

Groton Daily Independent

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Upcoming Schedule

Monday, Feb. 22: Boys Basketball hosts Warner with C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV (Kent & Darcy Muller) and varsity.

Tuesday, Feb. 23: GBB Region: Groton Area hosts Milbank, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 25: GBB Region

Thursday-Saturday: State Wrestling Tournament in Rapid City.



Friday, Feb. 26

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV (Gordon & Dorene Nelson) at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Tuesday, March 2: BBB Region

Thursday, March 4: GBB SoDAK 16

Friday, March 5: BBB Region

Tuesday, March 9: BBB SoDAK 16

March 11-13: State Girls Basketball Tournament in Watertown

March 18-20: State Boys Basketball Tournament in Sioux Falls



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

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General: Additional charges may apply in areas that require guard response service for municipal alarm verification. System remains property of ADT. Local permit fees may be required. Prices and offers subject to change and may vary by market. Additional taxes and fees may apply. Satisfactory credit required. A security deposit may be required. Simulated screen images and photos are for illustrative purposes only.

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DF-CD-NP-Q121

Four Groton grapplers advance to state

Groton Area will send four wrestlers to the state wrestling tournament to be held Thursday through Saturday at Rapid City. The Region 1B tournament was held Saturday at the Groton Area Arena.

Dragr Monson, who is rated number one in the state, remains undefeated as he won the 113 pound weight class. He was also designated as the winner for "Gene Benthin" Sportsmanship Award for Region 1B.

Lane Krueger placed second at 195 pounds, Christian Ehresmann placed third at 126 pounds and Cole Bisbee placed fourth at 160 pounds.

Redfield won the team title with 263 points followed by Kingsbury County with 136, Clark/Willow Lake 127.5, Sisseton 78, Groton Area 77, Sioux Valley 74.5, Faulkton Area 72.5, Ipswich/Leola/Bowdle 71, Warner/Northwestern 68, Webster Area 61.5, Potter County 44.5, Deuel 34, Hamlin/Castlewood 24, Britton-Hecla 16, Sully Buttes 16, Tiospa Zina 16 and Iroquois/Doland 0.

113: Dragr Monson (36-0) placed 1st and scored 20.0 team points.

Dragr Monson decisioned Ian Metz (Sisseton) 25-14 (Dec 4-3); and in the championship match, he decisioned Mason Whitley (Redfield Area) 37-9 (Dec 5-0).

126: Christian Ehresmann (33-6) placed 3rd and scored 16.0 team points.

Christian Ehresmann pinned Aaron Neugebauer (Webster Area) 4-9 (Fall 0:40); he was decisioned by Keaton Rohlf (Redfield Area) 36-10 (Dec 5-1); he decisioned Boe Iverson (Sisseton) 18-16 (Dec 2-0); and he won the third place match by pinning Lincoln Stuwe (Potter Co) 10-7 (Fall 4:18)

138: Korbin Kucker (18-17) scored 5.0 team points.

Korbin Kucker decisioned Matt Mork (Webster Area) 3-23 (Dec 7-1); he was pinned by Chase Yellowhawk (Sully Buttes) 14-8 (Fall 3:20); he pinned Tucker Adkins (Deuel) 1-27 (Fall 1:47); and lost by a major decision to Josh Long (Sisseton) 16-15 (MD 9-1).

160: Cole Bisbee (19-19) placed 4th and scored 10.0 team points.

Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 19-19 decisioned Connor Johnson (Kingsbury Co) 15-16 (Dec 9-2); he was pinned by Dylan Whitley (Redfield Area) 30-3 (Fall 1:30); he decisioned Mason Shultz (Sisseton) 10-20 (Dec 3-1); and in the third place match, he was decisioned by Easton Steinbach (Warner/Northwestern) 26-9 (Dec 2-0).

195: Lane Krueger (23-7) placed 2nd and scored 20.0 team points.

Lane Krueger pinned Tyler Tran (Ipswich/Leola/Bowdle) 7-15 (Fall 2:22); he decisioned Michael Stevenson (Hamlin/Castlewood) 26-12 (Dec 8-2); and in the championship match, he was pinned by Sean Domke (Redfield Area) 25-7 (Fall 1:01)

285: Adrian Knutson (13-21) placed 6th and scored 6.0 team points.

Adrian Knutson was pinned by Avery Nichols (Clark/Willow Lake) 26-16 (Fall 5:24); he pinned Lane Stern (Webster Area) 3-9 (Fall 0:56); he was decisioned by Connor Logan (Sioux Valley) 17-14 (Dec 8-1); and in the fifth place match, he was decisioned by Parker Bode (Faulkton Area) 13-21 (Dec 6-0).



Dragr Monson earned the Region 1B "Gene Benthin" Sportsmanship Award. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Cole Bisbee decided Connor Johnson of Kingsbury County in the first round, 9-2. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Lane Krueger pinned Tyler Tran of Ipswich/Leola/Bowdle, 2:22. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Christian Ehresmann pinned Aaron Neugebauer of Webster Area in 40 seconds. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Dragr Monson decided Mason Whitley of Redfield Area in the championship match, 5-0. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Samantha Pappas
National Debate Tournament Qualifier

(Photo from Kristen Gonsoirs FB Page)

Pappas qualifies for National Debate, again

It was down to the final eight. Only four would be a National Debate Tournament qualifier. There were three students from Aberdeen Central, two from Mitchell, two from Mitchell and one from Groton Area, Samantha Pappas. When all was said and done, Pappas became a member of the elite four.

Sam Pappas qualified for 2021 National Debate Tournament in domestic extemporaneous speaking. According to a post of Coach Kristen Gonsoir's Facebook page, "Sam is Groton's first ever two time qualifier!" Sam placed third with members from Aberdeen Central's team and Brooking's team placing first and second respectively.

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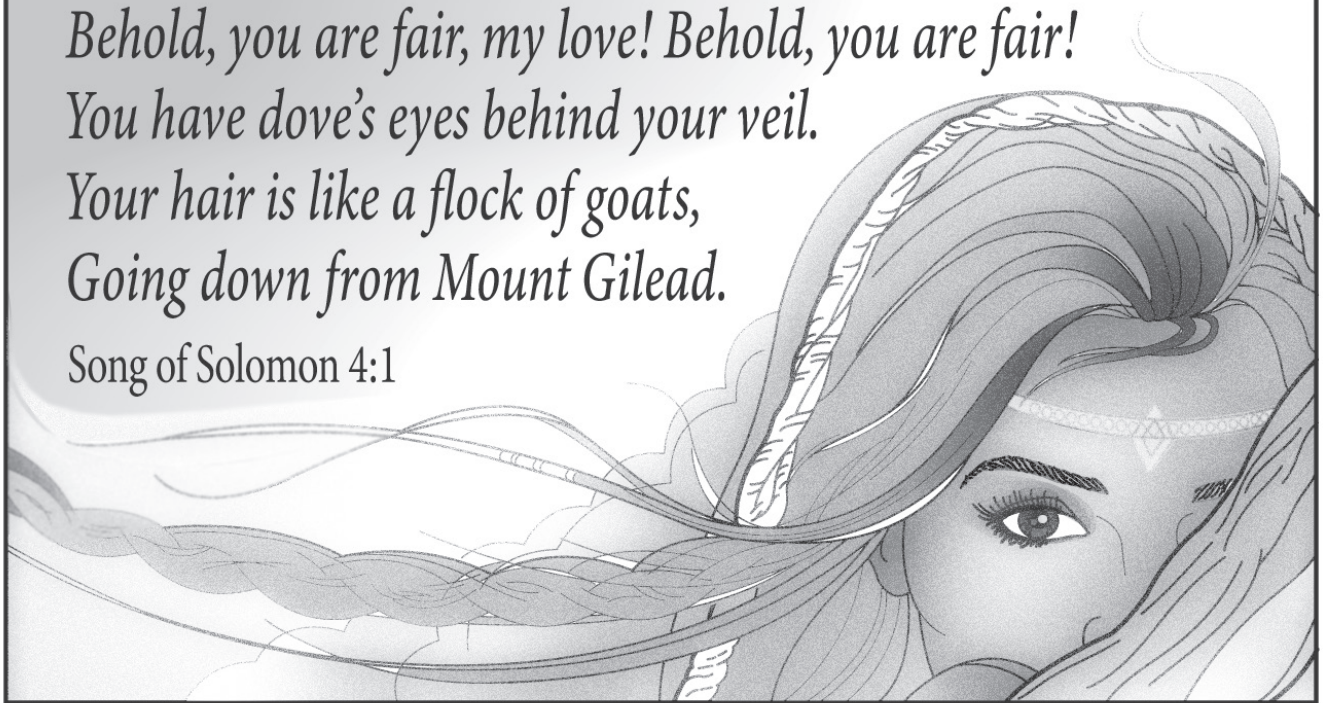
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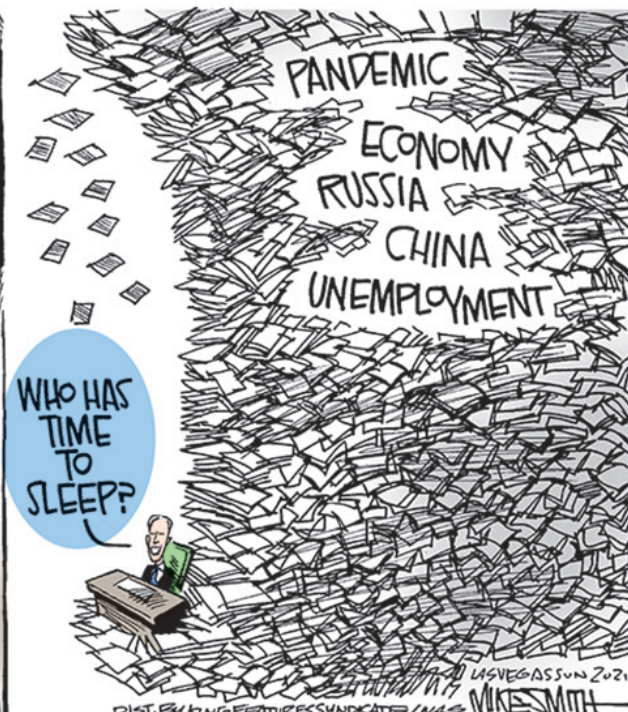


THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE

*Behold, you are fair, my love! Behold, you are fair!
You have dove's eyes behind your veil.
Your hair is like a flock of goats,
Going down from Mount Gilead.*
Song of Solomon 4:1



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BIBLE TRIVIA

by Wilson Casey

1. Is the book of 2 Peter in Old or New Testament or neither?

2. From Matthew 4, how many days and nights did Jesus fast before his temptation by Satan? *3, 12, 40, 7x70*

3. In Genesis 24, who played the matchmaker for Isaac and Rebekah? *Nahor, A shepherd, Bethuel, Abraham's servant*

4. From Proverbs 6, what is held up as an example to the lazy man? *Bee, Flea, Locust, Ant*

5. Who said, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away"? *Satan, Adam, Job, Haman*

6. Who/what was Shishak? *Roast lamb, Birthplace of Moses, Serpent, King of Egypt*

ANSWERS: 1) New; 2) 40; 3) Abraham's servant; 4) Ant; 5) Job 1:21; 6) King of Egypt

Sharpen your understanding of scripture with Wilson's Casey's latest book, "Test Your Bible Knowledge," available in bookstores and online.

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Comfort foods

Made fast and healthy



by Healthy Exchanges

Creamy Cherry Banana Pie

You'll hear lots of praise when you serve this pie. It's sure to be a "keeper" in your recipe file!

- 1 (4 serving) package sugar-free vanilla cook-and-serve pudding mix
- 2/3 cup nonfat dry milk powder
- 1 2/3 cups water
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 12 maraschino cherries, quartered
- 2 tablespoons chopped pecans
- 1 (6-ounce) purchased short bread pie crust
- 1 cup sliced (1 medium sized) banana
- 1/2 cup reduced-calorie whipped topping

1. In a large saucepan, combine dry pudding mix, dry milk powder and water. Cook over medium heat until mixture thickens and starts to boil, stirring constantly. Remove from heat. Stir in vanilla extract, cherry pieces and pecans.

2. Spread 1/2 cup of hot pudding mixture into bottom of pie crust. Arrange banana slices evenly over pudding. Spread remaining pudding mixture over bananas.

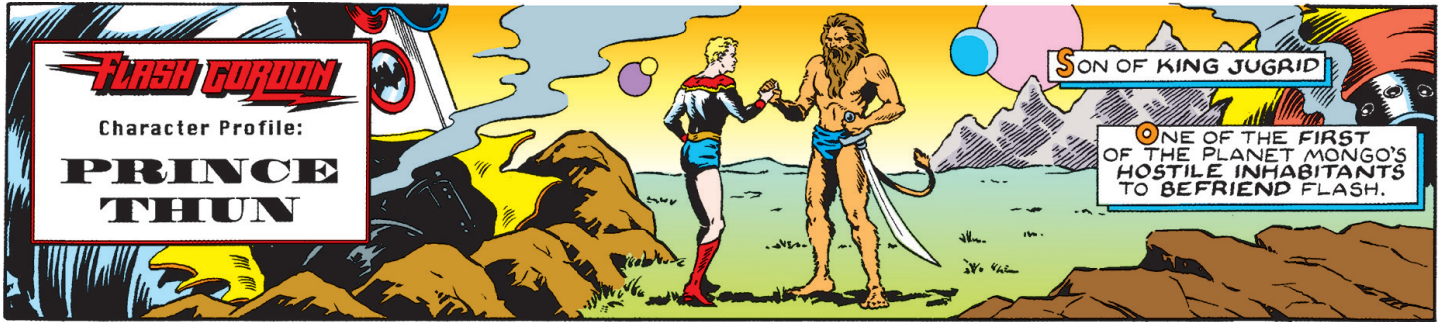
3. Refrigerate for at least 2 hours. Cut into 8 pieces. When serving, top each piece with 1 tablespoon whipped topping.

• Each serving equals: 186 calories, 6g fat, 3g protein, 30g carb., 183mg sodium, 1g fiber; Diabetic Exchanges: 1 1/2 Starch, 1 Fat, 1/2 Fruit.

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FLASH GORDON
Character Profile:
PRINCE THUN

SON OF KING JUGRID

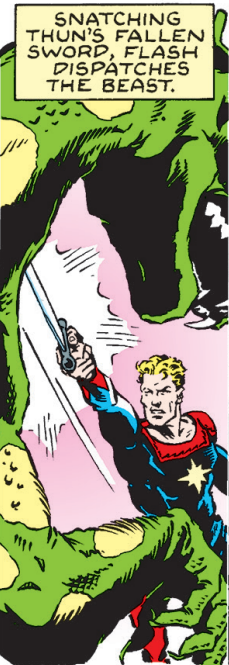
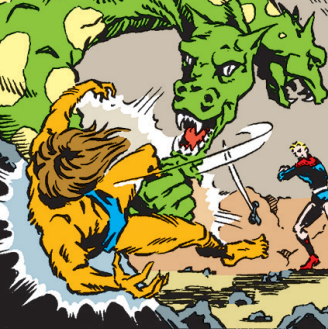
ONE OF THE FIRST OF THE PLANET MONGO'S HOSTILE INHABITANTS TO BEFRIEND FLASH.



FLASH GORDON
By JIM KEEFE
2-14

FLASHBACK:

ENTERING MING'S LABYRINTH, FLASH AND THUN ARE CONFRONTED BY THE CAVERN'S TWO-HEADED GUARDIAN.

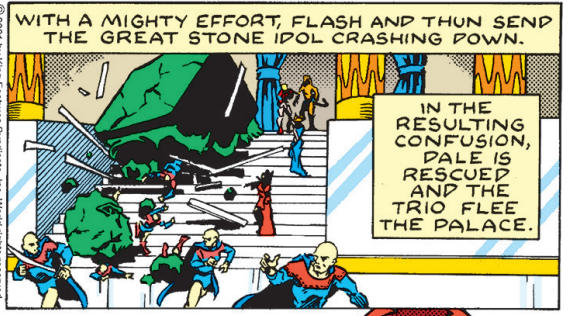


SNATCHING THUN'S FALLEN SWORD, FLASH DISPATCHES THE BEAST.



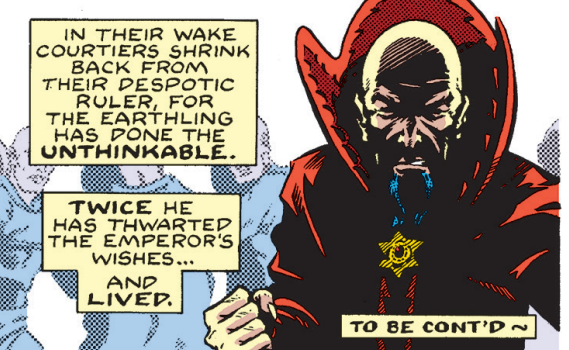
FINDING AN ENTRANCE TO THE PALACE, FLASH AND THUN STUMBLE UPON A WEDDING CEREMONY IN PROGRESS.

FLASH'S HEART SINKS AS HE BEHOLDS DALE... AS MING'S RELUCTANT BRIDE!



WITH A MIGHTY EFFORT, FLASH AND THUN SEND THE GREAT STONE IDOL CRASHING DOWN.

IN THE RESULTING CONFUSION, DALE IS RESCUED AND THE TRIO FLEE THE PALACE.

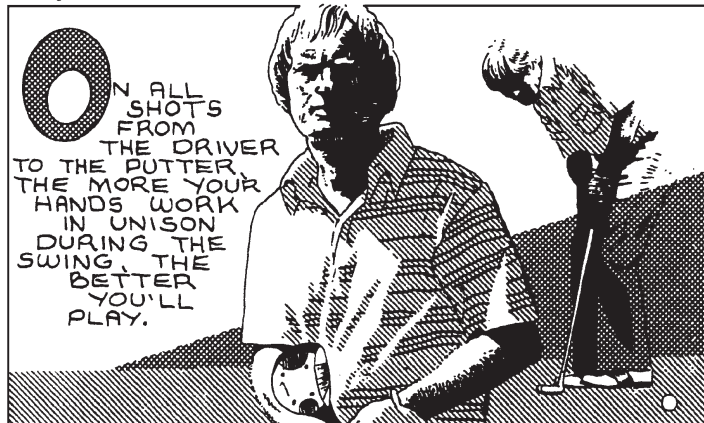


IN THEIR WAKE COURTIERS SHRINK BACK FROM THEIR DESPOTIC RULER, FOR THE EARTHLING HAS DONE THE UNTHINKABLE.

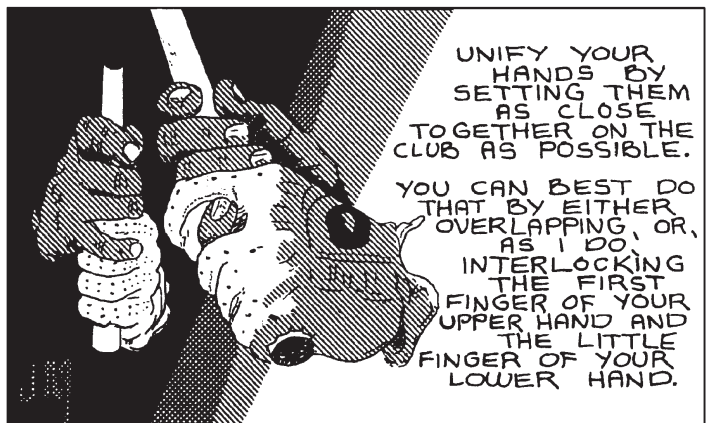
TWICE HE HAS THWARTED THE EMPEROR'S WISHES... AND LIVED.

TO BE CONT'D ~

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CT Scan Unlikely to Miss Advanced Lung Cancer

DEAR DR. ROACH: Is it possible for X-rays and a CT scan to miss advanced lung cancer? My brother worked two days before he died. He went to the hospital, was admitted to hospice and died the next day. I wonder if he knew at least a year ago, but didn't tell anyone. He said his scans showed pneumonia. His son was called to the hospital and spent the day with him until he died. During his last day, my brother told him that he had lung cancer and that it was not diagnosed earlier. — N.W.

ANSWER: I am very sorry about your brother.

Lung cancer, especially early lung cancer, is often missed on a regular chest X-ray. Pneumonia can accompany early lung cancer, and the pneumonia can hide the cancerous mass, but experienced radiologists should be able to see something. Also, experienced clinicians should check an X-ray weeks after a pneumonia to be sure there is no cancer in a person at risk, such as a current or former smoker.

Advanced lung cancer is only very rarely missed on X-ray, and should essentially never be missed on a CT scan. While I can't say it's impossible, it's much more likely that a year ago he was told that he had lung cancer and did not say anything, perhaps to spare his family's feelings, or perhaps he didn't want the sympathy and attention that accompany a diagnosis such as advanced lung cancer.

DEAR DR. ROACH: What does a person do when symptoms are vague and hard to explain? I am an 82-year-old woman. I started feeling discomfort in one breast about three weeks ago. It felt like irritation from a bra. I did all the things I thought I should, and three weeks later the symptoms are the same or slightly worse. Nothing looks or feels different when I touch it. Do I see my primary doctor (he's never seen me naked), or find a gynecologist? How do I present this issue? I feel like a fool. — V.B.

ANSWER: Both clinicians should be able to appropriately evaluate this concern. You should go to whoever you are more comfortable seeing. What you should not do is ignore it.

In your particular case, it's unlikely that your symptoms are because of something serious. Breast discomfort is common and only rarely due to breast cancer, which is what you must surely be concerned about. You should NEVER stop yourself from seeing your doctor for fear of not being taken seriously.

Primary doctors like me and gynecologists are very familiar with women coming in with breast symptoms, and we take them seriously. Clinicians know how justifiably concerned women are about breast cancer. Most often, a woman can be reassured with a careful history and physical exam; other times, a mammogram or ultrasound may be ordered. You don't want to regret missing that visit to the doctor.

It is often said that the only foolish question is the one that is not asked. This situation is analogous: It would be foolish for you not to go. While the overwhelming likelihood is that you will be reassured, in the unlikely event there is something wrong it's far better to know about it earlier than later.

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

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1. Name the artist who claims he's lost fans because of his name.
2. Which group was the first to release "Woke Up in Love"?
3. "Conga" is considered the signature song for which artist?
4. Who was the first artist to be inducted twice into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?
5. Name the song that contains this lyric: "Well, you can tell by the way I use my walk, I'm a woman's man: no time to talk."

Answers

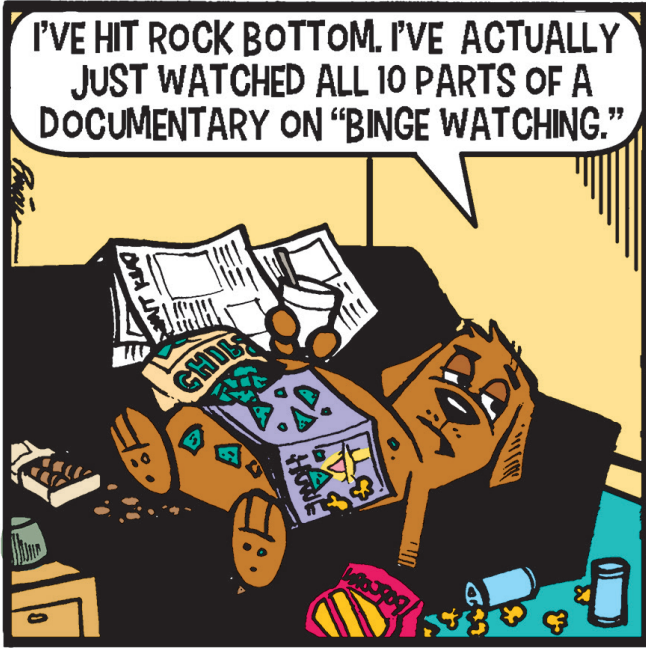
1. Meat Loaf. Vegetarians were leery of him because of the name (in one case a fellow artist who wouldn't speak to him), although he himself was a vegetarian for over 10 years.
2. Exile, in 1983. "Woke Up in Love" took the former rock group to the top of the country charts in both the U.S. and Canada.
3. Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine.
4. Clyde McPhatter, both as a member of the Drifters and for his solo work.
5. "Stayin' Alive," by the Bee Gees in 1977. It was used in the soundtrack for the film "Saturday Night Fever." After its release, "Stayin' Alive" shot to the top of the charts and stayed there for a month.

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Just Like Cats & Dogs by Dave T. Phipps



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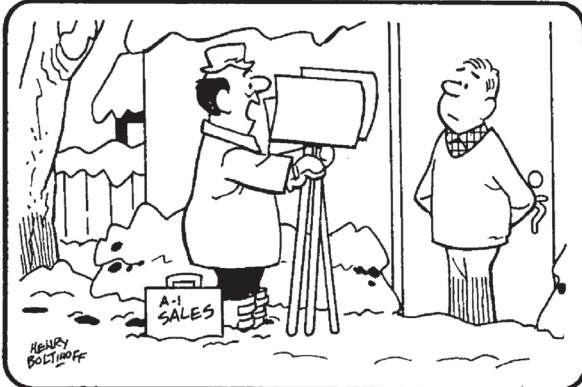
GRIN and BEAR IT ^{by Wagner}



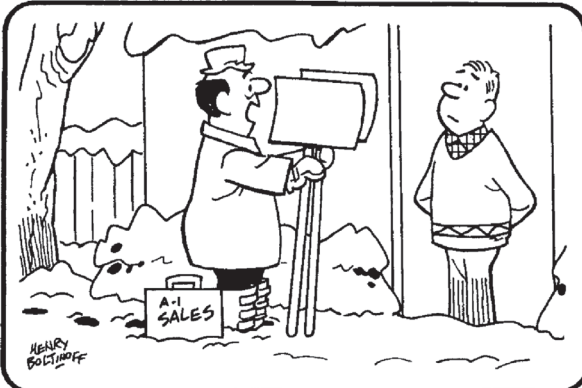
"The employment figures have been seasonably adjusted to allow for the firing of football coaches."

HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



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Differences: 1. Sweater has decoration. 2. Doorknob is missing. 3. Boots are taller. 4. One shovel is gone. 5. Fence is higher. 6. House is missing.

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- Need a quick fix for tarnished brass? Look in your fridge. Ketchup, applied liberally then buffed off, will remove tarnish in a pinch.

- Use a sticky note to clean the cracks in your keyboard. First hold it upside down and shake to remove crumbs. You'd be surprised how much comes out. Then run the sticky strip of the note paper between the keys to pick up dust and any other crumbs.

- “Many people play drinking games with movies and alcohol, but here’s my drinking game: I work at an ‘office’ job (although we are remote now), and every time I get an email notification, I take a sip or slug of water. It’s got me surprisingly hydrated!” — *P.J. in Florida*

- If your marker is nearing the end of its life, you might revive it by setting it tip down in a little bit of rubbing alcohol.

- “Schedule important doctor’s checkups, like your annual physical and dental cleanings, in the same month each year so you will know when they are coming up. I use my birth month. My mom always has hers done in February.” — *E.D. in Massachusetts*

- Use a cotton swab to clean out the tips of your earbuds!

- “To clean out your coffeemaker, run a cycle of water through it, and then pour out half the water and replace it with white vinegar. Pour that mixture back through the coffeemaker (make sure it’s off) and let it sit for 10 minutes. Then run the vinegar mixture through, then two cycles of fresh, cold water. — *A.L. in New York*

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

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Riddle Card

1. What did the big rose say to the little rose?
2. What has five eyes but cannot see?
3. What is the biggest jewel in the world?
4. What is the best name for a lady engineer?
5. Why are playing cards like wolves?



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Answers: 1. Hiya, bud. 2. The "Mississippi River." 3. A base-ball diamond. 4. Bridget. 5. Because they come in packs.

Junior Whirl

by Charles Barry Townsend

ARE YOU IN SHAPE FOR THIS PUZZLE?



MILE
PILE
POLE
POSE
POST

You're a winner if you can finish this puzzle in under five minutes. In this type of puzzle you are given a word that must be changed into another word in a series of moves. During each move, you must change one letter in the previous word so as to form a new word. In our example, we changed MILE to POST in four moves. See if you can change the following five words in four moves.

1. COWS to BARN
2. GALA to FETE
3. DARE to RISK
4. SINE to MATH
5. NAIL to BOLT

Illustrated by David Coulson

ODD MAN OUT!

To the right is a list of five words. Can you figure out which word doesn't belong on the list?



1. GREYED
2. GEARBOX
3. DANGER
4. CARIBOU
5. RISKING

Answer: Danger. The other words all contain the name of some part of your body. (1. Eye, 2. Ear, 4. Rib, 5. Skin.)

FIND THE SEVEN WORDS! In the word square at the right, we've removed six of the letters to spell out the word "DEPART." See if you can replace these letters in the squares so that you will have four three-letter words across and three four-letter words down. Time limit: 60 seconds.

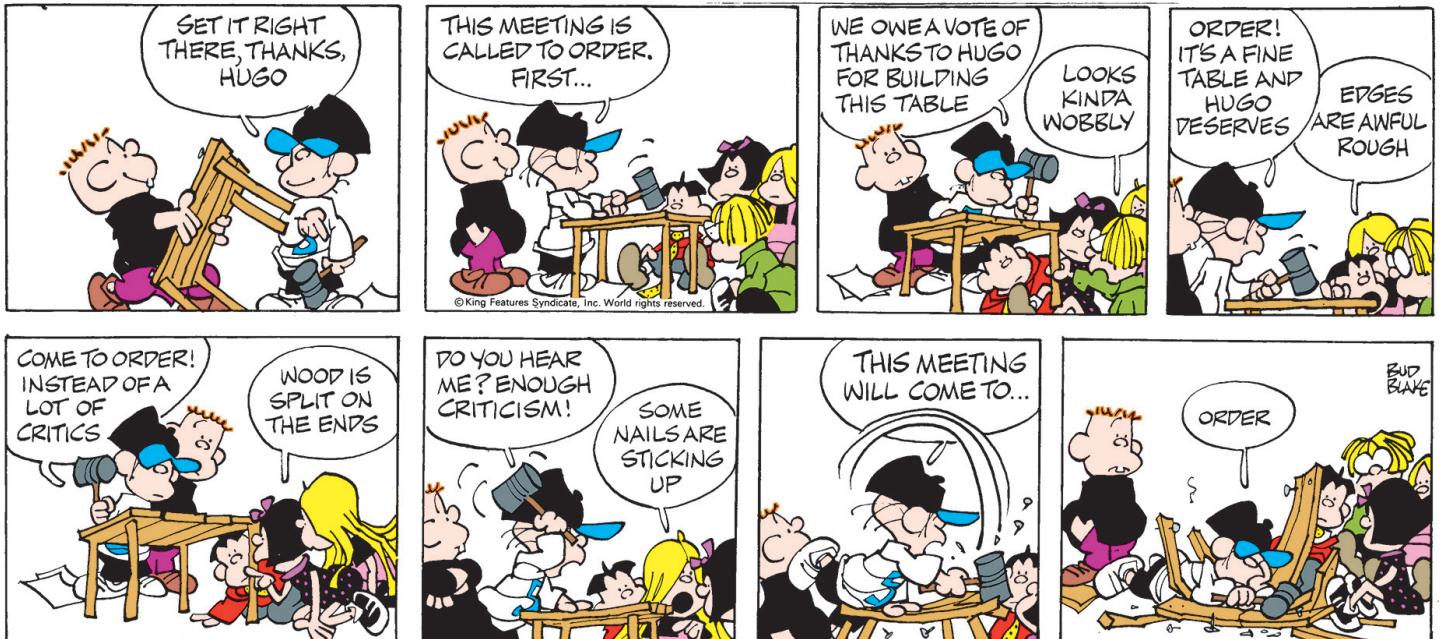
D E P A R T	L	E	
	E		E
		G	
		O	

Answers: (Across): Let, ere, age, pod. (Down): Leap, ergo, teed.

Answers:
1. COWS, CAWS, CARS, BARS, BARN.
2. GALA, GATE, FATE, FETE.
3. DARE, RARE, RASE, RISE, RISK.
4. SINE, NINE, MITE, MATH.
5. NAIL, BAIL, BALL, BOLL, BOLT.

TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



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King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 June honoree
- 4 Say it's so
- 8 Pretzel topper
- 12 Past
- 13 Travel permit
- 14 Done with
- 15 Brock of baseball
- 16 Alaskan city
- 18 Heron's kin
- 20 Army address
- 21 Dalai —
- 24 Slow, in music
- 28 Right to vote
- 32 Cash advance
- 33 201, in old Rome
- 34 Heat to near boiling
- 36 GOP org.
- 37 Priestly vestments
- 39 Cheap ride section
- 41 "Yum!"
- 43 Novelist Hunter
- 44 Steal from
- 46 Cowboy's workplace
- 50 Spur on
- 55 Tic-tac-toe win
- 56 Nerd's kin
- 57 Hostels
- 58 Hooting bird
- 59 Big wind

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15				16				17				
18			19				20					
			21		22	23		24		25	26	27
28	29	30					31		32			
33				34				35		36		
37			38		39				40			
41				42		43						
			44		45			46		47	48	49
50	51	52				53	54			55		
56					57					58		
59					60					61		

- 60 Track tipster
- 61 Carrier to Amsterdam
- 10 Table support
- 11 Three, in Rome
- 17 Texas tea
- 19 Sprite
- 22 PC alternatives
- 23 Marble type
- 25 Asta's feeder
- 26 Tart flavor
- 27 As soon as
- 28 "Shoo!"
- 29 Bruins' sch.
- 30 Little lies
- 31 Mountain ht.
- 35 Most loved
- 38 Painter's motion
- 40 Genetic letters
- 42 Thee
- 45 Telly watcher
- 47 Cranny
- 48 Batman's hood
- 49 Actress Celeste
- 50 Early bird?
- 51 PBS funder
- 52 Cartoon frame
- 53 Yucatan year
- 54 Wildebeest

DOWN

- 1 Valley
- 2 Awestruck
- 3 Gloomy
- 4 Online images
- 5 Sportscaster Scully
- 6 Computer key
- 7 Stadium cheers
- 8 Reddish-brown horse
- 9 "Selma"

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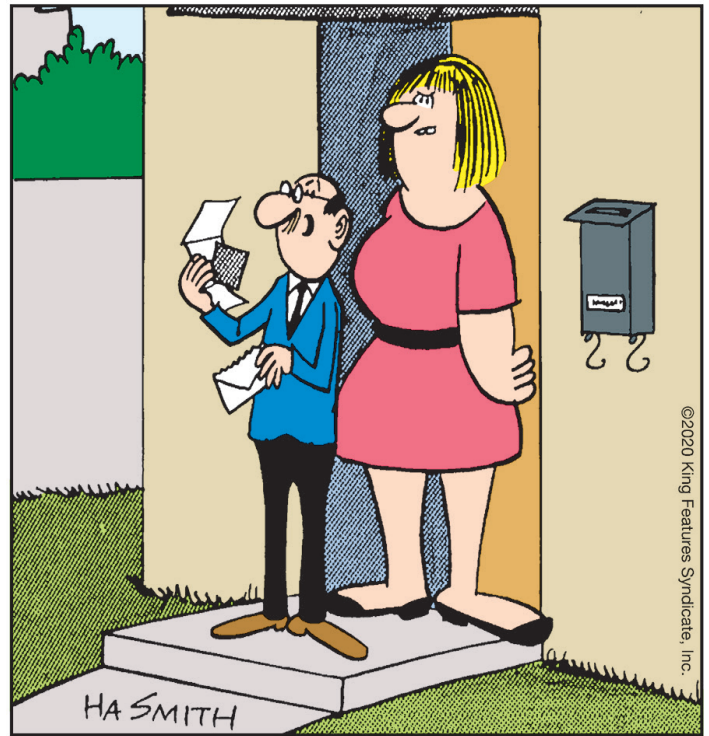
— King Crossword —

Answers

Solution time: 24 mins.

D	A	D		A	V	E	R		S	A	L	T
A	G	O		V	I	S	A		O	V	E	R
L	O	U		A	N	C	H	O	R	A	G	E
E	G	R	E	T			S	I	R			
			L	A	M	A		L	E	N	T	O
S	U	F	F	R	A	G	E		L	O	A	N
C	C	I		S	C	A	L	D		R	N	C
A	L	B	S		S	T	E	E	R	A	G	E
T	A	S	T	Y		E	V	A	N			
			R	O	B			R	A	N	C	H
E	N	C	O	U	R	A	G	E		O	O	O
G	E	E	K		I	N	N	S		O	W	L
G	A	L	E		T	O	U	T		K	L	M

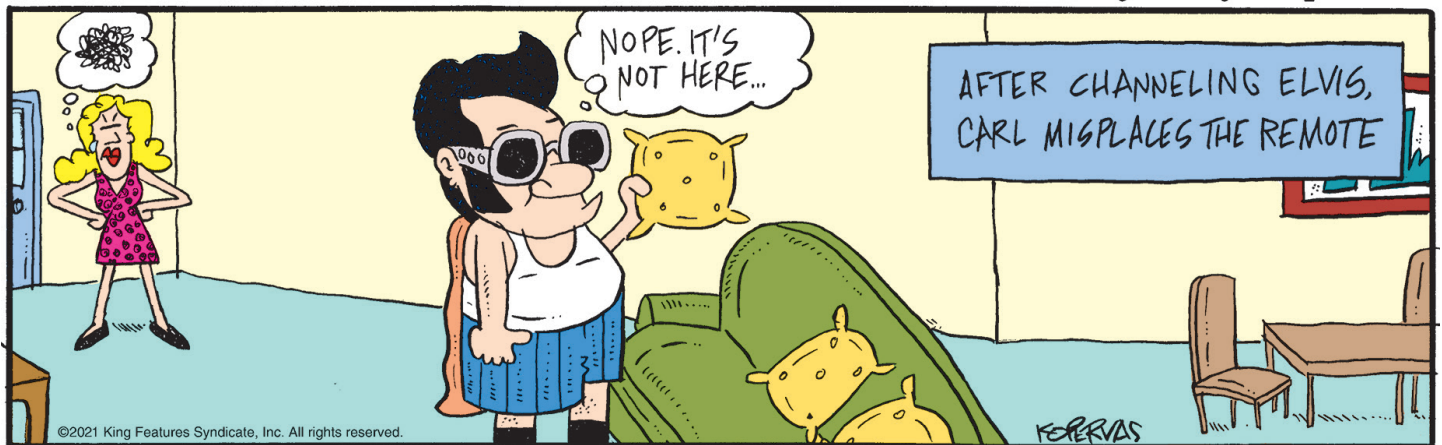
LAFF - A - DAY



"It's from the pickpocket that stole my wallet, dear. He returned your picture."

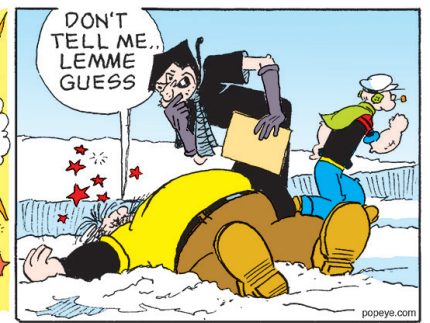
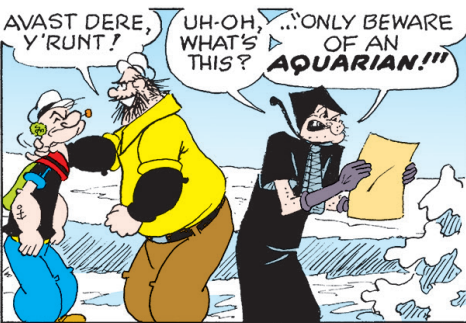
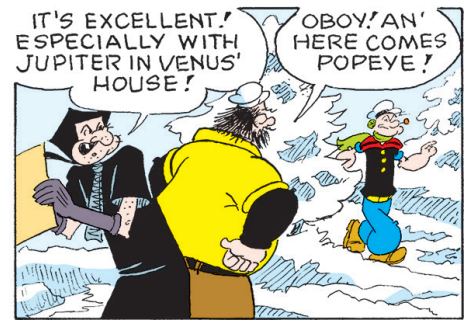
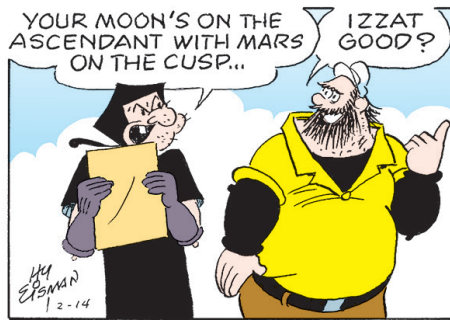
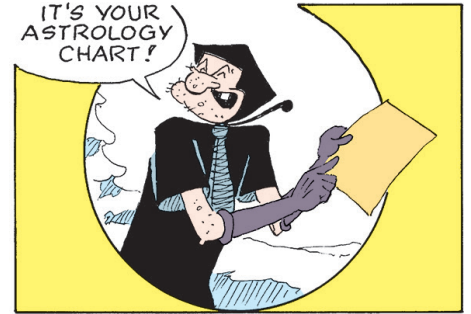
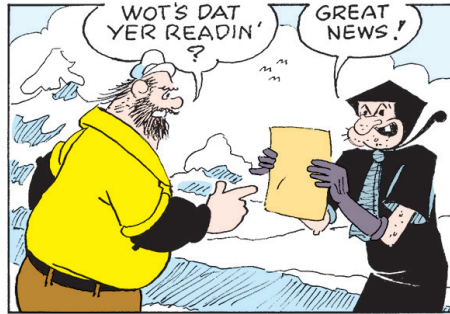
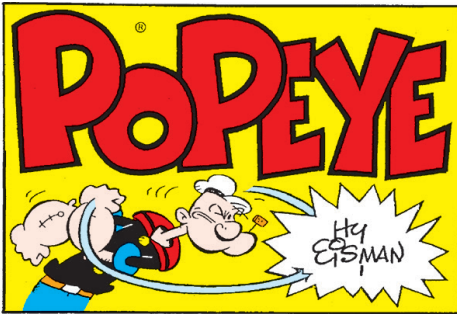
Out on a Limb

by Gary Kopervas



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R.F.D.

by Mike Marland

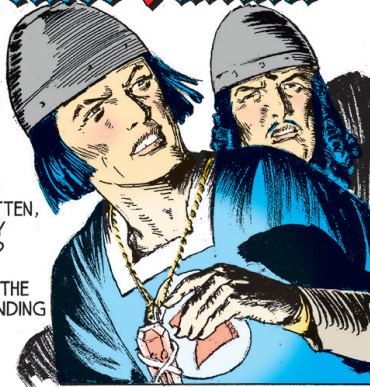


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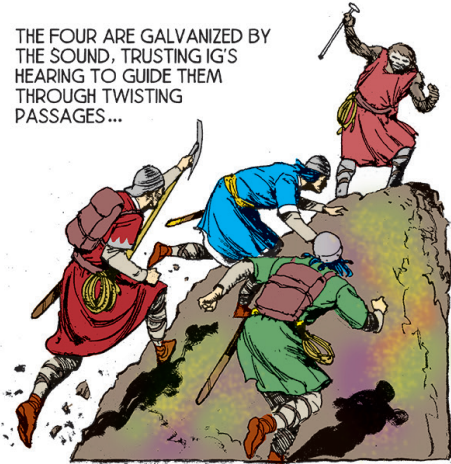
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Hal Foster's BY GIANNI AND SCHULTZ
Prince Valiant

Our Story:
VAL'S BRUSH WITH DEATH IS FORGOTTEN, AS A CRY FOR HELP ECHOES OUT OF THE SURROUNDING DARK.



THE FOUR ARE GALVANIZED BY THE SOUND, TRUSTING IG'S HEARING TO GUIDE THEM THROUGH TWISTING PASSAGES...



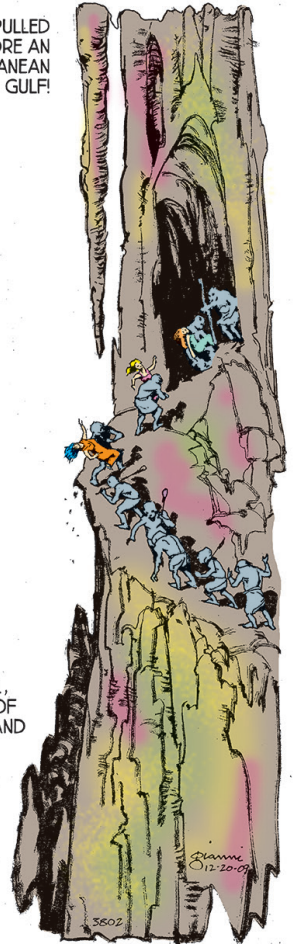
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...UNTIL THEY ARE PULLED UP SHORT BEFORE AN IMMENSE SUBTERRANEAN GULF!

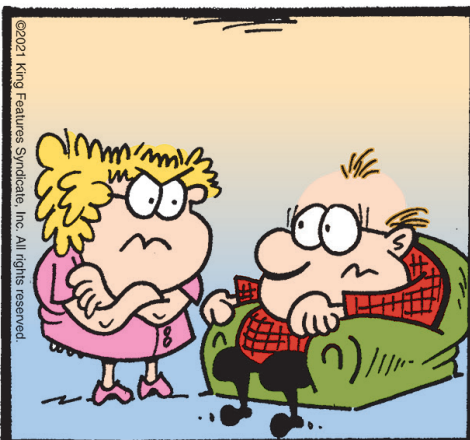
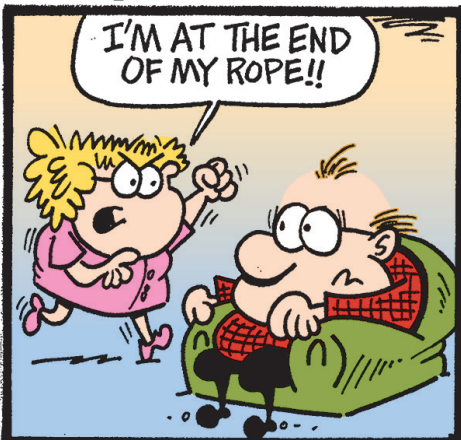
AND ON THE FAR WALL, THEY SEE A LONG LINE OF STUNTED CREATURES - AND THREE FRAIL FIGURES IN FLOWING GOWNS!

NEXT:
So close, so far...



The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

COVID Isolation Affects Our Mental Health, Too

COVID hits seniors hard. Many of us have underlying medical conditions that make a diagnosis of COVID very risky in terms of recovery. But the lockdown from the pandemic has another risky side: mental health disorders.

Whether we're living at home, in a retirement center or a care facility, our isolation has been very stressful.

A survey conducted in June concluded that seniors were less negatively affected than other age groups when it comes to mental health. They say we have better emotional regulation, which means we don't react as strongly to negative events.

But the study was done when we were only a few months into this new way of living. (Even the study mentions that as a caveat.) Now eight more months have passed. Holidays without family. Missed doctor appointments. We've had to take a crash course in online chat to be able to see and talk to friends and family. Our regular meetings and social outings are canceled.

The news has been a daily onslaught of the increasing numbers of positive cases and deaths.

A more recent study from Portugal unearthed the truth, however. After reviewing 41 pieces of research from around the world, scientists concluded that "anxiety, depression, poor sleep quality and physical inactivity" have been prevalent among seniors during our lockdowns.

If you're struggling, ask for help. In some communities, hotlines have opened up to deal with this kind of stress. Look online for "mental health hotline" and your state. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention set up a web page in December. Search online for "CDC Coping with Stress" and look at all the offerings on the page. There is a national helpline at 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Or you can just pick up the phone and dial 211. It's a referral for community services.

Stay safe.

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1. What World Golf Hall of Famer won 82 LPGA tournaments — including 13 major championships — from 1955-69?

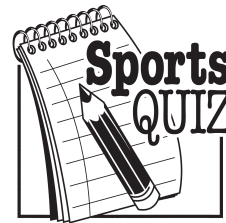
2. Bryce Harper, Jeff Bagwell, Jimmie Foxx and Andre Thornton are tied for what Major League Baseball record?

3. What NHL team ended a 54-year championship drought with a 4-3 Stanley Cup Finals win over the Vancouver Canucks in 1994?

4. In what league did the London Monarchs, Frankfurt Galaxy and Barcelona Dragons compete in from 1991-92?

5. What acclaimed sports documentarian's film credits include "Jesse Owens Returns to Berlin" (1968), "Wilma" (1977) and "100 Years of Olympic Glory" (1996).

6. In 1942, right-handed pitcher Hiram Bithorn became Major League Baseball's first player to hail from



by Ryan A. Berenz

what island?

7. A 1989 Pro Bowl wide receiver for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the 1990 NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year for the Chicago Bears share what name?

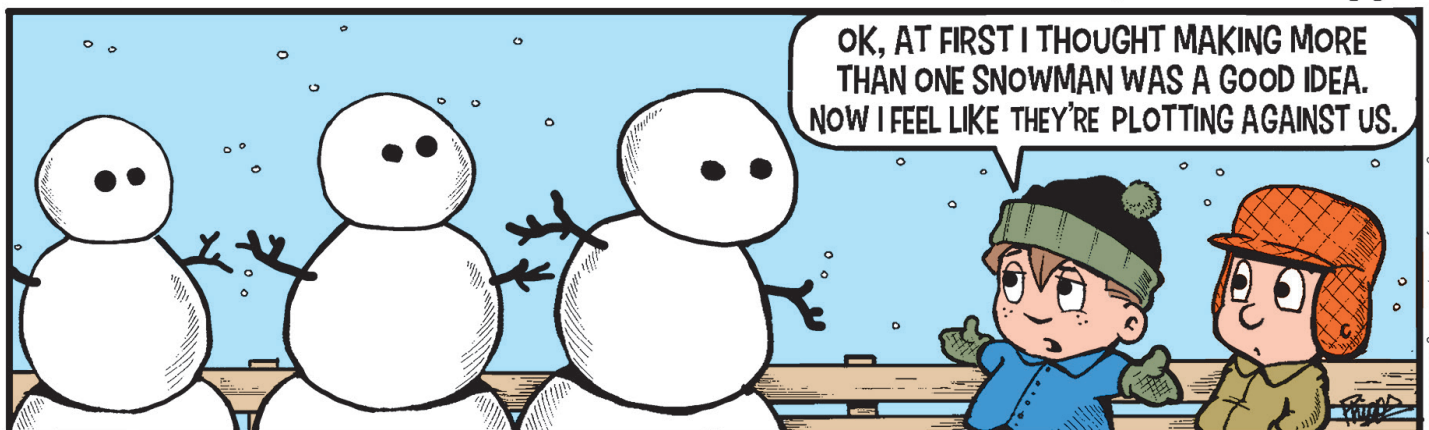
Answers

1. Mickey Wright.
2. Walks in a game (6).
3. The New York Rangers.
4. The World League of American Football.
5. Bud Greenspan.
6. Puerto Rico.
7. Mark Carrier.

