Perry County, which is near Bushart's home and which held a candlelight vigil.

The meme Bushart posted that prompted his arrest read: "This seems relevant today..." and featured President Donald Trump and the words, "We have to get over it." That quote, the meme explained, was said by Trump in 2024 after a school shooting at Iowa's Perry High School.

Perry County Sheriff Nick Weems told news outlets that most of Bushart's "hate memes" were lawful free speech, but residents were alarmed by the school shooting post, fearing Bushart was threatening a local school, also called Perry County High School, even though Weems said he knew the meme referred to a school in Iowa.

"Investigators believe Bushart was fully aware of the fear his post would cause and intentionally sought to create hysteria within the community," Weems said in a statement to The Tennessean last year.

Bushart's bail was set at \$2 million before he was released as the case drew national attention.

"It's in times of turmoil and heightened tensions that our national commitment to free speech is tested

the most," said Cary Davis, an attorney for the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, which helped represent Bushart. "When government officials fail that test, the Constitution exists to hold them accountable. Our hope is that Larry's settlement sends a message to law enforcement across the country: Respect the First Amendment today, or be prepared to pay the price tomorrow."

## **Putin and Xi hail their friendship and growing energy trade at their meeting in Beijing**

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO and SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin hailed their strategic ties and growing energy trade as they met in Beijing Wednesday only days after a visit by U.S. President Donald Trump to China.

Putin and Xi oversaw the signing of more than 40 cooperation agreements in areas such as trade, technology and media exchanges. They stressed their growing trade, particularly in oil and natural gas, and declared themselves aligned on international relations.

The countries' ties have reached "the highest level in history," Xi said after the signing ceremony, speaking to members of the delegations and journalists. The two sides also agreed to extend a friendship treaty first signed in 2001.

Putin told those in the room that "the driving force behind economic cooperation is Russian-Chinese collaboration in the energy sector."

"Amid the crisis in the Middle East, Russia continues to maintain its role as a reliable supplier of resources, while China remains a responsible consumer of these resources," Putin added, an apparent reference to the U.S. war in Iran.

Xi stressed the need for a "complete cessation of hostilities" in the Middle East, according to Chinese state media.

"An early end to the conflict will help reduce disruptions to energy supply stability, the smooth flow of industrial and supply chains, and international trade order," Xi said.

In the evening, Xi and Putin had a conversation over tea in the Great Hall of the People, where the Chinese leader expressed confidence in continuing to strengthen the relationship between the two countries, according to state media. Putin later left for the airport and departed on his official plane.

### **A growing trade relationship**

China became Russia's top trading partner after Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Beijing has said it is neutral in the conflict while maintaining trade ties with the Kremlin despite economic and financial sanctions by the U.S. and Europe.

China is also the top customer for Russian oil and gas supplies, and Moscow expects the war in Iran to increase the demand. There was no visible progress, however, on the prospective Power of Siberia 2 natural gas pipeline that Russia has pushed to boost exports to China.

A Russian presidential aide said earlier that Russia's oil exports to China grew by 35% in the first quarter of 2026 and that Russia is one of the biggest exporters of natural gas to China.

Bilateral trade between the two countries reached around \$228 billion in 2025, according to Xinhua news agency.

Xi said trade in areas like energy served as "stabilizing pillars" of the relationship and pledged to accelerate cooperation in other areas, like artificial intelligence, the digital economy and technological innovation.

### **Xi and Putin show a united front on international affairs**

The trip comes just days after Trump's own visit to Beijing — in a sequence that is meant to cement China's image as an influential superpower, experts say.

"The message is clearly one that China maintains friendship and strategic partnership with whichever power it likes, and the USA is just one of them," said Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute at the University of London.

Putin also described China and Russia's cooperation in foreign policy as "one of the key stabilizing fac-

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tors on the international stage.”

“In the current tense situation on the international stage, our close cooperation is particularly in demand,” he said.

Xi also repeated criticisms of “unilateralism and hegemonism,” in what appeared to be a veiled reference to U.S. actions. He said “the world faces the danger of reverting to the law of the jungle.”

In February 2022, just weeks before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China and Russia announced a “no limits” partnership during a trip by Putin to Beijing.