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



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Invading Spiders Endanger Cat

DEAR PAW'S CORNER: For some reason this winter, my new house has been invaded by spiders. They are building webs in every corner of the house and basement, and every day I'm knocking down another web with my broom. I'm worried about my cat, "Jameson," being bitten by a spider. What do I do if this happens? — *Janine S., via email*

DEAR JANIE: I'm a huge fan of spiders, because they are one of nature's best pest control services, trapping and disposing of many other tiny critters. They probably have much more to fear from Jameson than the other way around, because housecats see spiders as interesting prey.

Still, a spider invasion is not much fun to deal with. Look for something that is attracting spiders to your home. Do you have wood or leaves piled

up against the foundation? Are there cracks in the foundation? Is your basement or attic damp? How clean are your HVAC vents and ductwork? Addressing the source of the problem can cut down quite a bit on the number of spiders invading your house.

As for Jameson being bitten by a spider — if you are concerned, do the same thing you would do when checking for evidence of fleas or ticks. Every evening put Jameson on your lap and run your hand over his coat, backwards. This lifts the hair away so you can see his skin. A spider bite on a cat will look similar to a spider bite on a human. If you do see a spider bite on Jameson, the best thing to do is observe. If he is behaving normally, not distressed or pawing/licking the bite, he's probably fine. If you have any concerns, contact his veterinarian.

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

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Strange BUT TRUE

By Lucie Winborne

- In 2008, two sisters from Virginia sold their Illinois-shaped corn flake on eBay for \$1,350.
- One of the first diet books, “The Art of Living Long” by Luigi Comaro, came out in 1558 ... and is still in print.
- In the movie “Psycho’s” iconic shower scene, Alfred Hitchcock achieved the sound of stabbings by knifing through a casaba melon. He even had his crew audition multiple varieties of melon to get the perfect tone.
- Folks who enjoy collecting ties are known as grabatologists.
- The mostly unknown second and third verses of “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” reveal the song was originally written as a feminist anthem about a woman wanting to go see a baseball game rather than go on a date to a show.
- Cinderella’s shoes were made of fur, not glass, in the tale’s original version.

- Overdo it on the garlic or onions and need to freshen your breath? Try roasted coffee beans instead of gum or mints. Israeli scientists have found that coffee can inhibit the bacteria that leads to bad breath, but if you prefer drinking it to chewing, you’ll do best to take it black.

- German chocolate cake was named for an American baker, Samuel German.

- “Scurryfungie” is an old English word meaning to rush around cleaning when you see company is on their way over.

- In the Middle Ages, the “shrew’s fiddle” or “neck violin” was used to punish those who were caught bickering by linking them face-to-face, forcing them to talk to each other. They weren’t released until their disagreement was resolved.

Thought for the Day: “I had a new vision in front of me, and I always feel that if I can see it and believe it, then I can achieve it.” — *Arnold Schwarzenegger*

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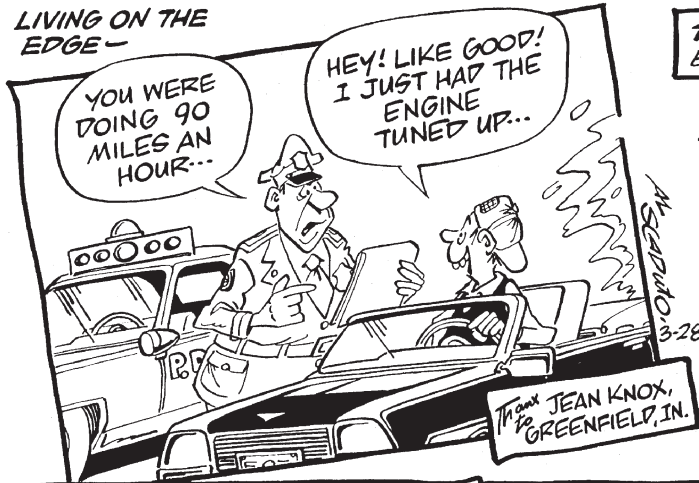
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THEY'LL DO IT EVERY TIME

BY AL SCADUTO

LIVING ON THE EDGE—



THINGS NEVER SEEN IN A WESTERN MOVIE—A BARTENDER GIVING CHANGE TO A CUSTOMER...



"THEY SHALL NOT PASS...THERE'S ONE IN EVERY CONGREGATION..."



Planting roses

In choosing a site to plant a rose bush, pick an area that receives six or more hours of direct sunlight. Some roses will grow in partial shade, but most roses bloom best in full sun. Roses are also heavy feeders and need rich soil to grow well, so work organic matter into the soil before planting. Avoid planting roses under trees, as falling branches will damage them, and avoid any areas that see high winds regularly. — Brenda Weaver

Source: www.thespruce.com

VETERANS ★ POST ★

by Freddy Groves

Sarge's Attic Dormitory

I slid through the backdoor of the coffee shop and found Sarge discussing the lease with four new guys — homeless veterans moving into the upstairs dormitory.

“And now we come to the most serious clause of this lease agreement,” he was saying. “Theft. I’m a real hard case about theft, and I have my own definition of it.”

He looked around the room and the guys were watching him warily.

“If you take a magazine off another guy’s dresser, read it and put it back, you’ve committed theft, in my eyes. Theft of trust. You do not touch another man’s stuff, ever.”

Half an hour later, we all piled out the back door to a rental truck full of furniture and hauled bed frames, mattresses, dressers, lamps, nightstands and large cartons up the narrow staircase.

Sarge stood at the top of the stairs like a drill instructor interior decorator, ordering the furniture placed in exact spots he’d marked out on the floor with blue duct tape. I popped open the boxes and the men took sheets, blankets, pillows and towel sets. In short order, the room was ... beautiful. Three of them flopped onto their beds, groaning with comfort. One guy refused: “I won’t touch it until I have a shower.” Sarge cocked his thumb at the bath at other end of the finished attic and the guy took off, cradling his armload of towels like they were gold.

Later, Sarge and I stood in the cold outside the back door, the first snowflakes of the next storm swirling around us. “I hope I selected right,” he said. “I originally thought I’d bring in six guys, but I wasn’t sure about two of them. These four seem like the best combination for success. I hope they get along.”

We heard thundering on the stairs as his formerly homeless renters came down to the kitchen to fix themselves some dinner. There was a lot of loud chattering — and laughter.

Sarge smiled.



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CONGRESSMAN
DUSTY JOHNSON
Representing **SOUTH DAKOTA** at large



Put Students First

I am proud to be a South Dakotan. As a father with three sons in public school, I'm grateful they have an opportunity each day to go to class in-person. Too many school children across this country aren't being given that opportunity, and it's a shame.

Study after study has shown that children being forced to learn remotely are falling behind students attending school in-person. The impact of those decisions will be felt for years to come.

President Biden promised Americans he would have schools reopened in the first 100 days of his presidency. However, America is one month into his tenure and he's walking back this promise.

His new watered-down approach? Fifty percent of classrooms, in-person one day a week. One. Day. A. Week. That's an absurd proposal. So absurd, he even reversed course on that plan this week.

Science and data have been the driving forces behind decisions made by the CDC and local governments, but apparently, science and data are irrelevant when push comes to shove and the national teachers union get involved.

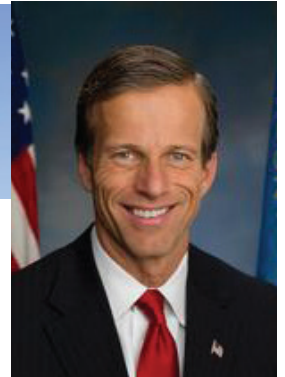
The Biden Administration has stressed schools cannot open until they have more funding – but that doesn't pass the smell test. Congress has already allocated \$68 billion for K-12 schools to increase safety protocols and only a fraction of that money has been spent.

According to the CDC, "there has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission." Last week, the CDC released long-awaited guidance that schools can be reopened safely if masks are worn and social distancing is practiced. South Dakota schools have been following this practice since last fall, and in Mitchell, there have been very few cases linked to in-person learning. I am grateful South Dakota's schools are open and our teachers aren't letting our students fall by the wayside, but other states aren't so lucky.

Frankly, like many parents, I'm frustrated. Frustrated at the unions for putting themselves before our children, frustrated at the high-rate of mental health issues young children now face, frustrated for the students falling further behind, and frustrated that one million American mothers have left the workforce in the past year.

I know many of America's teachers are just as frustrated as the parents and children facing uncertainty with never-ending remote learning – teachers and students want to be back in the classroom. The overwhelming majority of open schools in South Dakota are making wise decisions and mitigating the spread of COVID-19 – President Biden promised he'd lead efforts to open schools. It's time he fulfils that promise.

John Thune
U.S. SENATOR - SOUTH DAKOTA



A South Dakota Approach to Clean Energy

This past year has been tough for everybody, but especially for South Dakota's farmers and ranchers, who were already experiencing a struggling agriculture economy before the pandemic hit. Since I've been in Congress, fighting for agriculture – South Dakota's top industry – has been one of my highest priorities. As a long-time member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, which I'll be serving on again during the 117th Congress, I have sought to give South Dakota priorities a voice in national conversations on trade, food security, and energy development.

That's why I was disappointed that on the first day of the Biden administration, we were handed a significant economic blow with the cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline. We read stories about small businesses that had customers and orders vanish overnight. Thousands of workers learned that their jobs were cancelled with the stroke of a pen. All of this reveals the real-world harm that misguided environmental policies can create. I have urged President Biden to reconsider his decision, and I will continue to press for a common-sense, all-the-above energy strategy that can leverage South Dakota's contributions to American energy independence.

I have told the president's cabinet nominees that I will object to any far-reaching policies that threaten South Dakota's economy, such as a new "Waters of the United States" rule, but I have also strongly advocated for expanding areas of opportunity for our state, such as biofuels. For example, when I spoke to Tom Vilsack, the president's nominee for secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, he committed to working with me to promote ethanol as a form of clean energy, and he doubled down on that commitment during his confirmation hearing.

Earlier this month, I reintroduced two bipartisan bills that would provide a roadmap for increasing the use of biofuels. The Adopt GREET Act, which I introduced with Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), would require the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to update its greenhouse gas modeling for ethanol and biodiesel by using the U.S. Department of Energy's GREET model. A recent Harvard study found that ethanol is 46 percent cleaner than gasoline, with some technologies reducing lifecycle emissions by as much as 61 percent. These findings underscore how biofuels can achieve near-term emissions reductions using the existing vehicle fleet and fueling infrastructure without costly subsidies for electric vehicles.

The benefits of modern biofuels are rightfully getting increased attention in the ongoing discussion about the Biden administration's climate change agenda, aggressive as it may be. Cabinet nominees, including EPA administrator-nominee Michael Regan and energy secretary-nominee former Gov. Jennifer Granholm, have committed to "following the science," which should include fair consideration of new biofuel emissions data. If confirmed, I will be sure to hold all of them to their commitments.

I also recently reintroduced a bill to advance long-stalled biofuel registrations with the EPA. Regulatory inaction has stifled the advancement of promising technologies like ethanol that is derived from corn kernel fiber, even though some fuels are already safely used in states like California. My bill would permit biofuel producers to capitalize on the research and facility investments they have made to create advanced

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biofuels at scale, improve their operating margins, and further lower lifecycle emissions, all which would reinforce this essential market for our farmers.

These bills have received strong support from stakeholders, including the South Dakota Corn Growers Association. I recently attended a South Dakota Corn board meeting to discuss these proposals and receive feedback from producers on additional steps that can be taken to promote biofuels like ethanol. As always, this kind of feedback from folks in the state who know the issues best are what drives and informs the decisions I make in Washington.

As the 117th Congress gets to work, you can be sure that I will keep South Dakota's farmers and ethanol producers at the forefront of any energy policy discussions, and I will continue to press the Biden administration to "follow the science" by ensuring additional ethanol policy is on the table.

South Dakota Governor

Kristi Noem



South Dakota: *Under God, the People Rule*

Empowering Parents

Good education starts in the home. It starts with strong parents and strong families. We know that parents are responsible for a child's upbringing and their protection. And COVID-19 underscored just how involved parents need to be in their children's day-to-day education, as well.

It's our duty to find innovative solutions that empower parents to set their children up for success. For some kids, the home is the best environment for them to get an individualized education that fits their needs. Senate Bill 177 amends South Dakota's alternative education statutes. This legislation passed through the Senate this week and has my support.

Unfortunately, there's been a lot of misinformation on what this bill does. Some folks think that more homeschooling will lead to more truancy – and this bill strengthens two elements of the state's truancy statutes to make sure that this does not happen. It puts criminal processes in place for parents who neglect their duty to educate their children.

The bill also eliminates a testing mandate that is not currently being used in South Dakota. This test costs taxpayers \$40,000 a year to conduct. If nobody is using it, then we should eliminate it, save the taxpayers those dollars, and spend them in other areas that help grow our state.

SB 177 also simplifies the notification process. This complicated process varied from school district to school district, and we'd heard from families that it was burdensome when they simply wish to educate their children. There will still be a notification process in place – this just streamlines it.

The bill also allows kids who are being homeschooled to participate. In many school districts across South Dakota – including Rapid City, our 2nd largest school district – these kids can participate in activities today. Our children shouldn't have different opportunities based on what zip code they live in, so we're changing that. For some of these kids, participating in activities may be just the bridge they need to make friends and get involved in a public school. This will get some of these kids back in public school over time.

Through this entire conversation, we should all remember that our goal is to give each individual child the best possible education for their specific needs. For many kids, that comes in public school. For others, parents may realize that their kid will learn better at home. We should be helping parents in those instances; we shouldn't put roadblocks in their way.

Let's empower parents to make whatever choice they think is best for their children. In the meantime, let's put appropriate safeguards in place, such as the strengthening of our truancy statutes and a simplified notification process. And let's keep our focus right where it belongs: on ensuring that every South Dakota child gets the best individualized education that will set them up for a lifetime of success.

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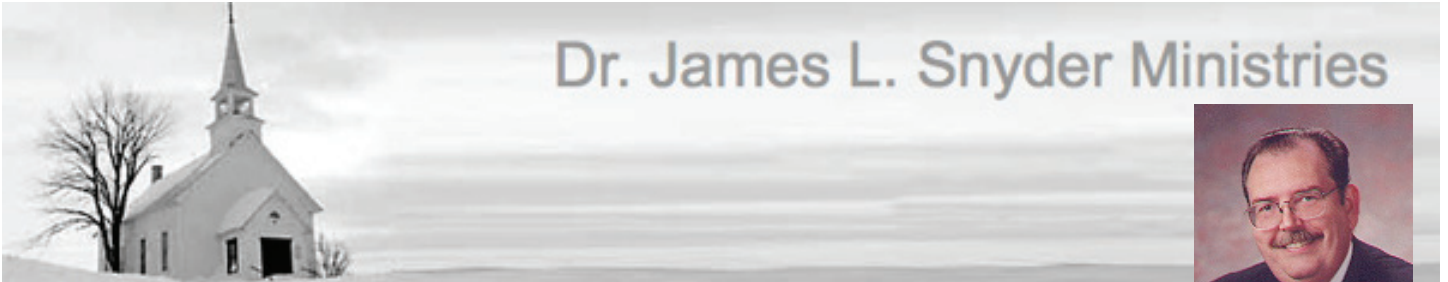
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Dr. James L. Snyder Ministries



What's Pete Got to Do with Anything?

If there's anybody that can be conned, it's Yours Truly. It's not so much that I'm stupid; I'm just naïve. I believe when somebody says something, they mean exactly what they say.

So, if you can't swindle me, you might as well hang it up and get a real job. I must confess I often know a certain person is trying to take advantage of me. But, that's another story.

One problem I see is that people are always blaming someone else for their problems. I must confess I do that on occasion, probably more so than I will acknowledge.

To blame someone else for my problem gets me off the hook, or so I think.

I gladly will take credit, but I'm slow in accepting blame. I'm trying to change that a little bit, but it's a slow progress.

The other day the Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage and I were going downtown to do some shopping. I don't always go with her when she's shopping, but sometimes it's necessary.

During these times, I always allow her to drive her vehicle. She has a wonderful red van, and enjoys driving it. I encourage her to drive it, and not because I don't like to drive, or because she's a better driver than me.

If the truth were known, and I keep this a little under the table, I allow her to drive because I am not using the gas in my vehicle when she is driving. I'm not cheap, but I am rather stingy when it comes to money.

She is an excellent driver, and why shouldn't she be? I'm the one who taught her how to drive. Enough said on that subject.

As we were driving down the main street, several cars swayed in and out of the traffic, and my wife almost hit one.

In complete frustration, she said, "For Pete's sake, what's wrong with people these days?"

Because she was in the driver's seat, I needed to go along with her and keep my mouth closed. There are many times when I need to open my mouth, but I have yet to discover which times. While she's driving, this is one of the times when I keep my mouth closed and my thoughts to myself.

She reiterated this phrase several times to the store and back home again.

I helped take the store items into the house while I kept my mouth closed.

We had supper, and then graduated into the living room to have our coffee and watch a little bit of TV news. I like to try to keep up with what's going on in the world.

Several stories were just outrageous, and people were doing such crazy things.

It wasn't long before my wife said, "For Pete's sake, what's wrong with people today?"

Okay, I think I've had enough of that, and I wanted to get to the bottom of it without sinking my ship.

"Who," I said as calmly as possible, "is Pete, and what does he had to do with anything?"

She looked at me, gave me one of her stares, and then went back to watching the news.

It wasn't long before another story came across the screen, and she said, "For Pete's sake, doesn't anybody know any different?"

I tried controlling myself. Honestly, I tried. But at this point, it had crossed over the line, and I said to her, "Who is Pete? And do I know him?"

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I tried my best to control any giggle. I looked at her, and she looked back at me with another one of her stares.

"Well, who do you think he is?"

At that point, I was tempted to answer, "Is Pete any relation to Jake?" I knew that I would be in more trouble than I could handle at the time. I sense she was getting a little frustrated, but most of her frustration was in my direction.

To look at me and said, "What are you laughing at?"

I couldn't contain myself at that point. I replied, "I just was thinking of a joke." No sense in showing my hand at this point.

For several days she never used that phrase, at least in my hearing. And I was waiting for it.

I can only hold myself for so long. One night there was a loud noise like gunshots outside, and we couldn't comprehend what it was.

Looking at my wife, I said, "Call Pete and ask him what's going on."

She gave me one of her looks and finally said, "Why don't you call Jake and ask him?"

Finally, we laughed together most heartily. I love it when a joke comes together.

I thought about this for a couple of days. How often we blame people for things I don't even make sense? We really don't want to take personal responsibility for a lot of things.

Thinking about this, I remembered a biblical passage. "And the man said, The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat. And the Lord God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat" (Genesis 3:12-13).

Blaming others is not a new phenomenon. But, it only gets us into trouble and what started the mess we're in today. Accept the blame and get on with life.

#363 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Not so much like a weekend, more like what we've been seeing. Of course, Sundays are always our low point in the week, so we'll see what tomorrow brings. But what today looks like is nothing is appreciably worse and nothing is appreciably better. After what we've been through, that's not so bad.

We're up to 28,091,100 cases reported in the US, which is 0.3% more than yesterday. There were 73,400 new cases reported today. This is below the summer peak, so that's progress, I guess. We're still above the summer's peak seven-day average, but we're getting closer and still dropping. Hospitalizations, at 59,882, are below 60,000 for the first time in approximately forever. I haven't been tracking that for a very long time, but I can say for sure it's been more than 100 days. Deaths reported today were 2057. Our deaths total inches ever closer to that half-million at 497,380, some 0.4% more than yesterday. We're going to hit 500,000 tomorrow or, more likely Monday. I do not look forward to that milestone.

With the number of people receiving vaccines these days, itself a matter for celebration, I'm getting a lot of questions about the practical side of vaccination. I can't help you much with how to get an appointment or whether you qualify yet where you live; those are questions for your state or local departments of health or for your medical care provider. But I can talk about the other issues surrounding vaccination. We've talked about most of this here and there before, but a couple of recent questions have caused me to conclude it might be a good idea to gather this information up in one place. So here's a short primer on being vaccinated.

1. You need two doses. Both currently-authorized vaccines are two-dose vaccines. We cannot be sure you'll be adequately protected if you stop at one dose. This is an important point, especially with all the news stories circulating lately about people who've had previous infections and delaying doses to stretch the vaccine supply and how this or that country is handling second doses. These are all intriguing ideas—if they turn out to be right. But right now, the US experts in charge of knowing stuff think there is not adequate evidence to support withholding a second dose for anyone except the seriously allergic. And the last thing we need is millions of Americans running around thinking they're protected when they are, in fact, not protected. It could be that, at some future date, we will have evidence that some people don't need a second dose, but we do not have that evidence now—and maybe we never will. Current guidance is clear and unequivocal: Get both doses.

[For the record, there is a single-dose vaccine about to undergo evaluation for emergency use authorization (EUA). If that one is authorized, then the need for a second dose will depend which vaccine you've received; but for the present, at least well into March, if you are vaccinated, you are receiving a two-dose vaccine. Get them both.]

2. You will be asked to hang around at the vaccination site for 15 to 30 minutes after receiving your vaccination. Don't be stupid and skip out. The purpose for this waiting period is to monitor you for severe allergic reactions—the kind that people can die from if they're not rapidly treated. This has been exceedingly rare, but it's nothing to mess with when it happens. These reactions typically develop quickly and respond very well to treatment if you're there to be treated. Every vaccination site has both the proper treatment and professionals qualified to administer it. Collapsing in the parking lot isn't exactly an ideal scenario—much smarter to do your collapsing in front of medical professionals equipped to deal with your problem. Just do what you're told and wait to leave until you've been cleared to do so.

3. Get the second dose at or as close as possible to the recommended interval. If you received Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine, then that interval is 21 days—three weeks; if you received Moderna's, then the interval is 28 days—four weeks. Don't freak out if your second appointment is 30 days after your first dose instead of 28; a few days isn't going to hurt a thing. But in general, come in as close to the recommended interval as possible. Something comes up—winter storm, vaccine supply problems, you feel ill on the day of your appointment and need to reschedule—then we're quite comfortable that extending the interval to as long as 42 days—six weeks—is still going to leave you well protected. So why not just plan that second appointment for six weeks out in the first place? Well then, if something like a storm comes up, you could

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easily end up outside that window where we don't know how well the vaccine will work. Planning for the correct interval leaves wiggle room in case you need it.

For the record, getting the second dose early is much more likely than a delay to cause a real problem; again, a day early is likely no big deal, but you do not want to come in way early. That might not give the first dose time to do its job so that the second one works as designed. I kind of doubt anyone's going to try to make you an appointment for a shorter interval between doses; but if it comes up, just ask for something later.

4. If at all possible, make the appointment for the second dose at the time you get the first one. In some places, this is routine (and should be everywhere); but in others, second appointments have been problematic. Do what you can to avoid those problems by being proactive with that second appointment. If you can't make it at the vaccination side, then as soon as you get home from the first dose, go to work setting it up. Do not leave this until too late.

5. You should receive the same vaccine for both doses. If your first dose was Pfizer/BioNTech, then your second dose should also be Pfizer/BioNTech; if your first dose was Moderna, then your second dose should be Moderna. We think maybe it wouldn't hurt to receive a first dose of one and a second dose of the other, but no one knows this for sure. When it comes to something that could kill me, "no one knows for sure" isn't really good enough for me—shouldn't be for you either. The only time playing mix-and-match with vaccine could possibly be OK is (a) if you do not know which one you received the first time or (b) in case of a serious supply problem where the correct vaccine is not available and is not expected to be within your six-week window. Still not a great plan, still not ideal. Keep track of which vaccine you received. You are probably aware by now that you will be given a little card with that information. If you're concerned about losing it, take a photo of it with your phone; then you'll have that to fall back on if the card does disappear and your memory fails you.

6. You may experience side effects from either or both doses of the vaccine. You are more likely to experience them with the second dose than the first; people with a prior Covid-19 infection are more likely to experience them with the first. Younger people are more likely to experience them than older people. Most people don't notice much, if anything; some get pretty sick. Most common symptoms are pain at the injection site which can be quite severe, fatigue, fever, chills, and aches. Some folks feel pretty bad; around one-third of recipients experience symptoms severe enough to slow them down. Duration is generally 24 to 48 hours with some going away much more quickly and a very few lasting more than 48 hours. Try not to plan anything big for the day after vaccination, just in case. If it's hard to get time off from your job, try to make your appointment for the day before a regular day off.

Outside of a very small number of severe allergic reactions, no one has required medical care for side effects. I believe the last report I saw on severe allergic reactions had the number somewhere around 60—with some 42 million doses administered so far. If you do have such a severe allergic reaction, you should not go in for the second dose. Consult your physician to discuss alternatives. I am not sure where we are on this, but I'm going to guess those folks will be recommended to receive the new Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine if it receives EUA. I do not believe it has any ingredients in common with either of the two authorized vaccines, so it is likely safe for those who've reacted to one of the current vaccines. I am working from limited information here—haven't even seen an ingredients list, so I am just working from what I know about the vaccine platforms. I have read that no one thinks it is in any way dangerous to receive one vaccine and then later receive a different one, so that shouldn't be a limiting factor. I'll let you know more on this as the situation develops.

One more thing: A small number of people have experienced a rash at the injection site. It's been showing up from three to 10 days after the shot. This does not fall into the "severe allergic reaction" category that would prevent getting the second dose; but if you develop this rash, it is recommended you receive the second dose in the other arm. Doctors have said it would be fine to treat with an over-the-counter antihistamine. This rash is not believed to represent a risk for a more severe allergic reaction with the second dose, so it's apparently nothing to get too excited about.

7. You should not take any medication to prevent side effects before you receive a dose of vaccine. We're

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talking about over-the-counter stuff like ibuprofen, acetaminophen, and naproxen. There is some small chance those meds will interfere with your response to the vaccine—and why would you want to do that? It's fine to take something afterward; but wait until you actually have symptoms, and some experts think you should limit yourself to acetaminophen if possible. This is because you shouldn't really be medicating problems you don't actually have and because that drug is less likely to get in the way of the vaccine. No one thinks it is a disaster if you take ibuprofen afterward; this is just hedging your bets. And please remember, this is all just tweaking at the margins; these vaccines work very well indeed, and so it is likely you'll be protected either way. We are just looking to squeeze out every gram of protection that we can get. Because why wouldn't you?

For the record, if you routinely take an anti-inflammatory for a chronic condition, do not just decide to skip your medication prior to receiving vaccine. It is recommended you consult with the prescribing physician to determine whether it is safe for you to withhold some doses prior to vaccination, but this is not a decision you should be making without proper medical consultation. It can be dangerous to abruptly discontinue some of these meds. Also, we do not believe these medications will completely shut down your response to the vaccine; there is simply some evidence from studies of other kinds of vaccines that they will inhibit the full development of an optimal response. With respect to Covid-19 vaccines in particular, in fact, people taking these kinds of medications were included in the phase 3 clinical trials for both of the currently-authorized vaccines and, as you will recall, no one in those trials became severely ill with Covid-19, including those folks. So if it is determined you cannot afford to miss any doses of your regular medication, you absolutely should still receive vaccine. This stuff has been highly effective in all sorts of people, so it is quite likely you will produce a beneficial immune response to it.

8. It is recommended you avoid receiving other vaccines from two weeks before your first dose until two weeks after your second dose. The reason for this isn't that we think it will kill you; it's just that we do not have any data on the safety of taking this with another vaccine, and we do not have any data on whether another vaccine might interfere with the efficacy of this one. This is another matter of not taking chances when there's no practical reason to do so. Avoiding other vaccines also helps us to know that any reaction you might have to the Covid-19 vaccine is from this vaccine, not from the other one. The exception to this guidance is where there is an emergency need for the other vaccine, for example, an exposure that makes tetanus or hepatitis B vaccine necessary. DO NOT put that off; you really do not want to deal with either of these diseases.

9. You are not immune as soon as the dose goes into your arm. It takes time to mount an immune response: That's why we're vaccinating you, after all—because we want you quicker on the draw if the real thing shows up, right? Figure about two weeks after the second dose before you're protected. After that, if you have a fully-functioning immune system, your chance of developing severe Covid-19 are just about zero. Seriously. Ain't that amazing? (I am amazed, and I get how this stuff works.)

10. You should still wear a mask. Sorry. I hate the damned things too. Practice social distancing too. Why? (a) Miniscule, but nonzero, chance you could get sick. What if your immune response wasn't all that damned skippy? (b) We don't know yet whether you can still get asymptotically infected and serve as a source of infection to others. Remember that vaccine trials looked for symptoms, not for subclinical infections, so we're not sure. There is developing evidence on this point, and so the day may come when we do know for sure, but we're not there yet. (Hint: The developing evidence looks pretty good for at least a much diminished chance of spreading. Stay tuned for developments there, but exercise precautions in the meanwhile.) (c) This is a big reason, even if the other two turn out not to apply: If you go swanning about without a mask, it helps to normalize skipping the mask. No one who sees you all bare-faced in the grocery store knows you've been vaccinated; they just see this person going boldly forth without a mask. And maybe they think to themselves that this isn't that big a deal after all and stop wearing theirs. Then someone else sees them and thinks to themselves . . . , etc. We can't afford that when we're so close. Let's get a whole lot more folks vaccinated and infection rates way, way down first. Please. Think about all the not-yet-vaccinated people you will be protecting just by setting an example. What a small thing to do to show caring for others.

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Now you will note that some of the advice I've dispensed above is in the way of absolutes: Get the second dose. Period. And other of it is by way of doing tiny things that might buy you another fraction of a percentage point of protection—not absolutes, but good ideas for optimizing your immune response. This range is why I've been particularly verbose here, even for me—so that I can explain fully which is which and why these recommendations are current best practice. I think it's easier to do things right when you understand why you're doing them and what difference it makes when you do. So I hope this will be helpful to you as you make your appointments and receive vaccine. Let's get this done together and reclaim our lives.

Only four percent of mental health professionals are Black, which is something of a problem for Black people seeking their services because it is difficult to establish the sort of trust needed for a counseling relationship with someone you don't see as sharing your background, understanding where you come, "getting" what you face each day. What's more, suicide is the third leading cause of death among Black men ages 20 to 44. And there is a culture in that population that sees needing help as weak and values "toughness" and taking care of your own business, so a whole lot predicates against these guys getting the kinds of help that can save their lives and make them more satisfying and rewarding.

Lorenzo Lewis is a Black man who sees all that and understands how destructive it can be in his community. Born to an incarcerated mother, he lost his dad at the age of 10 and didn't have anywhere to go to meet his needs. But growing up, he had hung around in his aunt's beauty salon where he saw the barber at work and observed that this was the one place in his community where men let their guard down, where they communicated more openly. He explained that this is one place in communities where Black people "are not just tolerated, but seen, heard, and celebrated." There is something about being one on one with another human being with a lot of touch involved, but where there isn't much for judgement or expectations, that seems to break down barriers. And so, when he'd grown up, Lewis had an idea.

What if barbershops were places that could change the narrative of the way Black men see themselves? What if barbers could forge stronger connections with their clients and act as a positive influence in the community? And so he went to work, offering barbers training in specific core skills: active listening, validation, positive communication, and reducing the stigma of getting help. He built an organization called The Confess Project to accomplish these goals. If you have men unable or unwilling to access professionals, but who will talk to their barbers, then the goal is to start with the barbers: to turn them into supportive listeners—not mental health experts, but mental health advocates. And he did: 200 barbers in 16 cities reaching 240,000 clients in a year. For ten years. That's a whole lot of potential for change.

Reordering a culture's view of mental health is a tall order, but you never get anywhere if you just talk about it. Change needs to start somewhere. Like with that first barber, and then another one and another one and one more after that—until you have 200 barbers. Lewis says on his website that he is aiming to create leaders in a generation of leaders. And the plan is to do it one barbershop at a time. Powerful stuff from just this one guy who saw a need and had an idea—and then did something. Something good.

Be well. We'll talk again.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	452	430	851	15	Minimal	14.3%
Beadle	2685	2571	5725	39	Substantial	12.4%
Bennett	381	366	1164	9	Minimal	2.4%
Bon Homme	1502	1473	2029	25	Minimal	6.3%
Brookings	3557	3446	11616	36	Substantial	3.5%
Brown	5084	4924	12423	85	Substantial	6.5%
Brule	687	670	1835	9	Minimal	17.9%
Buffalo	420	406	889	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	972	934	3156	20	Moderate	3.0%
Campbell	129	125	254	4	Minimal	25.0%
Charles Mix	1266	1206	3838	20	Substantial	13.2%
Clark	362	344	934	5	Substantial	6.1%
Clay	1779	1748	5105	15	Moderate	3.6%
Codington	3923	3730	9479	76	Substantial	13.8%
Corson	466	449	991	12	Minimal	13.3%
Custer	743	717	2648	12	Moderate	10.9%
Davison	2936	2845	6367	60	Moderate	4.7%
Day	653	600	1730	28	Substantial	20.0%
Deuel	471	453	1110	8	Moderate	16.1%
Dewey	1401	1369	3760	23	Minimal	2.4%
Douglas	422	407	885	9	Minimal	2.9%
Edmunds	477	453	1019	12	Moderate	5.3%
Fall River	519	497	2544	15	Moderate	4.4%
Faulk	354	330	682	13	Moderate	0.0%
Grant	951	889	2168	37	Substantial	16.7%
Gregory	529	482	1224	27	Substantial	6.4%
Haakon	246	236	524	9	Minimal	14.3%
Hamlin	694	631	1730	38	Moderate	8.8%
Hand	327	315	786	6	Minimal	3.8%
Hanson	354	340	693	4	Moderate	18.4%
Harding	91	90	179	1	Minimal	0.0%
Hughes	2278	2189	6408	34	Substantial	4.8%
Hutchinson	783	738	2292	24	Moderate	9.1%

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Hyde	136	133	399	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	276	260	904	14	Minimal	15.4%
Jerauld	268	249	546	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	84	83	214	0	Minimal	0.0%
Kingsbury	630	598	1614	14	Moderate	9.7%
Lake	1173	1133	3197	17	Moderate	7.9%
Lawrence	2801	2730	8349	44	Moderate	6.8%
Lincoln	7660	7452	19789	77	Substantial	5.2%
Lyman	597	579	1846	10	Minimal	8.8%
Marshall	301	288	1151	5	Moderate	2.8%
McCook	738	702	1581	24	Moderate	7.0%
McPherson	237	231	544	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2557	2472	7496	31	Moderate	10.4%
Mellette	244	239	716	2	Minimal	0.0%
Miner	270	251	560	9	None	0.0%
Minnehaha	27702	26915	76111	326	Substantial	5.0%
Moody	612	587	1726	16	Minimal	7.7%
Oglala Lakota	2050	1969	6566	49	Minimal	2.2%
Pennington	12727	12318	38374	185	Substantial	8.2%
Perkins	344	319	786	13	Minimal	12.9%
Potter	365	351	819	3	Moderate	13.3%
Roberts	1153	1081	4041	35	Substantial	4.8%
Sanborn	326	320	668	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	796	753	2079	25	Substantial	7.4%
Stanley	327	319	907	2	Minimal	3.7%
Sully	136	132	298	3	Minimal	6.3%
Todd	1218	1179	4085	28	Moderate	9.8%
Tripp	687	651	1446	16	Moderate	18.4%
Turner	1059	992	2646	53	Moderate	8.3%
Union	1957	1880	6084	39	Substantial	9.0%
Walworth	716	691	1800	15	Moderate	14.3%
Yankton	2788	2724	9131	28	Moderate	1.7%
Ziebach	336	325	854	9	None	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1805	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4427	0
10-19 years	12472	0
20-29 years	19833	5
30-39 years	18272	17
40-49 years	15867	35
50-59 years	15670	109
60-69 years	12726	245
70-79 years	6808	420
80+ years	5090	1028

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	57951	876
Male	53214	983

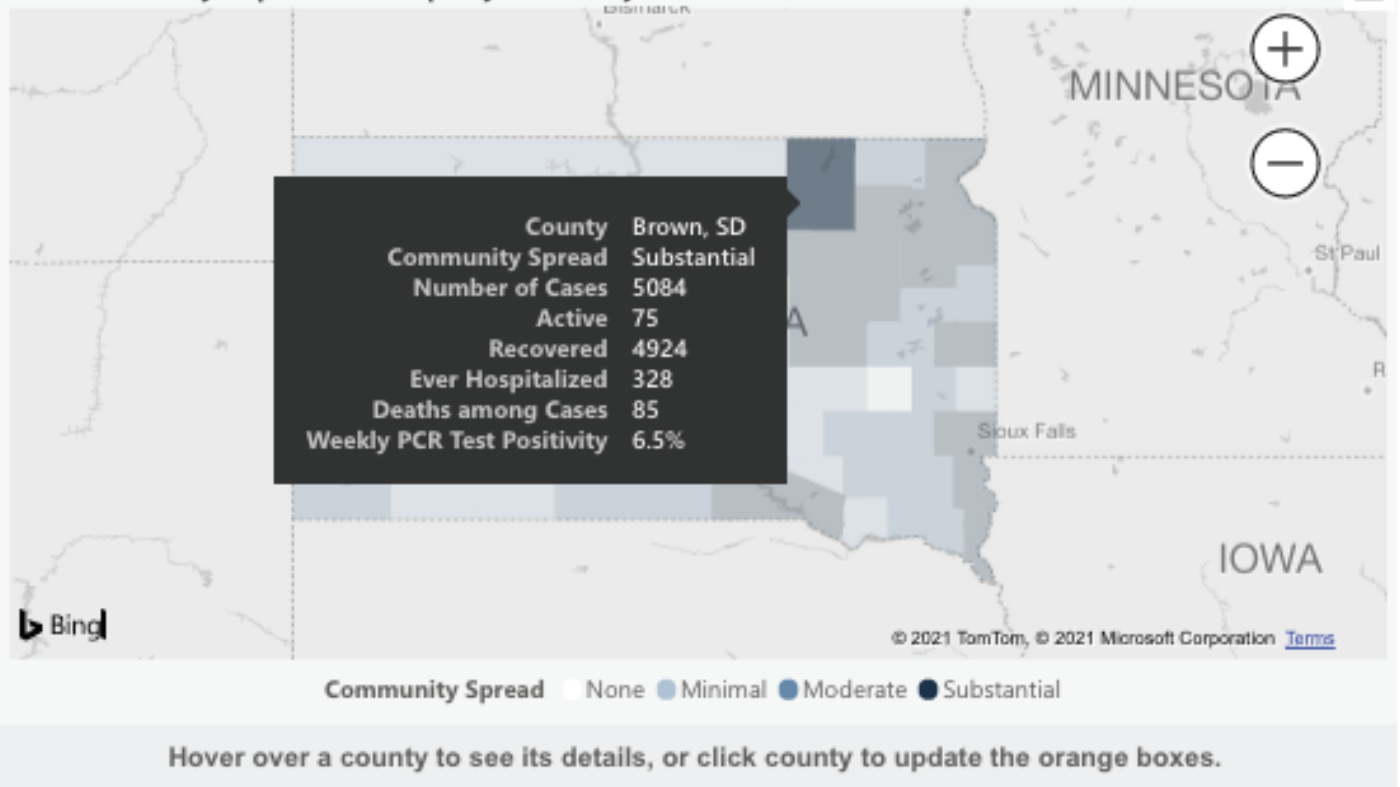
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



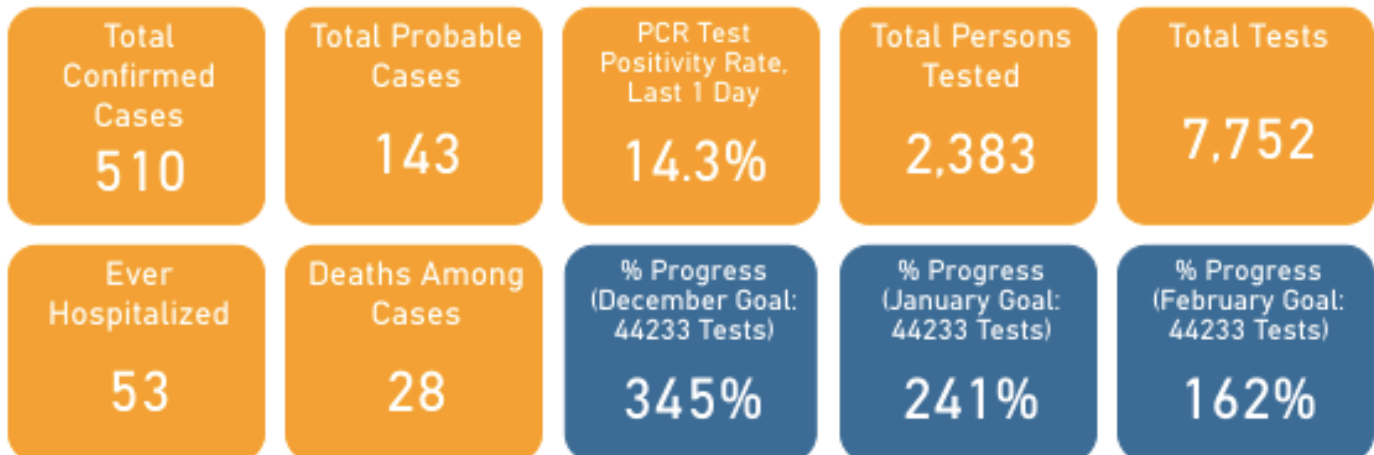
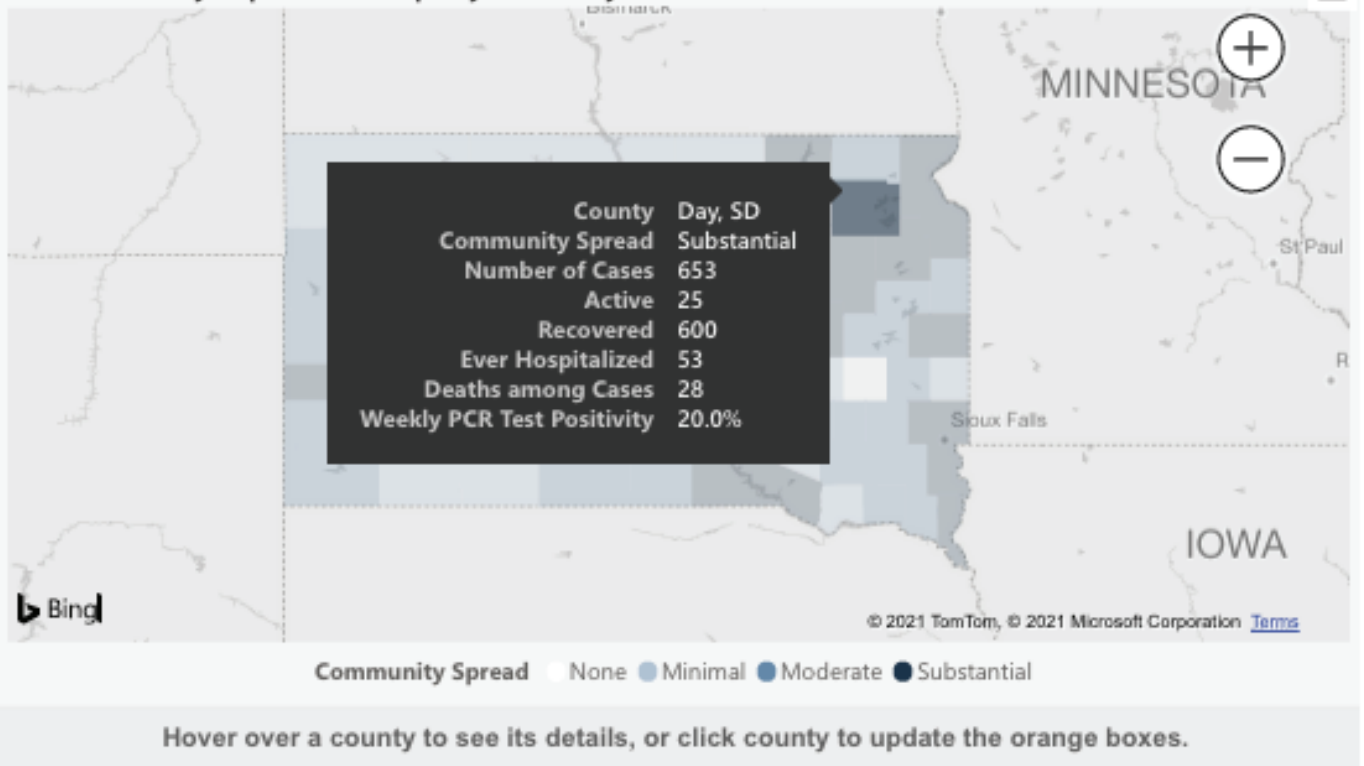
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

180,296

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

119,896

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

17%

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	95,254
Pfizer	85,042

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - Series Complete	31,781
Moderna - 1 dose	31,692
Pfizer - Series Complete	28,619
Pfizer - 1 dose	27,904

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	17.38%
Series Complete	8.75%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16 years and older

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	425	205	110	315
Beadle	3566	1,656	955	2,611
Bennett*	275	95	90	185
Bon Homme*	2040	1,124	458	1,582
Brookings	4698	1,692	1,503	3,195
Brown	8555	2,661	2,947	5,608
Brule*	1123	461	331	792
Buffalo*	97	77	10	87
Butte	1017	479	269	748
Campbell	660	208	226	434
Charles Mix*	1790	826	482	1,308
Clark	698	270	214	484
Clay	2767	1,127	820	1,947
Codington*	5861	2,111	1,875	3,986
Corson*	166	74	46	120
Custer*	1510	654	428	1,082
Davison	4375	1,427	1,474	2,901
Day*	1381	501	440	941
Deuel	857	357	250	607
Dewey*	294	56	119	175
Douglas*	747	269	239	508
Edmunds	729	263	233	496
Fall River*	1555	647	454	1,101
Faulk	612	220	196	416
Grant*	1343	489	427	916
Gregory*	954	378	288	666
Haakon*	338	108	115	223

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Hamlin	979	447	266	713
Hand	768	348	210	558
Hanson	248	110	69	179
Harding	38	28	5	33
Hughes*	4804	1,666	1,569	3,235
Hutchinson*	2126	772	677	1,449
Hyde*	330	116	107	223
Jackson*	248	92	78	170
Jerauld	445	253	96	349
Jones*	363	147	108	255
Kingsbury	1247	553	347	900
Lake	2031	727	652	1,379
Lawrence	4169	1,933	1,118	3,051
Lincoln	15845	4,035	5,905	9,940
Lyman*	426	232	97	329
Marshall*	881	339	271	610
McCook	1226	452	387	839
McPherson	121	51	35	86
Meade*	3300	1,332	984	2,316
Mellette*	29	13	8	21
Miner	492	182	155	337
Minnehaha*	46853	13,285	16,784	30,069
Moody*	914	338	288	626
Oglala Lakota*	94	44	25	69
Pennington*	21335	6,219	7,558	13,777
Perkins*	311	175	68	243
Potter	452	196	128	324
Roberts*	2451	1,107	672	1,779
Sanborn	550	214	168	382
Spink	1857	659	599	1,258
Stanley*	721	277	222	499
Sully	213	89	62	151
Todd*	100	36	32	68
Tripp*	1334	478	428	906
Turner	2116	600	758	1,358
Union	1458	742	358	1,100
Walworth*	1298	374	462	836
Yankton	5848	1,592	2,128	3,720
Ziebach*	43	13	15	28
Other	3799	795	1,502	2,297

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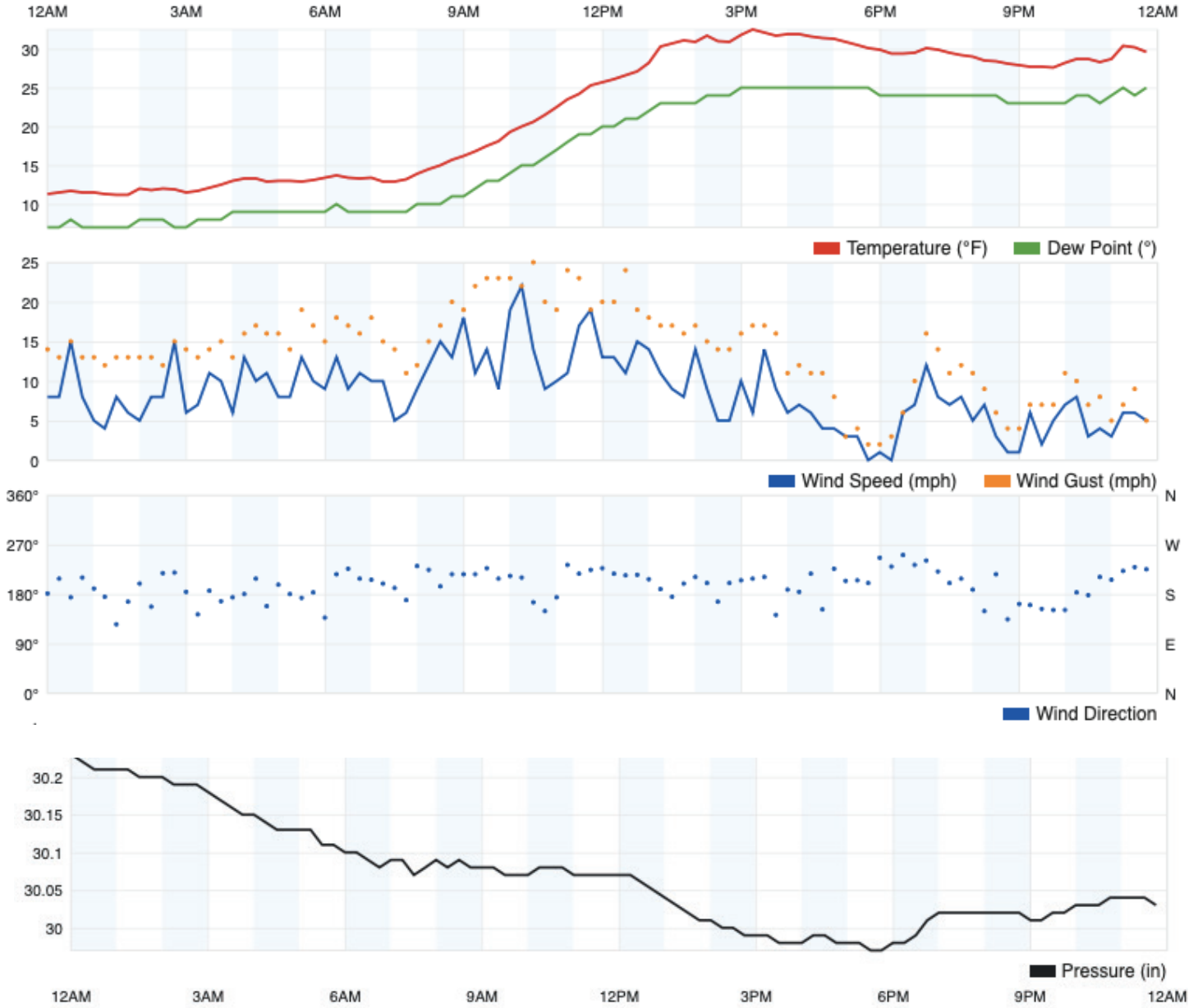


NATIONAL
— DEBT RELIEF —

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

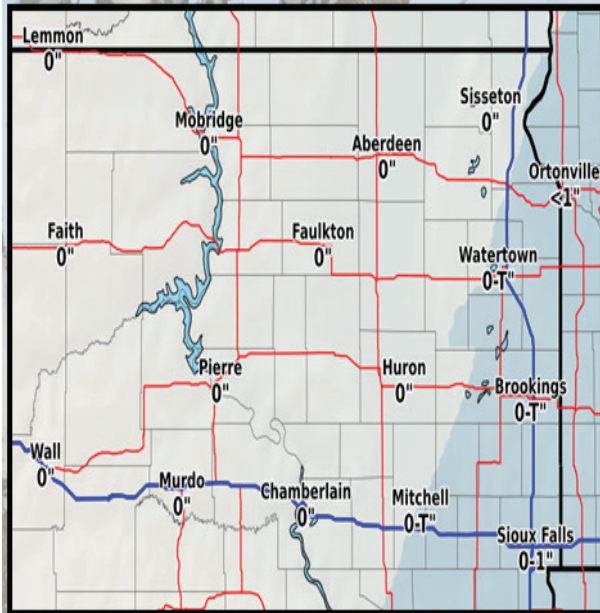


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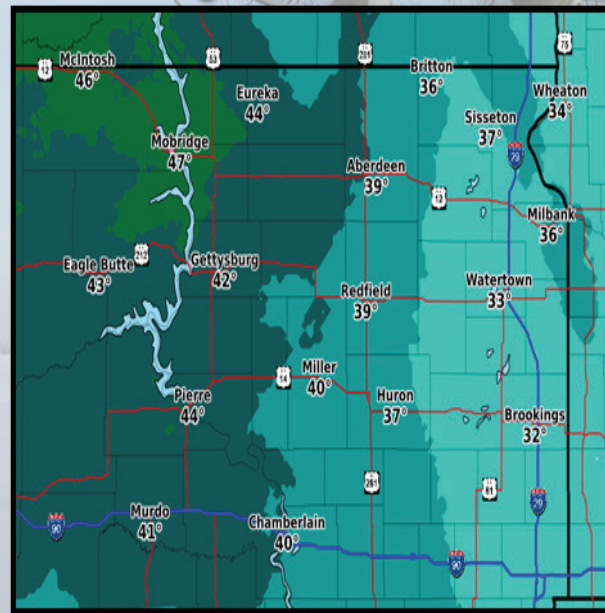
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Today	Tonight	Monday	Monday Night	Tuesday
				
Becoming Sunny	Increasing Clouds	Partly Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Partly Sunny then Slight Chance Rain
High: 39 °F	Low: 23 °F	High: 49 °F	Low: 27 °F	High: 44 °F

Additional Snowfall This Morning



Highs This Afternoon



Updated: 2/21/2021 5:53 AM Central

Light snow will come to end this morning across northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Not much more accumulations are expected with most areas seeing less than an inch. Clearing skies from west to east will take place through the day as west to northwest breezes kick in. Temperatures will be warmest across the west this afternoon. The outlook going into the work week is calling for well above normal temps on Monday along with plenty of wind.