Beijing says it is neutral in the conflict, though in practice it supports Moscow through frequent state visits, growing trade and joint military drills. China has also ignored demands from the West to stop providing high-tech components for Russia’s weapons industries.

Putin invited Xi to visit Russia in 2027 and said he would take part in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November in southern China.

Xi and Putin praise each other as ‘friends’

Both Putin and Xi continued to praise their close personal ties.

“My dear friend,” Putin said as he greeted Xi. “We are truly delighted to see you. We keep in constant touch, both personally and through our aides in the government.”

Xi also addressed Putin as “my longtime friend” at the start of their talks and said it was important to build upon “the foundation of mutual trust” between the countries. The two leaders have praised each other profusely in the past, with Xi at one point describing Putin as his “best and most intimate friend.”

Putin and Xi both need to use their close ties in order to prop up their images at home, said Willy Lam, a senior China fellow at the Jamestown Foundation.

Putin “needs to tell his countrymen and the world that Russia has China’s support in terms of buying its oil and gas and other tangible and intangible financial support,” Lam said.

Meanwhile, for Xi, having both Trump and Putin visit in such close succession is a major source of credit with the country’s top Communist leadership.

## What to know about the Bundibugyo virus, a species of Ebola causing an outbreak in Congo

By DEVI SHASTRI AP Health Writer

The virus causing an outbreak in Congo suspected of killing more than 130 people is less common than others that cause Ebola disease, which is complicating the response because there are no specific treatments or vaccines.

“There’s nothing even close to ready for clinical trials,” said Dr. Celine Gounder, an infectious disease specialist and epidemiologist who treated patients in West Africa during the 2014-2016 Ebola epidemic. “And so that means responders, healthcare workers and other aid workers are really back to the basics.”

Dr. Vasee Moorthy, a special adviser in the office of the WHO chief scientist, said the most promising candidate vaccine to address Bundibugyo would not be available for at least six to nine months.

Here’s what to know about Bundibugyo virus, the rare species behind the outbreak.

Bundibugyo virus has caused two other outbreaks

Bundibugyo virus has caused two other outbreaks, all in the same region of the Congo River basin, said Dr. Tom Ksiazek, a University of Texas Medical Branch virologist and veterinarian. He directed the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Special Pathogens Branch, which first identified the virus in 2007.

Other viruses that cause Ebola disease are the Ebola virus (sometimes called the Zaire virus), the Sudan virus, and the Tai Forest virus, which is not known to cause large outbreaks.

How Bundibugyo virus is spread

The virus is spread through close contact with sick or deceased patients’ bodily fluids, such as sweat, blood, feces or vomit. Healthcare workers and family members caring for sick patients face the highest risk, experts said.



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"So very often we see doctors and nurses among the first to be infected and to die," said Gounder, editor-at-large for public health at KFF Health News.

Bundibugyo may be less lethal, but still extremely dangerous

From the few outbreaks health experts have seen, Bundibugyo might be slightly less deadly than Ebola virus or Sudan virus.

"I think a 30%-plus mortality rate is still quite scary, but it's hard to say with a lot of precision because we don't have a lot of experience," Gounder said.

How to care for patients if there are no treatments or vaccines

In the other two Bundibugyo outbreaks, initial cases were identified early, Ksiazek said, allowing for a quick public health response: getting healthcare workers proper protective equipment, finding and isolating people who were exposed and offering supportive medical care to patients. Proper medical care "reduces mortality significantly," he said.

That includes giving patients lots of IV or oral fluids, Gounder said.

How public health workers are trying to contain the outbreak

Health workers are now working to find and isolate cases, trace their contacts and educate people about how to avoid the virus. In the West African Ebola epidemic, ensuring safe methods of burial was key to stopping the spread, said Gounder, because people were getting sick from preparing their loved ones' bodies for funeral rites. Making sure health workers have proper protective equipment is also critical, experts said.

"Of course, it's problematic because vaccines are some of our best tools for combating infectious diseases," said Lina Moses, an epidemiologist and disease ecologist at Tulane University. But other public health tools — public education, contact tracing, quick testing — still work, she said.