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Today in Weather History

February 21, 1918: An unusual warm-up of 83 degrees in just 12 hours at Granville, North Dakota from Chinook winds. The temperature soared from an early morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon temperature of 50 degrees. Chinook winds are caused by the compression of Pacific air descending the Rockies. Compressing the air causes it to heat up, resulting in the dramatic temperature rises.

February 21, 1969: Heavy snow, along with winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow which closed many roads. Snowfall amounts of 5 to 12 inches were typical across eastern South Dakota from the 20th to the 22nd. Some snowfall amounts included, 5 inches at Clear Lake and Brookings, 6 inches at Wilmot, 7 inches at Milbank, Redfield and Mitchell, 8 inches at Conde, 9 inches at Webster, Sioux Falls, and Huron.

1971: A massive tornado outbreak occurred in the Delta region of northeastern Louisiana and Mississippi. The first significant tornado touched down at about 2:50 p.m. in Louisiana and crossed into Mississippi. 46 were killed by this twister, which struck the towns of Dehli and Inverness. 121 people lost their lives that day, including 110 in Mississippi. A total of 1600 people were injured, 900 homes severely damaged or destroyed. The total loss was around 19 million dollars.

1918 - A spectacular chinook wind at Granville, ND, caused the temperature to spurt from a morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon high of 50 degrees above zero. (David Ludlum)

1935 - Frequent duststorms occurred in eastern Colorado during the month, forcing schools to close and people to stay indoors. A fatality occurred on this date when two section cars collided on the railroad near Arriba CO, due to poor visibility. (The Weather Channel)

1936 - The temperature at Langdon, ND, climbed above zero for the first time in six weeks. Readings never got above freezing during all three winter months. (David Ludlum)

1971 - An outbreak of tornadoes hit northeastern Louisiana and northern and central Mississippi. The tornadoes claimed 121 lives, including 110 in Mississippi. Three tornadoes accounted for 118 of the deaths. There are 1600 persons injured, 900 homes were destroyed or badly damaged, and total damage was 19 million dollars. (David Ludlum)

1971 - Elk City, OK, was buried under 36 inches of snow to establish a 24 hour snowfall record for the state. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Low pressure over central California produced gale force winds along the coast, and produced thunderstorms which pelted Stockton, Oakland and San Jose with small hail. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A storm tracking across southern Canada produced high winds in the north central U.S., with gusted to 90 mph reported at Boulder CO. The high winds snapped trees and power lines, and ripped shingles off roofs. The Kentucky Fried Chicken Bucket was blown off their store in Havre MT. An eighteen foot fiberglass bear was blown off its stand along a store front in west Cody WY, and sailed east into downtown Cody before the owners were able to transport their wandering bear back home in a horse trailer. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing during the morning hours spread severe weather across Georgia and the Carolinas. Strong thunderstorm winds caused one death and thirteen injuries in North Carolina, and another four injuries in South Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Overnight thunderstorms produced heavy rain in central Texas. Rainfall totals ranged up to 2.80 inches at Camp Verde, with 2.20 inches reported at Leakey. Thunderstorms early in the day produced high winds in southern Texas, with wind gusts to 60 mph reported at Alice. Daytime thunderstorms in eastern Texas drenched Rosenberg with four inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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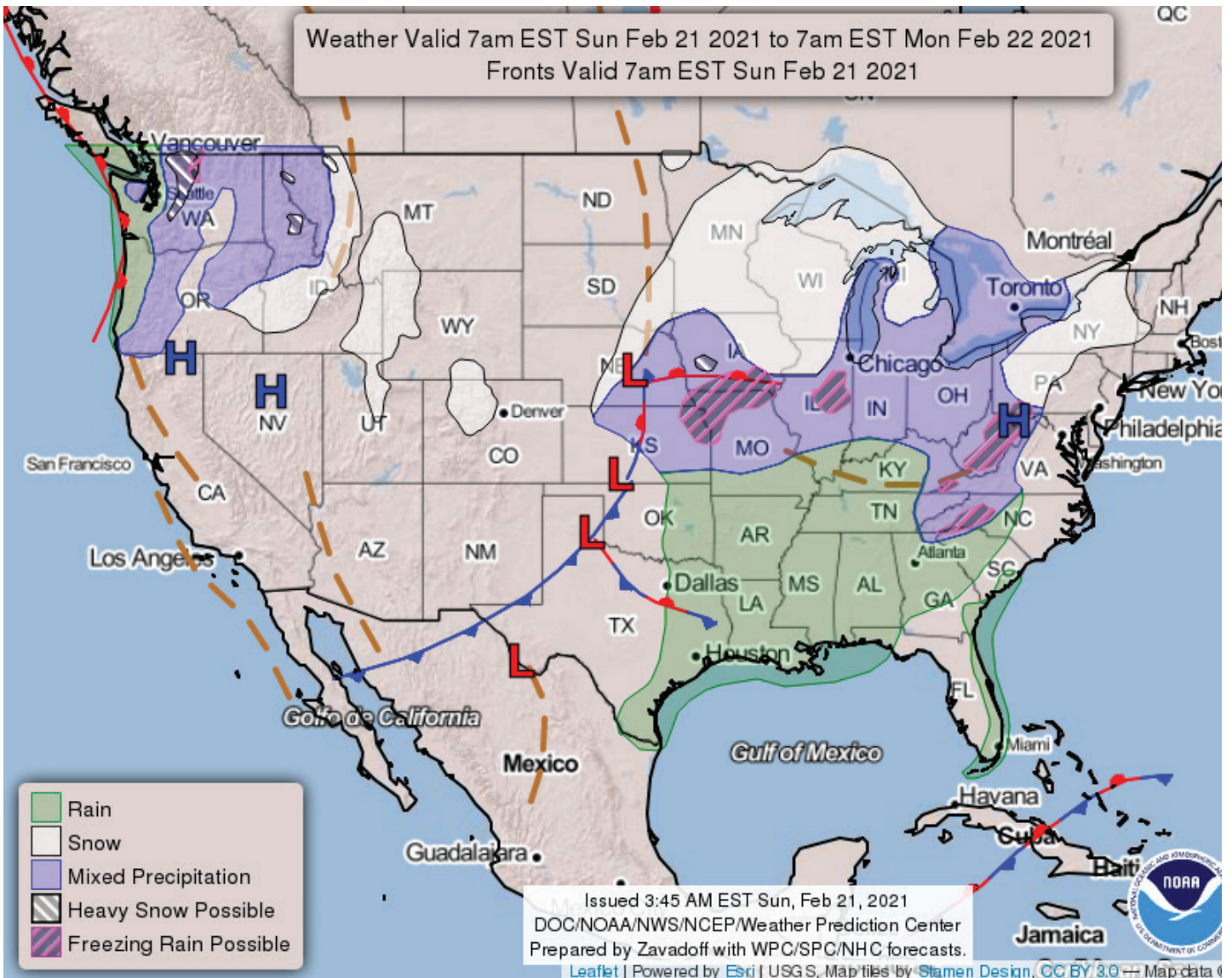
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 32 °F at 3:12 PM
Low Temp: 11 °F at 1:32 AM
Wind: 25 mph at 10:23 AM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 64° in 1917
Record Low: -30° in 1918
Average High: 30°F
Average Low: 10°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.35
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.14
Average Precip to date: 0.82
Precip Year to Date: 0.14
Sunset Tonight: 6:10 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:23 a.m.



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THE POTENTIAL IN PRAYER

Understanding the Word of God is important. But applying the Word of God to our lives is essential if we want to become who God wants us to be. Sin, we know, is a barrier to our relationship with God. It keeps us from enjoying His presence and power in our lives. In Psalm 19 we discover three important facts about sin and its consequences.

"How can I know the sins lurking in my heart?" asked the Psalmist. What a question! If we want to know how we look, we have at least three options: We can look into a mirror, ask someone to tell us how we look or search the Word of God. Only His Word, however, will give us a true picture of who we are, our sinful condition and the consequences that await us. We will quickly discover our faults and failures and see ourselves as God sees us. His Word will become our mirror when we hold up our lives to it, compare our lives with its teachings and ask God to reveal our sins to us. Then, with the Psalmist, we can pray "Cleanse me!"

But there is another request from the Psalmist: "Keep your servant from deliberate sins." To be cleansed is not enough. We need His power and protection to live the life that God would have us to live and become who He expects us to be. Through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, God will answer this prayer. But we must be sincere when we pray and willing to surrender our lives to the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to guide us, guard us and have control of us.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to read Your Word, know Your Word, accept Your Word and live Your Word. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Keep your servant from deliberate sins! Don't let them control me. Then I will be free of guilt and innocent of great sin. Psalm 19:13

Girls NEC Standings

Hamlin.....	10-0
Roncalli	9-1
Redfield	8-2
Sisseton	6-4
Groton	6-4
Webster.....	5-5
Milbank	4-6
Clark/Willow Lake	4-6
Deuel	1-9
Tiospa Zina	1-9
Britton-Hecla.....	1-9

Boys NEC Standings

Groton	8-2
Clark/Willow Lake	7-2
Tiospa Zina	6-2
Sisseton	5-3
Milbank	5-4
Roncalli	5-4
Hamlin.....	7-3
Redfield	5-4
Deuel	2-8
Webster.....	1-9
Britton-Hecla.....	0-10

Boys Games Left:

Feb. 22. Redfield at Sisseton
Feb. 23: Tiospa Zina at Clark
Feb. 26: Tiospa Zina at Sisseton
Feb. 26: Roncalli at Milbank

FINAL EXPENSES

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Father/Daughter Dance (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (Halloween)
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Saturday:

Dakota Cash

02-06-11-23-33

(two, six, eleven, twenty-three, thirty-three)

Estimated jackpot: \$37,000

Lotto America

07-18-26-31-39, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 3

(seven, eighteen, twenty-six, thirty-one, thirty-nine; Star Ball: eight; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.05 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

04-08-22-32-58, Powerball: 4, Power Play: 10

(four, eight, twenty-two, thirty-two, fifty-eight; Powerball: four; Power Play: ten)

Estimated jackpot: \$78 million

Saturday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Brandon Valley 61, Watertown 35

Custer 60, Hot Springs 44

Deubrook 64, Iroquois 26

Faith 71, Rapid City Christian 69

Flandreau 65, Parker 57

Hamlin 61, North Central Co-Op 49

Harrisburg 66, Aberdeen Central 57

Highmore-Harrold 56, Gregory 40

Marion 63, Murphysboro/Elverado, Ill. 62, OT

Northwestern 70, Webster 56

Rapid City Central 83, Lakota Tech 42

Rapid City Stevens 69, Douglas 61, OT

Sioux Valley 80, Sioux Falls Christian 70

St. Thomas More 78, Hill City 36

Wall 64, Newell 30

Great Plains Conference Classic=

Centerville 48, Scotland 46

Colome 55, Avon 46

Freeman Academy/Marion 55, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 38

Gayville-Volin 61, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 59

Marty Indian 63, Alcester-Hudson 61

Championship=

Corsica/Stickney 74, Burke 70

Warner Classic=

Florence/Henry 44, Wolsey-Wessington 32

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Ipswich 41, Herreid/Selby Area 40
Langford 53, Lemmon 37
Lower Brule 55, Sully Buttes 50
Warner 62, Arlington 55
Waubay/Summit 52, Aberdeen Roncalli 39
Yankton 76, Huron 57
GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=
Harrisburg 43, Aberdeen Central 38
Huron 55, Yankton 48
Kadoka Area 73, Colome 62
Rapid City Stevens 56, Rapid City Central 54, 2OT
Sioux Falls Lincoln 41, Pierre 36
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 63, Mitchell 35
Sioux Falls Washington 62, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 41

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

Kreuser lifts North Dakota St. past S. Dakota St. 84-82

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Rocky Kreuser had 17 points to lead six North Dakota State players in double figures as the Bison edged past South Dakota State 84-82 on Saturday night. Sam Griesel added 15 points for the Bison. Maleeck Harden-Hayes chipped in 11, Grant Nelson scored 10 and Jarius Cook had 10.

North Dakota State (12-10, 12-5 Summit League) scored 47 first-half points, a season best for the team. Douglas Wilson scored a season-high 29 points for the Jackrabbits (13-6, 9-4). Matt Dentlinger added 15 points and eight rebounds. Baylor Scheierman had 14 points.

The Bison registered their first win in three tries against the Jackrabbits this season. In the most recent matchup, South Dakota State defeated North Dakota State 68-67 on Friday.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Irwin scores 31, carries No. 23 South Dakota State women

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Tylee Irwin scored a career-high 31 points on Saturday night to help shorthanded No. 23 South Dakota State complete the road sweep of North Dakota State 69-60.

Irwin passed the 1,000-point milestone on a 3-pointer with 7:59 left in the fourth quarter and set a career high for the second straight night. She scored 25 for South Dakota State (19-2, 12-0 Summit League) in Friday night's 86-78 win over the Bison (14-6, 9-5).

Irwin made 11 of 15 from the field, including 4 of 5 from 3-point range, and made all five foul shots. Her boost in production came in the absence of Jackrabbits leading scorer Myah Selland (19.2 ppg) and fellow starter Tori Nelson (9.4). Both players left the game Friday night with apparent knee injuries.

It was South Dakota State's 16th straight win, clinching the No. 1 seed in the Summit League tournament and at least a share of the regular season title. Paiton Burckhard added 11 points.

Ryan Cobbins had 16 points for North Dakota State. Kadie Deaton added 11 points and Emily Dietz scored 10.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Plitzuweit lifts South Dakota past Oral Roberts 86-84

A.J. Plitzuweit tied his career high with 37 points to out-duel Max Abmas and lift South Dakota to an 86-84 win over Oral Roberts on Saturday. Abmas led the Golden Eagles with 36 points.

Plitzuweit shot 8 for 11 from beyond the arc and scored the game winning points on a pair of free throws with 2.8 seconds left.

Xavier Fuller scored a season-high 22 points and had seven rebounds for South Dakota (12-9, 11-5 Summit League), which earned its sixth straight home victory. Stanley Umude added 11 points.

Carlos Jurgens had 14 points for the Golden Eagles (11-10, 8-5). Kevin Obanor added 14 points and eight rebounds.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Senator seeks probe of natural gas price spikes during storm

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Democratic senator is calling for federal investigations into possible price gouging of natural gas in the Midwest and other regions following severe winter storms that plunged Texas and other states into a deep freeze that caused power outages in millions of homes and businesses.

Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith says natural gas spot prices spiked as high as 100 times typical levels, forcing utilities and other natural gas users to incur exorbitant costs, many of which were passed on to customers.

In a letter sent Saturday to federal regulators, Smith said the price spikes will not just harm consumers, but could “threaten the financial stability of some utilities that do not have sufficient cash reserves to cover their short-term costs in this extraordinary event.” The letter was sent to the Energy Department, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the Commodities Futures Trading Commission. A copy of the letter was obtained by The Associated Press.

The extreme weather spurred residents from Mississippi to Minnesota to crank up electric heaters and pushed demand for electricity beyond the worst-case scenarios planned for by grid operators. At the same time, many gas-fired power plants in Texas and other states were knocked offline because of icy conditions, and some plants appeared to suffer fuel shortages as natural gas demand spiked nationwide.

More than 70 deaths across the U.S. have been blamed on the storms.

In Winfield, Kansas, the city manager reported that a unit of natural gas that sold for about \$3 earlier this month sold for more than \$400 on Thursday. City Manager Taggart Wall told KWCH-TV in Wichita that Winfield, which budgets about \$1.5 million a year for natural gas, expects to pay about \$10 million for the past week alone. Residential customers could see bills as high as \$2,500 this month, he said.

In Morton, Illinois, officials reported that gas normally sold for about \$3 per unit cost nearly \$225 this week as demand soared because of the deep freeze.

While officials don’t know all the details of what happened, nor precisely how it will affect utility rates, “we do know this situation could be a significant financial burden for utilities and their customers,” especially as families in Minnesota and across the country struggle in the coronavirus pandemic and economic downturn, Smith said.

The Minnesota Public Utilities Commission has called a special meeting Tuesday to investigate what caused the dramatic spikes in natural gas prices in that state.

A spokeswoman for the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, known as FERC, said the agency will review Smith’s letter and “respond in due course.”

A spokesman for the American Gas Association, which represents more than 200 local energy companies,

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said Feb. 14 and 15 set a record for the largest natural gas demand in U.S. history over a two-day period.

While natural gas utilities faced “unprecedented challenges” and “spot prices climbed in some regions due to spikes in demand, families and businesses that use natural gas were protected from higher prices by the careful planning of their utilities,” said Jake Rubin, a spokesman for the gas association. Most natural gas utilities use long-term contracts that seek to guarantee enough supply to meet demand and to lock-in affordable prices, he said.

Still, exorbitant price spikes were recorded in the spot market. Natural gas hit a record \$600 per million British thermal units in Oklahoma, while Missouri Gov. Mike Parson said he’s asked the state attorney general to investigate complaints of price gouging of natural gas in that state.

Smith, in her letter to regulators, urged them to investigate conditions in the natural gas market over the last week, including any price gouging by natural gas producers and suppliers.

“A public report should detail what occurred, make recommendations to prevent such problems in the future and determine if laws have been broken,” she said. Smith also urged officials to invoke emergency authorities, including under the Natural Gas Policy Act and the Defense Production Act, to ensure natural gas is sold at fair prices during the current crisis.

The Biden administration and Congress should consider financial support to utilities and customers “that may be facing a cash crunch or rate increases as a result of the spike in natural gas prices,” Smith said.

The White House announced on Saturday that the president had declared a major disaster in Texas, and he has asked federal agencies to identify additional resources to address the suffering.

Tribes have high hopes as Haaland confirmation hearing nears

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — Deb Haaland stood with fellow tribal members protesting an oil pipeline outside a reservation in North Dakota, advocated for protecting cultural landmarks in her home state of New Mexico and pointedly told government witnesses in a hearing about blasting sacred Native American sites near the U.S.-Mexico border: “I don’t know how you can sleep at night.”

Native Americans have reason to believe the two-term U.S. congresswoman will push forward on long-simmering issues in Indian Country if she’s confirmed as secretary of the Interior Department, which has broad oversight of tribal affairs and energy development. Unlike most people who have held the job, she won’t need to be schooled on the history of Native Americans or tribal sovereignty. She already knows.

The Laguna Pueblo woman often draws on her own experience as a single mother and the teachings of her ancestors as a reminder that action the U.S. takes today on climate change, the environment and sacred sites will impact generations to come.

Haaland, 60, would be the first Native American to lead a Cabinet agency. A confirmation hearing is scheduled Tuesday. And while her support of the Green New Deal has put her in the crosshairs of some Republicans, Haaland is expected to have enough votes to secure the post.

President Joe Biden has committed to regular and meaningful consultation with tribal nations on federal policies and projects that affect them. The Interior Department has scheduled a series of talks with tribes in March on health, the economy, racial justice and the environment. Biden also vowed to restore the White House Tribal Nations Conference, an annual gathering of tribal leaders that occurred during the Obama administration.

Native Americans see Haaland’s nomination as the best chance to ask for more — to move from consultation to consent and to put more land into the hands of tribal nations either outright or through stewardship agreements.

“When tribal governments that are sovereign nations say no, it needs to mean something,” said Judith LeBlanc, a citizen of the Caddo Tribe of Oklahoma and director of the Native Organizers Alliance, a national group that works for social and policy changes. “It needs to be part of the process of deciding our energy needs, the process of deciding anything that will affect land, water, air or our social and civil rights.”

The concept of free and prior informed consent is in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

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Indigenous People and outlined in the Green New Deal. Former presidential candidates Elizabeth Warren and Julian Castro also included it in their platforms, but it hasn't gained widespread traction in the U.S.

Supporters say it would be a way to ensure sovereign tribal nations are part of the decision-making, rather than notified of projects already in the works that impact them — on or off their land — or not informed at all.

Had it been in place, advocates say, oil never would have flowed through the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota, the Trump administration would not have downsized Bears Ears National Monument in southern Utah, and the area around Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico would be permanently protected from oil and gas drilling — all in line with Haaland's stances.

Yet Larry Roberts, an expert in federal Indian law at Arizona State University who served under President Barack Obama in the Interior Department, said it's not that easy.

"Some of the things tribes want will require legislation, and I think that's going to be a higher hurdle," said Roberts, a citizen of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin. "Deb Haaland can't do it alone."

Oglala Sioux President Kevin Killer understands that.

"Time goes fast," he said. "We have a unique opportunity" now with Democrats controlling the House and Senate.

Ira Vandever, who is Navajo from the largely Navajo community of Haystack in New Mexico, said Indian Country is going to keep a close watch on Haaland to ensure she's held accountable in acting on behalf of Indigenous people and "our Mother Earth." The ultimate goal, he said, is to create a way for tribes to have full autonomy over their land.

"We don't want sympathy and patronizing," he said.

Some Republicans have vowed to oppose Haaland's nomination, saying her "radical ideas" don't fit in with a rural way of life, particularly in the West. They cited her support for the Green New Deal and Biden's recent moratorium on oil and gas drilling on federal lands — which doesn't apply to tribal lands — and her opposition to fracking and the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

LeBlanc called the opposition "fear mongering of the worst kind" and said Haaland is more than qualified for the job. Native American tribes overwhelmingly support the nomination.

Requests made to Haaland's congressional office and the Interior Department to interview her were declined.

The Interior Department has broad authority in Indian Country, including managing federal relations with tribes, making decisions on federal recognition of tribes, administering mineral rights on tribal land, educating some Native Americans and providing police forces. The department also runs national parks, oversees wildlife and endangered species, and approves oil and gas drilling and mining.

Ryan Flynn, director of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association, said climate change likely will play a prominent role in policy decisions under Biden. Even so, demand for oil and gas is likely to continue for decades, he said.

"How can we be leaders when it comes to responsible production?" he said.

That debate has played out for decades at Chaco Canyon. The national monument sits amid a checkboard of Navajo Nation, private and public land. Individual Navajos who were given allotments of land benefit from oil and gas development, while pueblo tribes elsewhere in New Mexico have sought a permanent ban on extraction.

"In those situations where there's disagreement, it's just a harder issue to solve," Roberts said. "But it doesn't mean that someone should come in with a heavy hand and say, 'This is how we're going to do it.' Tribal consultation has to be a continuing dialogue and meaningful to be effective."

As a freshman lawmaker, Haaland led a subcommittee that oversees national forests, parks and public land. In those hearings and others, she points out that tribes haven't had much voice in determining what happens on their ancestral lands, and the U.S. has failed to uphold promises made through treaties and other acts.

Tribal nations have been pushing for the federal government to return land that was home to Indigenous

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people long before it became the U.S. Sometimes referred to as reparations, it's part of a growing movement known as "Land Back."