"It's important to keep in mind that every single Ebola outbreak that has occurred in the (Democratic Republic of the Congo) — we're on our 17th now — has been stopped," she said.

## North Korean soccer team beats South Korean hosts in rare match between divided countries

By SEONG-BIN KANG and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SUWON, South Korea (AP) — Drenched in rain, hundreds of South Koreans cheered the North Korean visitors during a rare soccer match between the divided countries Wednesday as Pyongyang-based Naegohyang Women's FC defeated host Suwon 2-1 against the backdrop of political tensions.

The win locked Naegohyang into another match in South Korea, a final Saturday against Tokyo Verdy Beleza, which defeated Melbourne City 3-1 in the other semifinal of the Asian Football Confederation Women's Champions League.

"I trusted our team's strength. If all of us stay united firmly as one, neither the semifinals nor the final would be a problem for us," said Naegohyang goal-scorer Choi Kum Ok.

While athletes from North and South Korea have previously competed on combined teams and marched together in Olympic ceremonies during periods of warmer ties, such exchanges have largely disappeared in recent years as relations between the rivals deteriorated over North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Naegohyang has drawn intense media attention since its 39 players and staff arrived in South Korea on Sunday on a flight from China.

North Korea last sent athletes to the South in December 2018 for a table tennis event, part of a brief period of diplomatic engagement that included the participation of North Korean athletes and a high-level delegation at that year's Winter Olympics in the South.

The brief period of inter-Korean detente collapsed after U.S.-led negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program broke down in 2019 amid disputes over international sanctions.

Since then, North Korea has conducted a flurry of weapons tests aimed at expanding its nuclear arsenal and rejected South Korean and U.S. efforts to revive diplomacy.

Hundreds show up in rain-soaked match

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The liberal government of South Korean President Lee Jae Myung, which has pushed for improved ties with North Korea, said it would financially support civic groups that had planned to organize a 3,000-member squad to cheer both sides at Wednesday's match.

It wasn't immediately clear whether that many people showed up for the rain-soaked match, although at least hundreds filled the stands in raincoats, pounding balloon sticks and loudly chanting "Naegohyang" to drumbeats, appearing especially enthusiastic about the North Korean team.

Some held signs reading "We welcome the Naegohyang Women's FC team" and other similar messages.

Ri Yu Il, Naegohyang's coach, brushed aside questions about South Korean supporters cheering for his team, saying at a Tuesday news conference that he and his players were focused "solely on tomorrow's match and the match after that."

North Korea is a powerhouse in women's soccer and the defending Under-17 and Under-20 World Cup champion. While Ri's team defeated Suwon 3-0 in the group stage in Myanmar in November, Wednesday's match was much more closely contested and forced his team to stage a comeback.

North Koreans rally

Naegohyang played aggressively out of the gate, pressing Suwon's defense early with long passes and runs on the flanks, but struggled to finish and had an offside goal disallowed in the fourth minute.

Suwon responded with counterattacks as the North Koreans struggled to clear crosses into the box, with a header from home forward Haruhi Suzuki bouncing off a post in the 21st.

Teammate Milena Barreto de Oliveira squandered another chance in the 30th when her close-range attempt also struck the post.

Suzuki gave Suwon the lead in the 49th, pouncing on a deflected ball in the box and chipping it past Naegohyang goalkeeper Pak Ju Gyong.

Naegohyang equalized five minutes later when Choe Kum Ok headed in from a set piece, then grabbed the lead in the 67th after Kim Kyong Yong collected a high-arching clearance from a Suwon defender to nod home.

Suwon had an opportunity to tie the match in the 79th but Ji So-Yun's penalty went wide.

Naegohyang will return to the Suwon Sports Complex on Saturday for the final.

## Where Trump stands with Republicans nationally, according to the latest AP-NORC poll

By LINLEY SANDERS and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans are unhappier with President Donald Trump's handling of the economy than they were a few months ago, but they're largely continuing to stand behind him as the war with Iran continues, a new AP-NORC poll finds.

About 6 in 10 Republicans approve of how Trump is handling the economy, according to the poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. That's down from about 8 in 10 in February, before the war began.

The poll comes as the war with Iran fuels higher gasoline prices, while the U.S. and Iran struggle to move toward a permanent ceasefire. Trump's hold on the GOP remains strong, as he demonstrated on Tuesday when his handpicked candidate defeated Rep. Thomas Massie, a Trump critic, in a primary election challenge. The findings highlight Trump's continued strength within the Republican Party, even as economic frustration grows.

Ariel Gutierrez, a 55-year-old Republican in Wisconsin, usually requires his teenage children to pay for their own gas. But with spiking gas costs, he's helping out his 15-year-old, who's just learning how to drive.

"The whole Iran issue has just exacerbated it," he said. "Maybe we were seeing it in groceries before, but now — with this push on gas and travel and all that — that is how people want to live the leisure part of their lives ... and it is directly impacting us there now. And yes, that is, I believe from Trump's policies, not from his predecessors."

Trump remains unpopular outside his base. Most Americans continue to disapprove of Trump's approach

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to both Iran and foreign policy. His overall approval rating in the new poll stands at 37%, up slightly from 33% in April. Nearly all Democrats disapprove of his performance as president, as do about 7 in 10 independents.

The economy remains a struggle

About one-third of U.S. adults approve of how Trump is handling the economy. That's in line with an AP-NORC poll conducted in late April, but down slightly from the start of his second term, when 40% of U.S. adults approved.

The economy was a strength for Trump in his first term, but he's struggled with skepticism about his handling of the issue ever since he reentered the White House last year, after repeatedly promising to bring prices down. His second-term economic approval has fallen among Republicans, in particular. While a majority, 63%, still approve, that's down from 79% in February, a few weeks before the war with Iran began.

Richard Baumgartner, a 77-year-old Republican from Las Vegas, believes higher costs are a necessary side effect of the war, which he supports.

"Unfortunately, because of the war, the economy is a little bit off kilter," Baumgartner said. "I think it'll fall back into place after things resolve over there. Temporary price increases — it's unfortunate, but it's something that has to be confronted in a situation like this where you have a very serious problem."

Trump regains some strength on immigration

While economic promises were pivotal to Trump's reelection, so were his goals of stricter immigration enforcement — and this issue may be reemerging as an asset.

Immigration emerged as one of Trump's strengths early in his second term, with about half of U.S. adults saying they liked his approach, but approval of his handling of the issue dipped to 38% in January and February, after months of aggressive immigration enforcement that led to the shooting deaths of two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis.

Now, just under half of U.S. adults, 45%, approve of how he is handling that issue.

Brenda Theiss, an independent from Cullman, Alabama, doesn't like everything Trump is doing. But she gives him credit for being willing to disrupt the status quo to reduce the flow of immigrants who are in the country illegally compared to Democratic presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden.

"I liked Obama; I voted for Obama — but Trump was the only one that did something. All of the other presidents sat back and went, 'Well there's nothing we can do,'" the 73-year-old said. "He's closing the border. He did it. Biden didn't do it. For that, I give him one hundred."

Over the past few months, the Trump administration has appeared to recalibrate its approach on immigration, moving in many ways away from aggressive, public-facing tactics toward a quieter approach to enforcement.

Immigration remains one of Trump's stronger issues among Republicans. About 8 in 10 approve of his handling of the issue, which is roughly 10 points higher than the share that say he's doing a good job as president.

Few approve of Trump on Iran or issues abroad

Trump's handling of the war with Iran remains unpopular.

Only about one-third of U.S. adults approve of how Trump is handling Iran. Roughly two-thirds of Republicans approve, though an AP-NORC poll conducted last month found that younger Republicans are more likely to disapprove of Trump's performance on the issue than older ones.

Similarly, about one-third of Americans approve of Trump's approach to foreign policy. Though Trump has zeroed in on a more aggressive international approach this year — including capturing the leader of Venezuela and threatening Cuba — Americans' views of his overall handling of foreign policy have not shifted significantly in recent months.

Amanda Wylie, a 22-year-old who lives in Athens, Georgia, says Iran is one of the few issues where Trump doesn't have her support.