High on the list: Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Many Native Americans consider the monument featuring the faces of four U.S. presidents a symbol of white supremacy and a desecration to the area known to Lakota people as Paha Sapa, "the heart of everything that is."

Char Miller, an environmental historian at Pomona College in California, said the U.S. has a moral responsibility to at least co-manage public land with tribes that have been stewards of it for millennia, building off agreements that already exist with fisheries and in national forests.

Some Native Americans want Mount Rushmore removed, while others want a share in its economic benefits.

For Nick Tilsen, returning the area and other public lands to Indigenous people would be a way for Biden to show he's serious about racial justice.

"We want to see action," said Tilsen, an Oglala Lakota citizen and president of the activist organization NDN collective. "In this time of racial justice and reckoning, we want to make sure Indigenous people aren't left out of that narrative."

Fonseca is a member of the AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/FonsecaAP>

Man wanted for South Dakota homicide surrenders in Nebraska

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A man wanted for a homicide in South Dakota has turned himself in at a police station in Nebraska.

Phillip Pond, 38, was transferred to South Dakota earlier this week and made an initial appearance in federal court in Rapid City.

Pond is accused of shooting 40-year-old Justin Little Hawk in Pine Ridge on Nov. 22, 2020 after the two argued. Little Hawk died the following month at a hospital in Colorado.

Chadron Acting Police Chief Rick Hickstein said Pond stopped by the station Feb. 15 to ask if there were any warrant out for his arrest since he had been told by others that his name was in the news. Hickstein says Pond peacefully surrendered.

Pond was booked into the Pennington County Jail the next day and made his initial appearance at the federal court in Rapid City on Feb. 17, the Rapid City Journal reported.

It was not immediately clear if Pond has an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

Man convicted to robbing same bank twice in South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A federal jury has convicted a Nebraska man of robbing the same bank in South Dakota twice in a year's time.

Ferris Valentine was convicted of two counts of bank robbery Thursday in Sioux Falls.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in South Dakota says the 54-year-old Omaha man and a partner robbed the First National Bank in Sioux Falls on Nov. 15, 2016.

Valentine and his partner rented a car in Omaha and drove to Sioux Falls. Valentine, armed with a handgun, demanded money from the bank tellers and the bank's vault. They fled before police arrived.

Prosecutors say in November 2017, Valentine robbed the same bank again, wearing a mask, as he did in the first robbery, and again used a gun. He grabbed money from the vault and left before police got to the bank.

DNA was taken from the first robbery scene in 2016. A match to Valentine's partner in 2018 led law enforcement to Valentine, the Argus Leader reported.

A total estimated \$278,000 was taken from the robberies, according to authorities.

Valentine is scheduled to be sentenced on May 10.

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Airman gets 18 years in killing of his 6-month-old son

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A senior airman at Ellsworth Air Force Base has been sentenced to 18 years in federal military prison, after he was convicted of killing his 6-month-old son.

A military jury found 27-year-old James Cunningham guilty of murder Thursday in the March 2020 death of his son, Zachariah, following a four-day trial at the Air Force base. A judge then sentenced him to prison later Thursday night. As part of his sentence, Cunningham's rank was reduced to the lowest rank for an airman and he must forfeit pay and will be dishonorably discharged.

Prosecutors said Cunningham lied three times before confessing to punching his son and that medical evidence showed the baby died from being shaken and hit multiple times.

The defense argued the baby suffered injuries when he fell from a kitchen counter where Cunningham had placed him.

The jury convicted Cunningham after hearing testimony from Zachariah's mother Caitlynn Merhoff, law enforcement, Cunningham's co-workers and medical experts, including some who treated the child, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Jurors listened to the 911 call, viewed body camera footage from officers responding to the house and hospital, and watched the video of Cunningham's interview with Rapid City police officers. Cunningham did not testify, but as part of the sentencing phase, he answered questions before military Judge Col. Sterling Pendleton.

"I'll never forgive myself for letting him down," Cunningham said of his son. "It was my job to protect him."

This story has been corrected to show that Cunningham will be dishonorably discharged.

Gronowski's 3 total TDs help S. Dakota St. top N. Iowa 24-20

CEDAR FALLS, Iowa (AP) — Mark Gronowski passed for two touchdowns, including a 1-yarder to Pierre Strong with 19 seconds left, and ran for another to help South Dakota State beat Northern Iowa 24-20 on Friday night.

Gronowski, a freshman, was 19-of-29 passing for 194 yards and no interceptions. Strong finished with 91 yards rushing on 22 carries and had six receptions for 31 yards. Zach Heins added 90 yards receiving on five catches for South Dakota State (1-0, 1-0 Missouri Valley Conference).

The teams kicked off an unprecedented spring slate of FCS football games after the fall season was upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

SDSU, ranked No. 5 in the STATS FCS polls, took a 17-7 lead into the halftime after Gronowski scored on a 5-yard run with 1:24 left in the second quarter. Matthew Cook made field goals of 43 and 35 yards before Will McElvain's 14-yard touchdown pass to Tysen Kershaw gave third-ranked UNI (0-1, 0-1) a three-point lead with 5:59 to play. Gronowski led a 10-play, 75-yard drive capped when he rolled to his right and hit a wide-open Strong to give South Dakota State a 24-20 lead with 19 seconds left.

McElvain was 19-of-29 passing for 164 yards.

UNI converted just 2-of-12 third downs and finished with 192 total yards.

More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/Collegefootball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Blind chef creates homemade treats with wife as his eyes

By MAKENZIE HUBER Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Samantha and Yeshua Prestan move as one in the kitchen.

For every slight gesture Yeshua takes to prepare lunch, Samantha is right beside him, anticipating his next move.

He smoothly chops carrots with all the grace earned from decades making supper since childhood.

He barely has to speak before she sweeps a few stalks of green onions on the cutting board to chop

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next for an egg salad.

As he seasons the mixture, she hustles dishes back and forth to the sink. She's already back at his side as he turns on the griddle to prepare a Cuban sandwich.

The 55-year old isn't just her husband's better half. Samantha serves as his eyes, and their synchronized work in the kitchen is their dance.

Yeshua is blind. The 56-year-old can still see vague shapes, but a genetic disorder called retinitis pigmentosa has deteriorated his eyesight over time, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

But he loves cooking, having grown up with family in the restaurant industry, and is passionate about crafting his own recipes. After he started losing his eyesight in 2009, which made it difficult to find employment, Samantha became his "sous chef," so he could continue doing what he loves.

"He has ideas for how it should look, but can't see it," Samantha said. "All the time, I see and I help."

The two work at Yakkity Yak Coffee Shack. Yeshua is the chef, preparing homemade recipes and treats such as Samantha's family recipe for tabbouleh. Samantha is a shift supervisor, who guides Yeshua as he works.

Yakkity Yak, a coffee shop in the All American Gymnastics Academy building in southeastern Sioux Falls that, is fully run by people with special needs. The shop not only serves coffee and food to its customers, but is meant to expose people to what inclusion is and to better employ people of all abilities.

"They're so in sync with each other because they've worked together for so many years," said Kathy Luke, executive director of Yaks Give Back. "A lot of the time, people with different abilities are overlooked. Here, we are giving them an opportunity to do different things and learn different things — find success in employment."

The Prestans are refugees from Colombia, having moved to Sioux Falls about 12 years ago with their four children.

"It was a new life, new language, new people. But we are happy," Samantha said.

The two dated each other in high school, but they separated because their families didn't approve of the relationship. It wasn't until 13 years later they met again.

By then, they both had children of their own and had divorced from their spouses. Samantha was an up-and-coming lawyer and Yeshua was an architect looking for legal advice about his company. When he called an office, it just so happened to be his high school sweetheart who could help him out.

The spark was still there for both of them. He asked her to get dinner, and they rekindled their romance.

"She never forgot me," Yeshua joked.

After a few years together again, they had to flee Colombia because there were assassins trying to kill Samantha. She was an attorney and government worker at a high security prison in Barranquilla, Colombia. They originally fled to Costa Rica in 2005, but they fled again to the United States after people tried to kidnap their youngest daughter.

Yeshua's eyesight quickly worsened after moving to South Dakota. The bright reflection on the snow and harsher sunlight deteriorated his eyesight. Without his eyes, he lost many things he loved: friendships, his work with construction and design, painting and photography.

But he didn't lose Samantha.

He attended a school to learn adaptation skills, which is where he learned how to safely cook without his vision. He cooked at a day care in Sioux Falls for four years, and Samantha served as a volunteer to help him prepare food, before the two started Cafeto Colombian Coffee, a Colombian coffee distribution business in 2012.

The two sell their coffee through Yakkity Yak, other businesses in town and the Eighth and Railroad Center Farmers Market. They also dream of opening up the first Colombian restaurant in Sioux Falls soon.

During their 23 years together, they've learned to work together and complement each other.

He prefers to cook the food. She prefers to eat it and wash dishes afterward.

He's the creative with visions of how his creations should be presented. She's the helping hand who can make his ideas come to life.

"The food is good for our relationship, because even when it's a happy or a sad time, we have the food

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together," Yeshua said. "I tell her, 'Don't worry,' and 'Remember, I promised I will stay with you through all of it.'"

"The most important thing in love is that you have one life; no more," he added. "Right now, enjoy the life, enjoy the food, enjoy the time you have together."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Friday:

Mega Millions

27-32-47-50-53, Mega Ball: 4, Megaplier: 4

(twenty-seven, thirty-two, forty-seven, fifty, fifty-three; Mega Ball: four; Megaplier: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$78 million

Friday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 72, Sioux Falls Lincoln 70

Belle Fourche 60, Faith 56

Burke 71, Alcester-Hudson 66

Canistota 75, Colman-Egan 23

Castlewood 76, Estelline/Hendricks 43

Dakota Valley 79, Madison 49

Dell Rapids 57, Lennox 52

Dell Rapids St. Mary 64, Baltic 49

Elkton-Lake Benton 57, Deubrook 48

Gregory 69, Bon Homme 49

Groton Area 67, Deuel 56

Hamlin 64, Britton-Hecla 28

Jones County 70, Bennett County 65

Lemmon 61, Harding County 52

Leola/Frederick 60, Herreid/Selby Area 58

Lyman 64, Kadoka Area 34

Menno 51, Scotland 39

Parker 53, Bridgewater-Emery 51

Platte-Geddes 57, Wagner 48

Potter County 83, Highmore-Harrold 57

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 60, Pierre 38

Stanley County 60, Langford 53

Tea Area 86, Elk Point-Jefferson 57

Timber Lake 71, McIntosh 30

Tiospa Zina Tribal 65, Milbank 59

Tri-Valley 53, Beresford 44

Wall 69, Edgemont 49

Watertown 54, Brookings 40

Wessington Springs 67, James Valley Christian 31

West Central 74, Chamberlain 49

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White River 92, New Underwood 28
Winner 81, Mobridge-Pollock 76
Yankton 53, Mitchell 44
GIRLS BASKETBALL=
Aberdeen Central 47, Sioux Falls Lincoln 33
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 61, Marty Indian 44
Belle Fourche 51, Faith 30
Bon Homme 53, Gayville-Volin 35
Burke 49, Alcester-Hudson 39
Centerville 48, Irene-Wakonda 45
Dakota Valley 63, Madison 25
Deubrook 57, Elkton-Lake Benton 43
Florence/Henry 76, Langford 24
Groton Area 55, Deuel 30
Hamlin 58, Britton-Hecla 23
Hill City 55, Wall 40
Howard 62, Warner 35
James Valley Christian 45, Wessington Springs 41
Jones County 71, Bennett County 56
Kadoka Area 44, Lyman 39
Lower Brule 69, Tiospa Zina Tribal 54
McCook Central/Montrose 67, Sioux Valley 45
Mitchell 53, Yankton 26
Newell 45, Timber Lake 44
North Central Co-Op 55, Sunshine Bible Academy 33
Rapid City Stevens 64, Lakota Tech 44
Redfield 53, Webster 20
Sioux Falls Christian 64, Canton 31
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 48, Pierre 45
Sisseton 59, Clark/Willow Lake 52
St. Thomas More 57, Hot Springs 19
Sturgis Brown 49, Douglas 29
Tea Area 54, Elk Point-Jefferson 29
Tri-Valley 56, Beresford 36
Upton, Wyo. 63, Lead-Deadwood 36
Wagner 58, Platte-Geddes 23
Watertown 51, Brookings 29
White River 79, Philip 37
Winner 71, Mobridge-Pollock 37

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

Scheierman leads S. Dakota St. over North Dakota St. 68-67

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Baylor Scheierman had 16 points, six rebounds and six assists and Charlie Easley made a 3-pointer with 17.6 seconds left as South Dakota State edged past North Dakota State 68-67 on Friday night.

Matt Dentlinger had 13 points for South Dakota State (13-5, 9-3 Summit League). Alex Arians added 10 points and nine rebounds.

Douglas Wilson, the Jackrabbits' second leading scorer entering the matchup at 15 points per game,

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had only 4 points (2 of 10).

After heading to the locker room at the half with a 40-34 lead, South Dakota State managed to hang on for the one-point victory despite being outscored by five points in the second half. The Jackrabbits' 28 second-half points marked a season low for the team.

Sam Griesel had 17 points for the Bison (11-10, 11-5). Rocky Kreuser added 13 points. Tyree Eady had 13 points.

The Jackrabbits improve to 2-0 against the Bison on the season. South Dakota State defeated North Dakota State 77-75 on Dec. 10.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Irwin scores 17 in 4th, No. 23 SDSU women beat NDSU 86-78

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Tylee Irwin scored 17 of her career-high 25 points in the fourth quarter, Paiton Burckhard had 16 points, 11 rebounds and six assists, and No. 23 South Dakota State beat North Dakota State 86-78 on Friday night to extend its winning streak to 15 games.

South Dakota State took the lead for good during a 14-0 run in the first quarter — with six points from Tori Nelson. Irwin was 4-of-5 shooting in the fourth, including three 3-pointers, and 6 of 7 at the free-throw line.

Myah Selland added 10 points and Nelson finished with eight for South Dakota State (18-2, 11-0 Summit League). Irwin was 8 of 10 from the free-throw line as the Jackrabbits hit 25 of 36.

Heaven Hamling scored 23 points with five 3-pointers for North Dakota State (14-5, 9-4). Emily Dietz added 15 points with five assists and Ryan Cobbins had 14 points and seven rebounds.

The two teams play each other again on Saturday as South Dakota State attempts to win its 12th straight in the series.

More AP women's basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Widow of man killed in South Dakota AG crash plans to sue

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The widow of the man who died after being struck by the South Dakota attorney general's car will file a wrongful death lawsuit, her attorneys said Friday.

Prosecutors announced Thursday that they charged the state's top law enforcement officer, Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, with three misdemeanors but no felonies in the death of 55-year-old Joseph Boever.

Lawyers for the victim's widow, Jenny Boever, said in a statement that they would be filing a lawsuit against Ravnsborg partly in the hopes of getting answers to lingering questions about the crash.

"The family deserves answers to what happened that night. The Attorney General should be held accountable for his actions, just like anyone else," lawyer Scott Heidepriem said in the statement.

Another Boever family lawyer, Greg Eiseland, said the lawsuit would be filed soon.

The attorney general said through a spokesman Thursday that he doesn't plan to resign and looks forward to his day in court.

Ravnsborg, who was elected to his first term in 2018, initially told authorities that he thought he had struck a deer or another large animal as he was driving home to Pierre from a Republican fundraiser late

on Sept. 12. He said he searched the unlit area with a cellphone flashlight and didn't realize he had killed a man until the next day when he returned to the accident scene on U.S. 14 near Highmore.

After an investigation that stretched over five months, prosecutors said they still had questions about the crash but were unable to file more serious criminal charges against Ravensborg. They charged him with careless driving, driving out of his lane and operating a motor vehicle while on his phone.

Though prosecutors said he was not using his phone at the time of the crash, he had been using it while driving about one minute before. The attorney general could face up to 30 days in jail and up to a \$500 fine on each charge, if convicted.

Beadle County State's Attorney Michael Moore, who assisted with the investigation, said Thursday that investigators weren't able to determine why or how long Ravensborg had been driving outside of his lane leading up to the crash or whether he had been aware he was outside of it. He said prosecutors didn't find evidence to warrant felony charges of vehicular homicide or manslaughter, which could have meant years of prison time. But he suggested that "the victim's remedy is in civil court."

Gov. Kristi Noem has said she will have the Department of Public Safety, which oversaw the investigation, release more information within a week.

GOP's Thune says Trump allies engaging in 'cancel culture'

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — U.S. Sen. John Thune is criticizing Republican activists and party leaders for engaging in "cancel culture" by rushing to censure GOP senators who found former President Donald Trump guilty of inciting an insurrection.

In his first interview since he voted to acquit Trump, the Senate's No. 2 Republican on Thursday defended fellow Republicans who sided with Democrats on the "vote of conscience" and warned against shutting out dissenting voices in the party. He also discussed Republicans' priorities under President Joe Biden, the proposed \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package and upcoming primary battles within his own party.

"There was a strong case made," Thune said of the Democrats' impeachment presentation last week. "People could come to different conclusions. If we're going to criticize the media and the left for cancel culture, we can't be doing that ourselves."

Thune's remarks were his first explaining his vote in Trump's trial and assessing the turbulent GOP politics the former president has left behind. Thune, who faces reelection next year, is among several establishment Republicans grappling with how to reclaim control of a party dominated by Trump for years.

The senator rarely criticized Trump while he was in office, but he called the former president's post-election actions "inexcusable" and accused him of undermining the peaceful transfer of power.

Still, Thune sided with most Republican senators and GOP Senate leader Mitch McConnell in voting to acquit. Thune and others argued that Trump could not be impeached because he was already out of office. Democrats fell 10 votes short of the 67 need to convict.

Since then, Trump has lashed out at McConnell and repeated the baseless claim that he won the election. The comments have inflamed a feud that is likely to play out in GOP primaries between Trump-backed candidates and those supported by the establishment wing.

Thune suggested he would be taking steps to assist candidates "who don't go off and talk about conspiracies and that sort of thing." He praised Rep. Liz Cheney — a Wyoming Republican, who was censured by the Wyoming GOP for voting to impeach Trump — for doing an "exceptional job on most issues," and said he was ready to jump into primary battles like the one she is sure to face.

"At the grassroots level, there's a lot of people who want to see Trump-like candidates," he said. "But I think we're going to be looking for candidates that are electable."

Despite the escalating fight over control of the GOP, Thune said he believes Republicans are well-positioned to take back the Senate, citing policy overreach by the Democrats.

Thune suggested that suburban voters — a crucial group that slipped away from Trump in the 2020 election — will not necessarily support Democratic Party priorities, such as statehood for Washington,

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D.C. and Puerto Rico, rolling back tax cuts, the Green New Deal, cancellation of the Keystone XL pipeline permit, and delaying the full reopening of schools.

"They are in the process of overreaching. If they overreach, we're in position to bring it back," he said.

Thune said Biden "left to his own devices would govern in the middle," but that he is under pressure from the more progressive wing of the party to enact aggressive changes.

"The energy, the intensity, the financial resources in their party is all on the far left," he said.

Republicans will try to hit Democrats on "pocketbook concerns" such as economic policy, fiscal responsibility in government, as well as "strong borders" and a tough China foreign policy, Thune predicted.

"We are a center-right country," he said. "If you can get somebody who is a center-right conservative, that is the candidate we want."

But before Republicans can challenge Democrats on ballots, a fight over Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus package looms. Thune, who holds the job of mobilizing votes in the Senate, has said there would be little appetite for a package that large. But the senator suggested that there are some Republicans who would support a lower amount, especially as a bipartisan group of governors and mayors has been pushing for economic help.

He said, "I'm not there," on Biden's price tag, adding: "When we're spending money right now, every dollar is borrowed."

Sioux Falls settles negligence lawsuit filed after drowning

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The City of Sioux Falls has agreed to pay \$500,000 to the mother of the 5-year-old girl who drowned in the river at Falls Park three years ago.

Courtney Jayne claimed the city was negligent in the death of Maggie Zaiger, who fell into the Big Sioux River and drowned in March of 2018.

The agreement states that the settlement is "not an admission of fault or liability by either party but rather a compromise of disputed claims."

The city also agreed to place signs in the parking lots of Falls Park for at least five years, warning people to keep away from foam that accumulates in the river during the spring.

The lawsuit alleged the city had been warned in previous safety reviews that conditions at the park were unsafe, particularly during spring melting when high volumes of water create a thick foam that appears to be solid.

Nearly five years to the day that Zaiger died, Madison Wallace and Lyle Eagle Tail drowned in the same location after they attempted to help Madison's younger brother, who fell into the river, but survived.

After Zaiger's death, the city installed additional fencing and viewing platforms in the area where she died.

The settlement cancels a jury trial scheduled for April.

Power failure: How a winter storm pushed Texas into crisis

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Two days before the storm began, Houston's chief elected official warned her constituents to prepare as they would for a major hurricane. Many took heed: Texans who could stocked up on food and water, while nonprofits and government agencies set out to help those who couldn't.

But few foresaw the fiasco that was to come. They could not be prepared.

As temperatures plunged and snow and ice whipped the state, much of Texas' power grid collapsed, followed by its water systems. Tens of millions huddled in frigid homes that slowly grew colder or fled for safety. And a prideful state, long suspicious of regulation and outside help, was left to seek aid from other states and humanitarian groups as many of its 29 million people grasped for survival.

At one hospital, workers stood outside to collect rainwater. Others stood in line at a running tap in a park. A mother of three took her children to shelter in a furniture store after she could see her breath forming in the family's trailer. University professors fundraised so their students could afford meals.

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Images of desperate Texans circulated worldwide. To some, they evoked comparisons to a less wealthy or self-regarding place. To others, they laid bare problems that have long festered.

The state's Republican leadership was blamed for ignoring warnings that winter could wreak the havoc that it did, and for not providing local officials with enough information to protect residents now.

A week after she warned her county's nearly 5 million residents about the impending storm, Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo was sleeping on an air mattress at the county's emergency operations center. Her home was without power for three nights.

"It's worth asking the question: Who set up this system and who perpetuated it knowing that the right regulation was not in place?" Hidalgo said. "Those questions are going to have to be asked and I hope that changes will come. The community deserves answers."

Around 2 a.m. Monday, the full measure of the crisis Texas faced began to be apparent.

Cold and ice had set in the day before, leading to spreading power outages across the state. But standing in the emergency operations center early Monday, Hidalgo and others learned that their local energy provider, CenterPoint Energy, would not be able to "roll" outages between homes as they had been told earlier.

Instead of short intervals of heat, enough to keep their homes safe, residents would have to go without for days on end.

Most people did not yet know that Texas' power grid had been on the brink of total failure. That revelation would come three days later.

Power outages spiraled through the day Monday, ultimately cutting off more than 4 million people. Grocery stores shut down, and hotel rates skyrocketed.

People who fled to the homes of relatives or neighbors had to consider the risks of contracting or spreading the coronavirus.

Ashley Archer and her husband decided to take in his best friend at their suburban Dallas home. She is pregnant and has been trying to protect herself from the virus for nearly a year.

The friend is "like family," she said. "We weren't going to let him freeze at his place."

Things got worse Tuesday. Thousands of people sought refuge from their freezing homes in warming shelters. Others sat in their cars; hundreds were hospitalized for carbon monoxide poisoning. A woman and her young daughter died after running their car inside a garage. An 11-year-old boy was found dead after his family's mobile home lost power.

In suburban Houston, Tina Rios could see her breath inside the trailer she shares with her husband and three children, ages 3, 9, and 10. She started "stressing really hard." Her refuge was a Gallery Furniture store opened to a desperate public by a well-known Houston businessman, Jim "Mattress Mack" McIngvale.

At her Dallas condominium, 51-year-old Stephanie Murdoch layered in blankets, two pairs of pants, two sweaters, three pairs of socks, a hat, and gloves. Her anger grew at the power companies and their apparent lack of preparation.

"We've got another blast of snow coming in this evening ... and still no clear answers as to why the grids aren't working better," she said.

By Wednesday, some started to get their power back, but a new shortage emerged -- drinkable water.

Frozen pipes burst across the state. And the water that did come out of taps was often undrinkable due to dangerously low water pressure levels. At one point, an estimated 13 million people were under a boil-water order, nearly half of Texas' population.

Along with her roommates in Austin, Abigail Burns, a 20-year-old university student, had filled bathtubs with water as experts advise before a storm. Austin instituted a boil-water order. But Burns' apartment lacked the power to boil what they had.

After more than 80 hours without power and 24 hours without running water, they decided to brave icy roads, setting out for a friend's home about 20 minutes away.

Methodist Hospital's branch in far west Houston lost water, and hospital staff collected rainwater in carts so they could flush toilets. CEO Marc Boom said the hospital's flagship location near downtown had turned

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a conference room into a staging area for dialysis patients.

"Many of those people end up not only needing dialysis but end up being admitted to the hospital," Boom said. "There's a lot of people who have medical devices at home, oxygen; all of those don't work."

More than 35 people in Texas have been confirmed dead. That number is expected to rise as roads cleared and relatives and first responders could check on missing loved ones.

Mark Henry, Galveston County's judge, asked the state early in the week to send a refrigerated truck requested by the local medical examiner, who expected an influx of bodies.

"If they had been honest with us from the beginning, we would have ordered evacuations. But they didn't tell us that," he said. "What's not manageable is to lose your power for days with a temperature in the single to double digits."

How could this happen in a state that is the nation's biggest energy producer and home to several of the world's biggest energy companies?

The disaster can be traced to mistakes by Texas' leadership and faults created by decades of opposition to more regulations and preparation.

Basically, the state is an island in the U.S. electrical system.