"I feel like we're wasting resources over there at this point and not for the benefit of the American people," said Wylie, who identifies as a Republican-leaning independent. "Especially if everyone is worried

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about gas prices and the ultimate goal of this is to prevent Iran from having a nuclear weapon. Yes, that's important, but at what cost?"

## Today in History: May 21, Clara Barton founds American Red Cross

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, May 21, the 141st day of 2026. There are 224 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On May 21, 1881, the American Red Cross was founded by nurse and educator Clara Barton in Washington, D.C.

Also on this date:

In 1924, 14-year-old Bobby Franks was murdered in a "thrill killing" carried out by University of Chicago students Nathan Leopold Jr. and Richard Loeb (Bobby's distant cousin).

In 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh landed his Spirit of St. Louis monoplane near Paris, completing the first solo airplane flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 33 1/2 hours.

In 1932, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean as she landed in Northern Ireland, about 15 hours after leaving Newfoundland.

In 1941, a German U-boat sank the American merchant steamship SS Robin Moor in the South Atlantic after the ship's passengers and crew were allowed to board lifeboats.

In 1955, Chuck Berry recorded his first single, "Maybellene," for Chess Records in Chicago.

In 1972, Michelangelo's Pieta, in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican, was damaged by a hammer-wielding man. (The sculpture went back on display 10 months later after its damaged elements were reconstructed.)

In 1979, former San Francisco City Supervisor Dan White was convicted of voluntary manslaughter in the slayings of Mayor George Moscone and openly gay Supervisor Harvey Milk. Outrage over White's lenient sentence sparked the White Night riots that evening.

In 1991, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated amid Indian national elections by a suicide bomber.

In 2003, a powerful earthquake rocked Algeria, killing more than 1,000 people and injuring more than 5,000 others in a region east of Algiers.

In 2017, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus closed out its 146-year-old show featuring animal acts with a farewell performance on Long Island. (Parent company Feld Entertainment, which retired its elephants in 2016, cited declining attendance and high operating costs but resumed performances without animals in 2023.)

Today's Birthdays: Baseball Hall of Fame manager Bobby Cox is 85. Singer Ronald Isley (The Isley Brothers) is 85. Singer Leo Sayer is 78. Actor Mr. T is 74. Actor Judge Reinhold is 69. Filmmaker Nick Cassavetes is 67. Actor Lisa Edelstein is 60. Comedian-TV presenter Noel Fielding is 53. Actor Fairuza Balk is 52. Actor Da'Vine Joy Randolph is 40. Country musician Cody Johnson is 39. Actor Hannah Einbinder is 31. NFL quarterback Josh Allen is 30. Actor Chase Sui Wonders is 30. Pop singer Sofia Camara is 24.



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## Groton Area Earns Relay Wins at Dial-A-Move Last Chance Meet

The Groton Area Tigers turned in several strong performances Wednesday at the Dial-A-Move Last Chance Track Meet in Warner, highlighted by a pair of relay victories in the boys' division and another dominant hurdle performance by McKenna Tietz in the girls' competition.

Groton Area placed seventh in the boys' team standings with 50 points, while Ipswich claimed the team title with 77.5 points. On the girls' side, the Tigers finished fifth with 49 points as Ipswich rolled to the championship with 156.5 points.

The Tiger boys were led by victories in both distance relays. Groton captured first in the 4x400-meter relay as the team of Jayden Schwan, Keegen Tracy, Ethan Kroll and Kyson Kucker crossed the finish line in 3:35.13.

Groton also won the 4x800-meter relay with the quartet of Jace Johnson, Riley Shellenberger, Ethan Kroll and Kyson Kucker posting a winning time of 9:01.97.

Individually, Jayden Schwan delivered another impressive performance in the 800 meters, winning the event in 2:00.34. Riley Shellenberger added a fifth-place finish in the race at 2:14.60.

Keegen Tracy placed fourth in the 100-meter dash with a time of 11.14, while Ryder Schwan was 14th in 11.78. Ryder Schwan later added a sixth-place finish in the 200 meters with a time of 24.96.

Ethan Kroll also turned in a strong showing in the field events, taking second in the triple jump with a leap of 41 feet, 1 inch.

For the Groton Area girls, McKenna Tietz continued her standout season by winning the 100-meter hurdles in 15.73. Teagan Hanten added a 15th-place finish in the same event in 19.80.

The Tigers also earned a runner-up finish in the 4x100-meter relay as the team of Raquel Tracy, Kella Tracy, Rylee Dunker and McKenna Tietz clocked a time of 51.61.

Groton's sprint medley relay team of McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy and Ryelle Gilbert placed third in 4:28.11.

Rylee Dunker brought home another event title for the Tigers by winning the javelin with a throw of 112 feet, 7 inches.

Additional top performances for the Groton girls included Taryn Traphagen placing fourth in the

200 meters in 28.54, Ashlynn Warrington taking fifth in the 400 meters in 1:05.10, and Ryelle Gilbert finishing fifth in the 1600 meters with a time of 5:36.39.

### Boy's Division

**Team Scores:** 1. Ipswich 77.5, 2. Aberdeen Christian 75, 3. North Central 71.5, 4. Aberdeen Roncalli 68, 5. Warner 55, 6. Timber Lake 52, 7. Groton Area 50, 8. Frederick Area 47, 9. Leola 44, 10. Faulkton Area 42, 11. Sully Buttes 34, 12. Mobridge-Pollock 32, 13. Hitchcock-Tulare 29, 14. Britton-Hecla 21, 14. Northwestern 21, 16. Tri-State 19, 17. Webster Area 14, 17. Dupree 14, 19. Langford Area 10, 20. Hoven 1

**100 Meters:** 4. Keegen Tracy, 11.14; 14. Ryder Schwan, 11.78; 51. Tate Johnson, 13.22; 56. Wesley Borg, 13.59.

**200 Meters:** 6. Ryder Schwan, 24.96; 39. Tate Johnson, 28.12; 48. Wesley Borg, 29.30.

**800 Meters:** 1. Jayden Schwan, 2:00.34; 5. Riley Shellenberger, 2:14.60

**4x400 Relay:** 1. Groton: (Jayden Schwan, Keegen Tracy, Ethan Kroll, Kyson Kucker), 3:35.13.

**4x800 Relay:** 1. Groton: (Jace Johnson, Riley Shellenberger, Ethan Kroll, Kyson Kucker), 9:01.97.

**Triple Jump:** 2. Ethan Kroll, 41' 1"

### Girl's Division

**Team Scores:** 1. Ipswich 156.5, 2. Warner 119, 3. North Central 68.5, 4. Mobridge-Pollock 63, 5. Groton Area 49, 6. Britton-Hecla 45, 7. Langford Area 39.5, 8. Hitchcock-Tulare 39, 8. Northwestern 39, 10. Timber Lake 33, 11. Faulkton Area 27, 12. Hoven 22, 13. Tri-State 21, 14. Aberdeen Christian 19, 15. Aberdeen Roncalli 15, 16. Webster Area 11.5, 17. Dupree 3, 18. Redfield 2, 19. Sully Buttes 1

**100 Meters:** 8. Raquel Tracy, 13.25.

**200 Meters:** 4. Taryn Traphagen, 28.54.

**400 Meters:** 5. Ashlynn Warrington, 1:05.10.

**800 Meters:** 12. Ashlynn Warrington, 2:44.63.

**1600 Meters:** 5. Ryelle Gilbert, 5:36.39.

**100m Hurdles - 33" / 0.838m:** 1. McKenna Tietz, 15.73; 15. Teagan Hanten, 19.80.

**300m Hurdles - 30" / 0.762m:** 8. Teagan Hanten, 55.87.

**4x100 Relay:** 2. Groton: (Raquel Tracy, Kella Tracy, Rylee Dunker, McKenna Tietz), 51.61.

**SMR 1600m - [200-200-400-800]:** 3. Groton: (McKenna Tietz, Taryn Traphagen, Kella Tracy, Ryelle Gilbert), 4:28.11.

**Javelin - 600g:** 1. Rylee Dunker, 112' 7".

**Long Jump:** 31. Teagan Hanten, 11' 9".