There is one large grid covering the Eastern half of the country, another for the West, with Texas wedged between them. There is a long and colorful history to how this came to be, but the simplest explanation is that Texas utilities wanted to be free of federal regulation. They accomplished that, going back to the middle of the last century, by avoiding sending power across state lines.

The Texas grid isn't walled off, but there are only a few, small interconnection points with the Eastern U.S. grid and Mexico. In the past, utility executives have argued that the Texas grid would be less reliable and more vulnerable to blackouts if it were fully connected to the rest of the country – which would make it easier for other states to tap Texas during their own shortages.

The Electric Reliability Council of Texas, or ERCOT, was created in 1970; it became a more powerful broker over electricity flows after deregulation in this century. In the wake of the storm, it has taken most of the blame from Texas politicians and the public, losing trust with predictions that failed to capture the depth of the crisis and posting jargon-heavy tweets about power generation that were hard for anyone without a degree in engineering to decipher. Critics have noted some of ERCOT's board does not live in Texas and that CEO, Bill Magness makes more than \$800,000 a year.

Standing in Harris County's emergency management center early Monday, Lina Hidalgo said she and other officials realized "that we couldn't just take the words from ERCOT at face value."

"They kept telling us that more power generation was coming online, only to send more orders to utilities to cut people off power," she said Thursday.

Despite efforts by some Republicans to blame clean energy, the failures occurred in every part of the sector. While wind turbines and solar panels froze, a major nuclear plant lost half of its generation, and there were massive failures in coal, oil, and natural gas. Demand surged, meanwhile, as people accustomed to mild Texas winters turned on their heat.

In 2011, millions of Texans lost power during the Super Bowl, which was played in a Dallas suburb. Two agencies, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and the North American Electric Reliability Corporation, conducted a study on how Texas could "winterize" its energy infrastructure. At the highest end, winterizing 50,000 gas wells would cost an estimated \$1.75 billion, the study found.

Of the 2011 storm, the report said: "Generators and natural gas producers suffered severe losses of capacity despite having received accurate forecasts of the storm. Entities in both categories report having winterization procedures in place. However, the poor performance of many of these generating units and wells suggests that these procedures were either inadequate or were not adequately followed."

But there was no broad move to winterize equipment. Since then, bills requiring energy producers to hold more power in reserve or ordering a study of how to better prepare for winter failed in the Republican-controlled Texas House.

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Texas lawmakers deregulated the energy market in 2002. Supporters say this lowered energy prices statewide, but critics say it gave producers leeway to avoid improvements that might have prevented events like this week's catastrophe.

The energy industry remains a political powerhouse. More than \$26 million of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's contributions have come from the oil and gas industry, more than any other economic sector, according to an analysis by the National Institute on Money in Politics.

In a Fox News interview, Abbott blamed this week's fiasco on green energy -- an assertion for which he was sharply criticized. At other points, Abbott did note failures across the energy industry. But others among the Republican leadership continued to tweet condemnations of green energy or support for natural gas.

Todd Staples, president of the Texas Oil & Gas Association, declined an interview request but issued a statement saying the industry was "steadfastly committed to doing our part to help Texas recover."

Abbott has promised multiple investigations of this storm and made ERCOT an "emergency" item for the Legislature, which is currently in its biennial session.

"I think there is going to have to be a serious inquiry into why it was, what were the factors that led the grid not to be able to meet the energy needs of Texas," said Republican U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz.

Cruz spoke Thursday evening in the yard of his home in one of Houston's wealthiest neighborhoods, River Oaks. He had cut short a trip to Cancun, Mexico, after images circulated of him waiting at a Houston airport for his flight to the resort town.

Nearby, a group of protesters called on Cruz to resign.

At week's end, as the cold weather began to loosen its grip, the power came back for most Texans. But the effects linger: Some Texans on variable-rate power contracts faced electric bills in the thousands of dollars, leading the governor to hold an emergency meeting Saturday with lawmakers.

There were dire shortages of drinking water. Cars lined up Friday for more than a mile in several directions to reach one water distribution site in northwest Houston, where volunteers were distributing two pallets of water bottles per vehicle.

Burst pipes had flooded thousands of homes. Earlier in the week, Abbott had asked plumbers from other states to come to Texas and help.

Fixing pipes is one thing. Fixing a whole state is another.

Extremes caused by global warming will make deadly weather more common. Hidalgo, the Harris County judge, said the state needs to overcome "the taboo of talking about climate change."

It's difficult to estimate how much it would cost for all the wintertime upgrades Texas needs, but the tab would likely be in the billions of dollars.

In California, long the foil of Texas Republicans, Pacific Gas and Electric is in the early stages of spending an estimated \$40 billion to \$50 billion upgrading its equipment to reduce the chances of igniting wildfires during hot and windy conditions that have become increasingly common during the late summer and early autumn.

Around the time Cruz was flying back from Cancun on Thursday, Joidice Slack waited in line at a west Houston park to fill up water from a running tap.

The 37-year-old market analyst lost power on Sunday, water on Monday. She carried two empty drums of water that she filled with a garden hose.

"Today would have been rough because we had about half of one of these and we were like, 'Let's go start looking. Hopefully we find some more water,'" she said.

"This is where we are at right now."

Associated Press journalists Jake Bleiberg and David Koenig in Dallas; Acacia Coronado and Paul J. Weber in Austin, Texas; Michael Liedtke in San Ramon, California; Juan A. Lozano in Houston; and Jamie Stengle in Dallas contributed to this report.

With heavy hearts, Italians mark year of COVID-19 outbreak

By LUCA BRUNO Associated Press

CODOGNO, Italy (AP) — With wreath-laying ceremonies, tree plantings and church services, Italians on Sunday marked one year since their country experienced its first known COVID-19 death.

Towns in Italy's north were the first to be hard-hit by the pandemic and put under lockdown, and residents paid tribute to the dead. Italy, with some 95,500 confirmed virus dead, has Europe's second-highest pandemic toll after Britain. Experts say the virus also killed many others who were never tested.

While the first wave of infections largely engulfed Lombardy and other northern regions, a second surge starting in the fall of 2020 has raced throughout the country. The number of new coronavirus infections has remained stubbornly high despite a raft of restrictions on travel between regions, and in some cases between towns. In addition, gyms, cinemas and theaters have been closed and restaurants and bars must shut early in the evening. There's a 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. nationwide curfew.

So far, Italy has confirmed 2.8 million cases.

It was in the hospital at the Lombard town of Codogno where a doctor recognized what would go down in medical history as the first known COVID-19 case in the West in a patient with no links to the outbreak in Asia, where coronavirus infections initially emerged. The diagnosis was made on the evening of Feb. 20, 2020, in a 38-year-old otherwise healthy, athletic man.

Near the Red Cross office in Codogno on Sunday, Lombardy's governor and the town mayor attended a ceremony to unveil a monument to COVID-19 victims. The memorial consists of three steel pillars, representing resilience, community and starting over. A wreath was laid, and townspeople stood in silence to honor the dead.

"Panic, total panic," was how one of Codogno's 15,000 residents, Rosaria Sanna, on Sunday remembered what she felt at the start. And a year later "I am still scared because it is not over yet."

Some of her fellow townspeople lit candles during morning Sunday Masses in Codogno's St. Blaise Church.

The Codogno hospital patient survived, after being transferred to another hospital and spending weeks on a respirator.

But it was in the northeastern town of Vo, in the neighboring Veneto region, where Italy's first known COVID-19 death was registered on Feb. 21, 2020.

In Vo's memorial ceremony, officials planted a tree. A plaque has been installed, quoting a line from the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo, whose works are widely studied by the nation's schoolchildren. The inscription reads: "A man never dies if there is someone who remembers him."

Italy's first known fatality from COVID-19 was a 77-year-old Vo man, a retired roofer who liked to play cards.

Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at:

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

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Tanzania's president admits country has COVID-19 problem

Associated Press undefined

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Tanzania's president is finally acknowledging that his country has a coronavirus problem after claiming for months that the disease had been defeated by prayer.

Populist President John Magufuli on Sunday urged citizens of the East African country to take precautions and even wear face masks — but only locally made ones. Over the course of the pandemic he has expressed wariness about foreign-made goods, including COVID-19 vaccines.

The president's comments came days after the country of some 60 million people mourned the death of one of its highest-profile politicians, the vice president of the semi-autonomous island region of Zanzibar, whose political party had earlier said he had COVID-19. The president's chief secretary also died in recent

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days, though the cause was not revealed.

Magufuli, speaking at the chief secretary's funeral in a nationally televised broadcast on Friday, urged the nation to participate in three days of prayer for unspecified "respiratory" illnesses that had become a challenge in the country.

Tanzania has not updated its number of coronavirus infections since April as the president has insisted COVID-19 had been defeated. Tanzania's official number of coronavirus infections remains at just 509, but residents report that many people have become ill with breathing difficulties and hospitals have seen a rise in patients for "pneumonia."

The director-general of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has added his voice to growing calls for Tanzania to acknowledge COVID-19 for the good of its citizens, neighboring countries, and the world, especially after a number of countries reported that visitors arriving from Tanzania tested positive for the virus.

Tedros in a statement on Saturday called Tanzania's situation "very concerning" and urged Magufuli's government to take "robust action." Others recently expressing concern include the United States and the local Catholic church.

UN nuclear chief in Iran as it threatens watchdog's cameras

By AMIR VAHDAT and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — The head of the United Nations' nuclear watchdog met Sunday with Iranian officials in a bid to preserve his inspectors' ability to monitor Tehran's atomic program, even as authorities said they planned to cut off surveillance cameras at those sites.

Rafael Grossi's arrival in Tehran comes as Iran tries to pressure Europe and the new Biden administration into returning to the 2015 nuclear deal, which President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from in 2018.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who under President Hassan Rouhani helped reach the nuclear deal, said the cameras of the International Atomic Energy Agency would be shut off despite Grossi's visit to follow a law passed by parliament.

"This is not a deadline for the world. This is not an ultimatum," Zarif told the government-run, English-language broadcaster Press TV in an interview aired before he was to meet Grossi. "This is an internal domestic issue between the parliament and the government."

"We have a democracy. We are supposed to implement the laws of the country. And the parliament adopted legislation — whether we like it or not."

Zarif's comments marked the highest-level acknowledgement yet of what Iran planned to do when it stopped following the so-called "Additional Protocol," a confidential agreement between Tehran and the IAEA reached as part of the nuclear deal. The IAEA has additional protocols with a number of countries it monitors.

Under the protocol with Iran, the IAEA "collects and analyzes hundreds of thousands of images captured daily by its sophisticated surveillance cameras," the agency said in 2017. The agency also said then that it had placed "2,000 tamper-proof seals on nuclear material and equipment."

In his interview, Zarif said authorities would be "required by law not to provide the tapes of those cameras." It wasn't immediately clear if that also meant the cameras would be turned off entirely as Zarif called that a "technical decision, that's not a political decision."

"The IAEA certainly will not get footage from those cameras," Zarif said.

The Vienna-based IAEA did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Zarif's comments. The agency last week said the visit was aimed at finding "a mutually agreeable solution for the IAEA to continue essential verification activities in the country."

There are 18 nuclear facilities and nine other locations in Iran under IAEA safeguards.

Grossi met earlier Sunday with Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of Iran's civilian nuclear program. Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Kazem Gharibabadi, later tweeted that "Iran and the IAEA held fruitful discussions

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based on mutual respect, the result of which will be released this evening.”

Iran’s parliament in December approved a bill that would suspend part of U.N. inspections of its nuclear facilities if European signatories do not provide relief from oil and banking sanctions by Tuesday.

Already, Iran has slowly walked away from all the nuclear deal’s limitations on its stockpile of uranium and has begun enriching up 20%, a technical step away from weapons-grade levels. It also has begun spinning advanced centrifuges barred by the deal, which saw Iran limit its program in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

An escalating series of incidents since Trump’s withdrawal has threatened the wider Mideast. Over a year ago, a U.S. drone strike killed a top Iranian general, causing Tehran to later launch ballistic missiles that wounded dozens of American troops in Iraq.

A mysterious explosion also struck Iran’s Natanz nuclear facility, which Iran has described as sabotage. In November, Iranian scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, who founded the country’s military nuclear program some two decades earlier, was killed in an attack Tehran blames on Israel.

Zarif brought up the attacks in his interview with state TV, saying the IAEA must keep some of its information confidential for safety reasons.

“Some of them may have security ramifications for Iran, whose peaceful nuclear sites have been attacked,” Zarif said. “For a country whose nuclear scientists have been murdered in terrorist operations in the past — and now recently with Mr. Fakhrizadeh — confidentiality is essential.”

Gambrell reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Cyprus activists: Hunters’ lead pellets threaten flamingos

By MARCOS ANDRONICOU and MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS Associated Press

LARNACA, Cyprus (AP) — Conservationists in Cyprus are urging authorities to expand a hunting ban throughout a coastal salt lake network amid concerns that migrating flamingos could potentially swallow lethal quantities of lead shotgun pellets.

Martin Hellicar, director of Birdlife Cyprus, said flamingos are at risk of ingesting the tiny pellets lying on the lakebed as they feed. Like other birds, flamingos swallow small pebbles to aid digestion, but can’t distinguish between pebbles and the lead pellets.

“Last year, we had tens of losses of flamingos,” Hellicar said.

Cyprus is a key stop on the migration path for many types of birds flying from Africa to Europe. The Larnaca Salt Lake, a wetlands network of four lakes, typically welcomes as many as 15,000 flamingos from colder climates to the southern coast of the island nation in the eastern Mediterranean. They stay through the winter and leave in March. Other water fowl frequenting the lake include ducks, waders and seagulls.

Hunting is banned around most of the salt lake, but hunters are still allowed to shoot ducks in the network’s southern tip.

The government’s Game and Fauna Service says in the first two months of last year, 96 flamingos were found dead in the Larnaca Salt Lake wetlands as a result of lead poisoning. Cyprus Veterinary Services official Panayiotis Constantinou, who has conducted autopsies on flamingos, said lead from the pellets poisoned the birds.

The high number of deaths is mainly attributed to heavy winter rain two years ago that stirred up the lake sediment and dislodged embedded lead shot.

A sport shooting range near the lake’s northern tip closed nearly 18 years ago and authorities organized a clean-up of lead pellets in the lakebed there.

But Hellicar says the clean-up was apparently incomplete. A European Union-funded study is underway to identify where significant amounts of lead pellets remain so they can be removed. Preliminary results of the study showed “very high” lead levels in the wetland’s southern tip and continued duck hunting there could compound the problem, Hellicar said.

“The problem is pronounced,” he said. “The danger is real for the flamingos and other birds that use

the area.”

Cyprus Hunting Federation official Alexandros Loizides disagrees, saying that hunting in a 200-meter northern swath is not a problem due to the limited number of hunters. He said he’s unaware of any flamingo deaths in the area and faults pesticide and fertilizer runoff from nearby farms for creating any pollution problems hurting wildlife.

“I think the effect of hunting there is very small on the specific part of the lake,” said Loizides. “It’d be a shame for hunters to lose the only area where hunting is permitted near wetlands.”

A ban on the use of lead pellets near wetlands has been in force in Cyprus for several years. A similar, EU-wide ban took effect last month but conservationists believe the laws are not being enforced enough.

Pantelis Hadjiyeros, head of the Game and Fauna Service, said it’s less important to ban hunting in the area than to convince hunters to stop using shells with lead pellets.

“It should be drummed into people that the use of lead pellets is prohibited near wetlands and that only steel pellets are permitted,” Hadjiyeros told The Associated Press.

Cloud 9: Djokovic wins 9th Australian Open, 18th Slam title

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Maybe, just maybe, the thinking went, Novak Djokovic would be just a tad more susceptible to trouble this time around at the Australian Open.

After all, he tore an abdominal muscle in the third round and wasn’t sure he could continue to compete. Entering Sunday, Djokovic ceded five sets in the tournament, the most he ever dropped en route to a major final. And to top it all off, he was facing Daniil Medvedev, owner of a 20-match winning streak.

Yeah, right. We’re talking about Djokovic at Melbourne Park, where his dominance is most certainly intact — nine finals, nine championships. Plus, he’s still gaining on Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal in the Grand Slam standings, now up to 18 overall, two shy of the men’s record those rivals share.

Djokovic used improved serving, along with his usual relentless returning and baseline excellence to grab 11 of 13 games in one stretch and beat Medvedev 7-5, 6-2, 6-2 for a third consecutive Australian Open trophy.

“Definitely, emotionally, the most challenging Grand Slam that I ever had, with everything that was happening — injury, off-the-court stuff, quarantines,” Djokovic said. “A roller-coaster ride.”

When the match ended after less than two hours, Djokovic went to the sideline, lifted his white shirt and peeled pieces of beige athletic tape from his stomach.

“I was quite worried,” Djokovic said about the injury. “I did not (think) realistically that I could actually play. I didn’t know until two hours before the fourth-round match.”

Dealing with what he called “bearable” pain, Djokovic improved to a combined 18-0 in semifinals and finals on Melbourne’s hard courts.

“Probably, it’s not your last one,” Medvedev said. “I have no words to say.”

Djokovic, a 33-year-old from Serbia, has won six of the last 10 majors and will stay at No. 1 in the rankings at least through March 8. That will give him 311 weeks there, breaking another mark held by Federer.

His goals now are squarely on Grand Slams, even more than before.

Put Djokovic’s nine triumphs in Australia alongside five at Wimbledon, three at the U.S. Open and one at the French Open. The math looks good for him: He is about a year younger than Nadal and 6 1/2 younger than Federer.

“I do enjoy the success every single time even more,” Djokovic said, “because I know that the longer the time passes, the more difficult it’s going to become.”

The No. 4-seeded Medvedev was appearing in his second Slam final; he was the runner-up to Nadal at the 2019 U.S. Open.

The 25-year-old from Russia had won 12 in a row against Top 10 opponents, but trying to solve Djokovic in Australia is a unique challenge.

“He’s really good (at) reading an opponent’s game,” Medvedev said, “knowing what you will do next, how to beat you.”

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As things slipped away, Medvedev bounced his white racket off the blue court, then absolutely destroyed it with a full-on spike. He kept looking up at his coach with palms up as if to ask, "What can I possibly do here?"

It is a familiar sentiment in this stadium: Federer, Nadal, Andy Murray, Stan Wawrinka, Dominic Thiem — all Grand Slam champions, all defeated by Djokovic in semifinals or finals in Melbourne.

On a cool, cloudy evening, an event delayed three weeks because of the coronavirus pandemic closed with an announced attendance of 7,426 in Rod Laver Arena. Spectators were barred for five days earlier in the tournament because of a COVID-19 lockdown, but they eventually were let back in at 50% capacity.

"There are a lot of mixed feelings about what has happened in the last month or so with tennis players coming to Australia," Djokovic said. "But I think when we draw a line at the end, it was a successful tournament for the organizers."

And for him.

Medvedev's flat, wrap-the-racket-around-his-neck forehand was iffy at first, missing wide, long and into the net in the initial 10 minutes. Djokovic grabbed 13 of the match's initial 16 points and a quick 3-0 lead. Soon enough, though, it was 3-all, then 5-all.

But that's when Djokovic stepped up, and Medvedev stepped back. Djokovic held at love, then broke to claim the set when Medvedev slapped a forehand into the net just after someone in the crowd called out during the point.

Djokovic began the second set with a fault into the net, then shook his left arm and flexed his shoulders. That point ended with him missing a backhand into the net, and he glared at his guest box. Another netted backhand gifted Medvedev a break.

But the extreme experience gap showed there. Medvedev immediately relinquished his next two service games. In all, Djokovic broke seven times and made merely 17 unforced errors to Medvedev's 30.

"Masterpiece," said Goran Ivanisevic, the 2001 Wimbledon champion who is one of Djokovic's coaches.

Medvedev appeared to have a tiny opening at 4-2 in the third, getting to 15-30 on Djokovic's serve with a forehand winner and waving to the crowd to make noise. As if viewing that as a personal affront, Djokovic took the next three points and the game, then pointed his right index finger to his temple and gritted his teeth.

Soon it was over.

"Coming to Australia, it always brings that extra dose of confidence to me," Djokovic said, "because of my record here and because of how I play."

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

UK speeds up vaccinations: All adults get 1st jab by July 31

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The British government declared Sunday that every adult in the country should get a first coronavirus vaccine shot by July 31, at least a month earlier than its previous target, as it prepared to set out a "cautious" plan to ease the U.K.'s lockdown.

The new target also aims for everyone 50 and over and those with an underlying health condition to get their first of two vaccine shots by April 15, rather than the previous date of May 1.

The makers of the two vaccines that Britain is using, Pfizer and AstraZeneca, have both experienced supply problems in Europe. But U.K. Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Sunday that "we now think that we have the supplies" to speed up the vaccination campaign.

The early success of Britain's vaccination effort is welcome good news for a country that has had more than 120,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe. More than 17.2 million people, a third of the country's adults, have had at least one vaccine shot since inoculations began on Dec. 8.

Britain is delaying giving second vaccine doses until 12 weeks after the first, rather than three to four weeks, in order to give more people partial protection quickly. The approach has been criticized in some

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countries — and by Pfizer, which says it does not have any data to support the interval — but it is backed by the U.K. government's scientific advisers.

News of the new vaccine targets came as Prime Minister Boris Johnson met Sunday with senior ministers to finalize a "road map" out of the national lockdown that he plans to announce on Monday.

Faced with a dominant virus variant that scientists say is both more transmissible and more deadly than the original virus, Britain has spent much of the winter under a tight lockdown. Bars, restaurants, gyms, schools, hair salons and all nonessential shops have been closed; grocery stores, pharmacies and takeout food venues are still open.

The government has stressed that economic and social reopenings will be slow and cautious, with nonessential shopping or outdoor socializing unlikely before April. Many children will go back to school beginning on March 8 and nursing home residents will be able to have one visitor from the same date.

Johnson's Conservative government has been accused of reopening the country too quickly after the first lockdown in the spring. The number of new confirmed cases, hospitalizations and deaths are all declining in February but remain high, and Johnson says his reopening road map will follow "data, not dates."

But he is under pressure from some Conservative lawmakers, who argue that restrictions should be lifted quickly to revive an economy that has been hammered by three lockdowns in the last year.

John Edmunds, a member of the government's scientific advisory group, said British hospitals are still treating about 20,000 coronavirus patients, half the January peak but almost as much as the height of the first surge last spring.

"If we eased off very rapidly now, we would get another surge in hospitalizations" and deaths, he told the BBC.

Edmunds said there is added uncertainty because of new virus variants, including one identified in South Africa that may be more resistant to current vaccines.

Hancock told Sky News that the government would take a "cautious but irreversible approach" to reopening the economy.

Despite the success of Europe's fastest vaccination campaign, the U.K. government has been accused of failing to protect disabled people, who are among the most at-risk from coronavirus.

The Office for National Statistics has found that 60% of people who died with coronavirus in England in 2020 had a physical or mental disability. But many disabled people, apart from those with "severe or profound" learning disabilities, have not been put in a priority group for vaccination.

Jo Whiley, a well-known BBC radio DJ, on Sunday highlighted the plight of her 53-year-old sister Frances, who has a learning disability. Whiley said her sister contracted the coronavirus in an outbreak at her care home, whose residents had not been vaccinated.

Whiley said her sister had finally been offered a shot of vaccine — but it came too late.

"She was actually called in for her vaccine last night. My mum got a message to say that she could get vaccinated, but it's too late, she's fighting for her life" in the hospital, Whiley told the BBC. "It couldn't be crueler."

Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

The Latest: Djokovic says he did tear muscle in Australia

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — The Latest on Day 14 of the Australian Open tennis tournament (all times local):

12:25 a.m.

Novak Djokovic says he did tear an abdominal muscle in his third-round match at the Australian Open. That's what he announced right after that win, but then he refused to go into details until the tournament was over.

Now that he has won his ninth title at Melbourne Park, Djokovic clarified he was merely guessing about

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the severity of the injury at the time.

He said he was not sure he could keep competing until about two hours before his next match and at that point did not think winning the championship was realistic.

Djokovic said that people will be able to see some of what he did to recover and be able to continue to play in Melbourne in a documentary that he has been filming and plans to release at the end of 2021.

9:40 p.m.

Novak Djokovic has beaten Daniil Medvedev 7-5, 6-2, 6-2 to win his ninth Australian Open championship and 18th Grand Slam title.

The No. 1-seeded Djokovic has won the trophy three years in a row at Melbourne Park.

He has won six of the last 10 major tournaments overall and his total of 18 Slams moves him within two of the men's record of 20 shared by Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

The No. 4-seeded Medvedev was trying to collect his first Grand Slam title Sunday.

But Djokovic used superb serving and his usual baseline excellence to end the Russian's 20-match winning streak.

Medvedev also had won his past 12 matches against Top 10 opponents.

9:05 p.m.

Novak Djokovic has taken a two-set lead over Daniil Medvedev in the Australian Open final.

Djokovic grabbed the opener by a 7-5 score and the second 6-2.

Medvedev destroyed his racket by spiking it to the court after missing a return to fall behind 5-2 in the second set.

He had broken to begin that set but Djokovic then reeled off four games in a row.

Djokovic is now one set away from his ninth championship at Melbourne Park and 18th Grand Slam title overall.

Medvedev needs to win three sets in a row to earn his first major trophy. He never has won a match after dropping the first two sets.

8:30 p.m.

Novak Djokovic has taken the opening set of the Australian Open final against Daniil Medvedev by a 7-5 score.

They were at 5-all before Djokovic held at love and then broke Medvedev.

There were several lengthy exchanges at the baseline that lasted at least 10 strokes in that set, and Djokovic held an 8-5 advantage on those points.

Djokovic is seeking a ninth Australian Open trophy and 18th Grand Slam title overall.

Medvedev is aiming for his first major championship.

7:46 p.m.

Novak Djokovic and Daniil Medvedev have started the Australian Open men's final.

Rod Laver Arena is about half-full after spectators were barred entirely for five days earlier in the tournament because of a local COVID-19 lockdown. The crowd capacity has been reduced to 50% under regulations in place during the pandemic.

The temperature is in the mid-60s Fahrenheit (below 20 Celsius).

Djokovic is seeded No. 1 and bidding for a third consecutive title at Melbourne Park and ninth overall.

This is his 28th Grand Slam final. He has won 17 previously.

Medvedev is seeded No. 4 and appearing in his second major final after being the runner-up to Rafael Nadal at the 2019 U.S. Open.

Medvedev comes into Sunday with a 20-match winning streak.

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6 p.m.

Novak Djokovic and Daniil Medvedev are getting ready to meet in the Australian Open men's final.

They are due on court in Rod Laver Arena at about 7:30 p.m. local time (3:30 a.m. EST) on Sunday.

Djokovic is seeded No. 1 and the two-time defending champion. He is seeking a ninth trophy at Melbourne Park and 18th Grand Slam title overall.

That would move him within two of the men's record of 20 shared by Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Medvedev is trying to collect his first Grand Slam title.

This is his second major final. He enters Sunday on a 20-match winning streak.

The 25-year-old from Russia also has won his past 12 matches against Top 10 opponents.

5 p.m.

Filip Polasek and Ivan Dodig have won the men's doubles title at the Australian Open with a 6-3, 6-4 win over 2020 champions Rajeev Ram and Joe Salisbury.

Ram, a 36-year-old American who spent two weeks in hard quarantine after arriving in Australia last month, was attempting a double at Melbourne Park after winning the mixed doubles title with Barbora Krejčíková on Saturday night.

The 35-year-old Polasek dedicated the victory to his newly-born baby daughter.

Ram saved a championship point while serving in the ninth game and held, but Polasek sealed the title in the next game.

Novak Djokovic is bidding for a ninth Australian Open singles title in the final later Sunday against fourth-seeded Daniil Medvedev.

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Washington taps pastors to overcome racial divide on vaccine

By ASHRAF KHALIL and HILARY POWELL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Stately and deliberate, with a distinctive white streak in his black hair, the Rev. Wallace Charles Smith started his Valentine's Day sermon at Shiloh Baptist Church by talking about love and vaccinations.

"That's what love's all about. When you get a vaccination, you are saying to everyone around you that you love them enough that you don't want any hurt, harm or danger to befall them," he said. "In the spirit of love, keep at it until you get your vaccination. That's the only thing that's going to erase this terrible scourge."

The church was empty except for a camera crew and a tiny choir. Thanks to COVID-19, Smith's Sunday sermons are now virtual affairs.

Still, health officials in the nation's capital are hoping that Smith and other Black religious leaders will serve as community influencers to overcome what officials say is a persistent vaccine reluctance in the Black community. Smith and several other local ministers recently received their first vaccine shots.

Black residents make up a little under half of Washington's population, but constitute nearly three-fourths of the city's COVID-19 deaths. The District of Columbia is now offering vaccinations to residents over age 65, but numbers show that seniors in the poorest and blackest parts of Washington are lagging behind.

Officials partially blame historic distrust of the medical establishment, especially among Black seniors, who vividly remember medical exploitation horrors such as the Tuskegee syphilis study, where hundreds of impoverished rural Black men suffered syphilis effects with minimal treatment for decades as part of the medical study.

"We know we need to focus on Black and brown communities," Dr. LaQuandra Nesbitt, the director of the district's health department, said earlier this month. "Let's not give up on communities of color being interested in the vaccine. Let's continue to answer their questions. Let's continue to be very thoughtful in how we answer their questions."

The D.C. government is giving priority for vaccine registration to predominantly Black ZIP codes and

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running public information campaigns, including the clergy vaccinations. The latest numbers show the gap is narrowing, but the southeastern core of the city's Black community is still getting vaccinated at the slowest rate.

"There's distrust in our community. We can't ignore that," said Rev. James Coleman of All Nations Baptist, who was vaccinated along with Smith. "The church, and particularly the Black church, is essential. ... That's what pastors do."

Coleman said he has worked to create a vaccine-positive atmosphere among the seniors in his church. Before a recent Sunday morning sermon, conducted via audio conference call, elderly parishioners in Coleman's church updated one another on their progress and congratulated those who had been vaccinated.

"There was some nervousness to overcome at first," Coleman said. "People outside the Black community sometimes can't relate to that sensitivity."

Health departments nationwide are dealing with the same challenges, and other jurisdictions also are calling on religious leaders to help dispel vaccine fears.

"Our role as clergy and as faith-based leaders is to be optimistic and hopeful. We say to our people that these vaccines are the gift of life. We believe in the science," said Rev. HB Holmes Jr. of Bethel Missionary Church in Tallahassee, Florida.

Holmes has gotten vaccinated, and his church has hosted vaccination drives.

"We knew that because of hesitation and reluctance that we needed trusted voices. So we brought together persons of great influence in Black and brown communities, particularly from our community, to say, you know, I'm going to take the vaccine and roll up our sleeves and do that publicly," he said.

In Washington, the Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church has been designated a "faith-based vaccination partner," with a portable vaccination trailer set up in the church's parking lot twice a week. The vaccinations have gone smoothly. But showing that vaccine skepticism transcends racial lines, a white D.C. resident, Kathy Boylan, crossed the city on a recent icy day to stand on the sidewalk outside the church with a sign saying "Danger: COVID Vaccine Say No!"

The city's community influencer campaign is targeting more than just religious leaders.

Prominent Black Washington figures such as Vice President Kamala Harris, local radio host Kojo Nnamdi and Doug Williams, a Super Bowl-winning quarterback for the Washington football team, have all received their injections at southeast Washington's United Medical Center and used their public platforms to encourage others to follow suit.

"I honestly believe that more people want to take it than don't," said hospital official Toya Carmichael, who said several people have asked for the same nurse that vaccinated Harris.

But some D.C. officials are insisting that simple cultural reluctance, while real, doesn't fully explain Washington's racial vaccination lag. Interviews with Black residents revealed a common set of complaints: seniors failing to navigate the online registration system or sitting on hold only to be informed that all appointments had been filled.

Lisa Chapman had to overcome both personal reluctance and logistical obstacles in order to schedule vaccinations for her parents, Walter Coates, 82, and Rosa Coates, 80.

First she had to persuade them.

"I just wasn't certain. I wanted to wait and see for a while," said Rosa Coates. "But (Lisa) convinced me. She just kept talking to me about it."

Then it took waiting on hold for more than 90 minutes, leaving the phone on speaker and then leaping back on when a human answered.

"That's a really long time to wait. I think a lot of people do want to get it. They just can't get through," Chapman said.

D.C. Council Member Kenyan McDuffie laid part of the problem at the feet of the government. In an interview, McDuffie, who represents southeastern Ward 5, called the city's vaccine rollout "overwhelmingly inequitable" and said talk of vaccine reluctance was obscuring a reality of vaccine frustration, made worse by the digital divide.

"I think there is a larger percentage of people who want to receive the vaccine and have had challenges

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with scheduling appointments and being able to receive the vaccine," he said. "My fear is that some of those residents have simply given up."

Smith, in his Valentine's Day sermon, spoke not just of the fear but also the logistical hassles of a confusing process.

"I know many of you have tried to get the vaccine, but there have been so many challenges ... waiting for hours, only to find that what you thought was available is not there," he said.

Given the community reluctance, city health officials say they cannot afford to frustrate or discourage those seeking vaccination.

Nesbitt said a new registration model would go into effect in March that would bring a further "equity lens" to the vaccination process. Also, officials have organized teams of "senior vaccine buddies" to go to the homes of seniors and help them get through the online process.

Associated Press writer Emily Leshner in New York contributed to this report.

Snubbed as Obama high court pick, Garland in line to be AG

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The last time Merrick Garland was nominated by the White House for a job, Republicans wouldn't even meet with him.

Now, the once-snubbed Supreme Court pick will finally come before the Senate, this time as President Joe Biden's choice for attorney general. Garland, an appeals court judge, is widely expected to sail through his confirmation process, which begins Monday before the Democratic-controlled Senate Judiciary Committee, with bipartisan support.

"Judge Garland's extensive legal experience makes him well-suited to lead the Department of Justice, and I appreciated his commitment to keep politics out of the Justice Department," Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said in a statement. "Unless I hear something new, I expect to support his nomination before the full Senate."

Biden's choice of Garland reflects the president's goal of restoring the department's reputation as an independent body. During his four years as president, Donald Trump had insisted that the attorney general must be loyal to him personally, a position that battered the department's reputation. Garland's high court nomination by President Barack Obama in 2016 died because the Republican-controlled Senate refused to hold a hearing.

Garland will inherit a Justice Department that endured a tumultuous time under Trump — rife with political drama and controversial decisions — and abundant criticism from Democrats over what they saw as the politicizing of the nation's top law enforcement agencies.

The department's priorities and messaging are expected to shift drastically in the Biden administration, with a focus more on civil rights issue, criminal justice overhauls and policing policies in the wake of nationwide protests over the death of Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement.

Garland plans to tell senators the department must ensure laws are "fairly and faithfully enforced" and the rights of all Americans are protected, while reaffirming an adherence to policies to protect its political independence, with the attorney general acting as a lawyer for the American people, not for the president. The Justice Department on late Saturday released a copy of Garland's opening statement.

Garland will also confront some immediate challenges, including the criminal tax investigation into Biden's son, Hunter, and calls from some Democrats to investigate Trump, especially after thousands of pro-Trump rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 as Congress was meeting to certify Biden's electoral win. Garland, in his prepared remarks for the Senate committee, calls the insurrection a "heinous attack that sought to distrust a cornerstone of our democracy: the peaceful transfer of power to a newly elected government."

A special counsel's inquiry started by William Barr, while he was attorney general, into the origins of the Trump-Russia investigation also remains open. It will be up to Garland to decide what to make public from that report,

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Garland was at the center of a political firestorm five years ago as part of a Republican gamble that eventually shaped the future of the Supreme Court. As Obama's nominee to replace the late Justice Antonin Scalia, who had died unexpectedly in February of 2016, Garland was a moderate choice and generally well liked by senators.

But Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said hours after Scalia's death that he would not consider any Obama nominee — and that the voters should decide by picking a new president that November. McConnell's entire caucus went along. Many declined even to meet with Garland, even though some privately questioned the gambit.

It was a huge political risk. Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton was ahead in most polls and could have easily nominated someone more liberal than Garland had she won the White House. But she did not, Trump did and Republicans were elated as they voted to confirm Neil Gorsuch as a justice a year later. The bet later paid off unexpected returns as the Senate remained in Republican hands for the next four years and Trump had the opportunity to nominate two additional conservative justices, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett, reshaping the political balance of the court.

Before the high court drama, Garland had been repeatedly praised by some Republicans as exactly the sort of moderate nominee they could support.

The criticism, such as it was, came from liberals, who had hoped Obama would pick someone more progressive, or diverse, than Garland. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, then seeking the 2016 nomination against Clinton, said he wouldn't have chosen Garland. Liberal activist groups were tepid in their support.

Sen. Lindsay Graham, R-S.C., was one of a handful of senators who met with Garland, but didn't budge from his position that a president should not choose a Supreme Court nominee in an election year. Graham reversed course when his party had the chance, ramming through Coney Barrett's nomination in record time during a global pandemic with just weeks to go before the 2020 election, which his party then lost.

Graham said in a tweet that Garland would be a "sound choice" to lead the Justice Department. "He is a man of great character, integrity, and tremendous competency in the law."

Garland is a white man, but two other members of the Justice Department leadership, Vanita Gupta and Kristen Clarke, are women with significant experience in civil rights. Their selections appeared designed to blunt any concerns about Biden's choice for attorney general and served as a signal that progressive causes would be prioritized in the new administration.

Garland is an experienced judge who held senior positions at the Justice Department decades ago, including as a supervisor in the prosecution of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. But he is set to return to a department that is radically different from the one he left. His experience prosecuting domestic terrorism cases could prove exceptionally handy now.

Garland probably will face pressure from civil rights groups to end the federal death penalty after an unprecedented run of capital punishment during the Trump administration. Thirteen federal executions were carried out in six months, and they became superspreaders during the coronavirus pandemic.

There could be questions, too, about the department's handling of a federal criminal and civil rights investigation examining whether members of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration intentionally manipulated data about nursing home coronavirus deaths.

The new chairman of the Senate committee handling the nomination, Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said Garland was well deserving of the post.

"And in light of his past treatment of the United States Senate, his day before the microphones is long overdue," Durbin said.

Associated Press writers Mark Sherman and Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

Funeral and more protests follow deadly shootings in Myanmar

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Crowds in Myanmar's capital attended a funeral Sunday for the young woman who was the first person confirmed to have been killed in protests against the military's takeover, just one day after security forces shot dead two more demonstrators.

Mya Thwet Thwet Khine was shot in the head by police on Feb. 9, two days before her 20th birthday, at a protest in the capital, Naypyitaw, and died Friday.

Mourners lined the entrance to a cemetery in the city as the hearse carrying her body arrived and was taken to a crematorium where more people had gathered. They silently raised their hands in three-fingered salutes — a sign of defiance and resistance adopted from neighboring Thailand — as the black and gold vehicle rolled slowly past.

Inside the crematorium hall, the lid on Mya Thwet Thwet Khine's coffin was partially removed to allow a last glimpse of her head resting on a bed of red and white roses before she was cremated. Members of the crowd outside chanted "Our uprising must succeed!"

Protesters elsewhere in Myanmar gathered again Sunday for street demonstrations that have been going on for more than two weeks.

In Yangon, Myanmar's biggest city, about 1,000 demonstrators began the day by honoring Mya Thwet Thwet Khine at a ceremony under an elevated roadway.

"I want to say through the media to the dictator and his associates, we are peaceful demonstrators," said protester Min Htet Naing. "Stop the genocide! Stop using lethal weapons!"

There were also protests in Myawaddy, on the border with Thailand, and at Inle Lake, a popular scenic tourist attraction, where dozens of its famous longtailed wooden boats were moored near shore and those aboard chanted anti-coup slogans.

Demonstrators turned out in force in Mandalay, the country's second-biggest city, where security forces shot dead two people on Saturday near a dockyard where the authorities had been trying to force workers to load a boat. The workers, like railway workers and truckers and many civil servants, have joined a civil disobedience campaign against the junta.

Shooting broke out Saturday after neighborhood residents rushed to the Yadanabon dock to try to assist the workers in their resistance. One of the victims, described as a teenage boy, was shot in the head and died immediately, while another was shot in the chest and died en route to a hospital.

Several other serious injuries were also reported. Witness accounts and photos of bullet casings indicated that the security forces used live ammunition, in addition to conventional riot control equipment and slingshots, a traditional hunting weapon in Myanmar.

The new deaths drew quick and strong reaction from the international community.

"I am horrified at more loss of life, including a teenage boy in Mandalay, as the ruling junta escalates its brutality in Myanmar," Tom Andrews, the U.N.'s independent investigator for human rights in the Southeast Asian country, said on Twitter.

"From water cannons to rubber bullets to tear gas and now hardened troops firing point blank at peaceful protesters. This madness must end, now!"

Germany's Foreign Ministry condemned the violent crackdown, and called for the immediate release of all of those arrested, in particular ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, to allow the "democratically and constitutionally legitimized institutions to resume their work."

Singapore, which together with Myanmar is part of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, issued a statement condemning the use of lethal force as "inexcusable." Urging "utmost restraint" on the part of security forces, it warned that "if the situation continues to escalate, there will be serious adverse consequences for Myanmar and the region."

The authorities have continued arrests that began on the day of the Feb. 1 coup, when Suu Kyi and members of the government were detained. According to the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 569 people have been arrested, charged or sentenced, with 523, including Suu Kyi and Win Myint, still in detention.

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A live Saturday night broadcast on Facebook showed the wife of actor Lu Min describing to neighbors how her husband was arrested and taken away from their home shortly after midnight. He was one of six high-profile people in the entertainment industry charged last week with inciting civil servants to stop work and join the protest movement, which he and the others have publicly championed.

On Sunday, Facebook announced that it took down the page run by the Myanmar military information unit "for repeated violations of our community standards prohibiting incitement of violence and coordinating harm." It had already taken down other accounts linked to the military.

The junta took power after detaining Suu Kyi and preventing Parliament from convening, saying elections last November were tainted by voting irregularities. The election outcome, in which Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party won by a landslide, was affirmed by an election commission that has since been replaced by the military. The junta says it will hold new elections in a year's time.

The coup was a major setback to Myanmar's transition to democracy after 50 years of army rule that began with a 1962 coup. Suu Kyi came to power after her party won a 2015 election, but the generals retained substantial power under the constitution, which had been adopted under a military regime.

Israel starts reopening economy after two-month lockdown

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel lifted many of its coronavirus restrictions and started reopening its economy Sunday as the country's vaccination drive and third nationwide lockdown have started to bring down infections.

Most grade school and high school classes have reopened after a nearly two-month closure, along with museums, libraries, malls and markets. Some restrictions on the number of people in attendance remain in place. The entire education system is expected to return to normal operations early March.

Gyms, pools, cinemas and restaurants are opening back up for people who have received two doses of the coronavirus vaccine.

Israel unveiled its plan to allow the vaccinated to attend cultural events, fly abroad and patronize restaurants and health clubs by using a "green badge" app on Saturday ahead of the reopening of the economy. The rollout of the app has been fraught with technical difficulties.

After striking a deal with Pfizer to trade data for doses, Israel's vaccine campaign became the world's speediest in the past two months. Almost half its population of 9.3 million have received the first dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Nearly 3 million have gotten the second shot.

Israel has faced international criticism for largely excluding Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip from its highly successful vaccination campaign. The dispute highlights the Palestinians' reliance on Israel even as they struggle to combat the pandemic on their own. Last week, Israel facilitated the transfer of the first 2,000 doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip.

The coronavirus is still spreading rapidly in Israel, however, and restrictions on movement and assembly have remained in place since the government imposed a countrywide lockdown in late December.

Israel has recorded at least 743,000 cases of COVID-19 and at least 5,521 deaths since the start of the pandemic last year. Its three lockdowns have paralyzed the economy and driven unemployment to over 20%

Frozen pipes, electric woes remain as cold snap eases grip

By JAKE BLEIBERG and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Higher temperatures spread across the southern United States on Saturday, bringing relief to a winter-weary region that faces a challenging clean-up and expensive repairs from days of extreme cold and widespread power outages.

In hard-hit Texas, where millions were warned to boil tap water before drinking it, the warm-up was expected to last for several days. The thaw produced burst pipes throughout the region, adding to the list of woes from severe conditions that were blamed for more than 70 deaths.

By Saturday afternoon, the sun had come out in Dallas and temperatures were nearing the 50s. People emerged to walk and jog in residential neighborhoods after days indoors. Many roads had dried out, and

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patches of snow were melting. Snowmen slumped.

Linda Nguyen woke up in a Dallas hotel room Saturday morning with an assurance she hadn't had in nearly a week: She and her cat had somewhere to sleep with power and water.

Electricity had been restored to her apartment on Wednesday. But when Nguyen arrived home from work the next evening, she found a soaked carpet. A pipe had burst in her bedroom.

"It's essentially unlivable," said Nguyen, 27, who works in real estate. "Everything is completely ruined."

Deaths attributed to the weather include a man at an Abilene health care facility where the lack of water pressure made medical treatment impossible. Officials also reported deaths from hypothermia, including homeless people and those inside buildings with no power or heat. Others died in car accidents on icy roads or from suspected carbon monoxide poisoning.

Roughly half the deaths reported so far occurred in Texas, with multiple fatalities also in Tennessee, Kentucky, Oregon and a few other Southern and Midwestern states.

A Tennessee farmer died trying to save two calves from a frozen pond.

President Joe Biden's office said Saturday he has declared a major disaster in Texas, directing federal agencies to help in the recovery.

U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a New York Democrat, tweeted Saturday that she helped raise more than \$3 million toward relief. She was soliciting help for a Houston food bank, one of 12 Texas organizations she said would benefit from the donations.

The storms left more than 300,000 still without power across the country on Saturday, many of them in Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi.

More than 50,000 Oregon electricity customers were among those without power, more than a week after an ice storm ravaged the electrical grid. Portland General Electric had hoped to have service back to all but 15,000 customers by Friday night. But the utility discovered additional damage in previously inaccessible areas.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown ordered the National Guard to go door-to-door in some areas to check on residents' welfare. At its peak, what was the worst ice storm in 40 years knocked out power to more than 350,000 customers.

In West Virginia, Appalachian Power was working on a list of about 1,500 places that needed repair, as about 44,000 customers in the state remained without electricity after experiencing back-to-back ice storms Feb. 11 and Feb. 15. More than 3,200 workers were attempting to get power back online, their efforts spread across the six most affected counties on Saturday.

In Wayne County, West Virginia, workers had to replace the same pole three times because trees kept falling on it.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott met Saturday with legislators from both parties to discuss energy prices as Texans face massive spikes in their electric bills after wholesale energy prices skyrocketed while power plants were offline.

"We have a responsibility to protect Texans from spikes in their energy bills" resulting from the weather, he said in a statement.

Water woes added misery for people across the South who went without heat or electricity for days after the ice. Snow storms forced rolling blackouts from Minnesota to Texas.

Robert Tuskey was retrieving tools from the back of his pickup truck Saturday afternoon as he prepared to fix a water line at a friend's home in Dallas.

"Everything's been freezing," Tuskey said. "I even had one in my own house ... of course I'm lucky I'm a plumber."

Tuskey, 49, said his plumbing business has had a stream of calls for help from friends and relatives with burst pipes. "I'm fixing to go help out another family member," he said. "I know she ain't got no money at all, but they ain't got no water at all, and they're older."

In Jackson, Mississippi, most of the city of about 161,000 lacked running water, and officials blamed city water mains that are more than 100 years old and not built for freezing weather.

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The city was providing water for flushing toilets and drinking. But residents had to pick it up, leaving the elderly and those living on icy roads vulnerable.

Incoming and outgoing passenger flights at Memphis International Airport resumed Saturday after all flights were canceled Friday because of water pressure problems. The issues hadn't been resolved, but airport officials set up temporary restroom facilities.

Prison rights advocates said some correctional facilities across Louisiana had intermittent electricity and frozen pipes, affecting toilets and showers.

The men who are sick, elderly or being held not in dormitories but in cell blocks — small spaces surrounded by concrete walls — were especially vulnerable, according to Voice of the Experienced, a grass-roots organization founded and run by formerly incarcerated people. The group said one man at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, just south of Baton Rouge, described a thin layer of ice on his walls.

Cammie Maturin said she spoke to men at the 6,300-inmate Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola who were given no extra provisions to protect themselves from the cold.

"They give them no extra blankets. No extra anything. For them, it's just been fend for yourself," said Maturin, president of the nonprofit H.O.P.E. Foundation.

In many areas, water pressure dropped after lines froze and because people left faucets dripping to prevent pipes from icing, authorities said.

As of Saturday, 1,445 public water systems in Texas had reported disrupted operations, said Toby Baker executive director of the state Commission on Environmental Quality. Government agencies were using mobile labs and coordinating to speed water testing.

That's up from 1,300 reporting issues Friday afternoon. But Baker said the number of affected customers had dropped slightly. Most were under boil-water orders, with 156,000 lacking water service entirely.

"It seems like last night we may have seen some stabilization in the water systems across the state," Baker said.

The Saturday thaw after 11 days of freezing temperatures in Oklahoma City left residents with burst water pipes, inoperable wells and furnaces knocked out of operation by brief power blackouts.

Rhodes College in Memphis said Friday that about 700 residential students were being moved to hotels in the suburbs of Germantown and Collierville after school bathrooms stopped functioning because of low water pressure.

Firefighters extinguished a blaze at a fully occupied 102-room hotel in Killeen, Texas, about 70 miles (110 kilometers) north of Austin, late Friday. The hotel's sprinkler system didn't work because of frozen pipes, authorities said Saturday.

Flames shot from the top of the four-story hotel, and three people required medical care. Displaced guests were taken to a nearby Baptist church.

Texas electrical grid operators said electricity transmission returned to normal after the historic snowfall and single-digit temperatures created a surge in demand that buckled the state's system.

Smaller outages remained, but Bill Magness, president of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said the grid now can provide power throughout the system.

Abbott ordered an investigation into the failure for a state known as the U.S. energy capital. ERCOT officials have defended their preparations and the decision to begin forced outages Monday as the grid reached breaking point.

The blackouts resulted in at least two lawsuits filed against ERCOT and utilities, including one filed by the family of an 11-year-old boy who is believed to have died from hypothermia. The lawsuits claim ERCOT ignored repeated warnings of weaknesses in the state's power infrastructure.

Also, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton issued civil investigative demands to ERCOT and electric utility companies. His investigation will address power outages, emergency plans, energy pricing and more related to the winter storm.

Scolforo reported from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Associated Press journalists Gillian Flaccus in Portland, Oregon; Ellen Knickmeyer in Oklahoma City; Jim Mustian in New York; Terry Wallace in Dallas; Jonathan J. Cooper in Phoenix; and Kimberlee Kruesi in Boise, Idaho contributed.

Customers, staff fired back in gun store shooting; 3 dead

By STACEY PLAISANCE Associated Press

METAIRIE, La. (AP) — A person entered a gun store and shooting range in a New Orleans suburb and fatally shot two people Saturday, prompting customers and staff to open fire on the shooter, a sheriff said. The shooter also died.

The shooting happened around 2:50 p.m. at the Jefferson Gun Outlet in the suburb of Metairie, according to a release from the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office.

Sheriff Joseph Lopinto said the shooter initially struck two people inside, and then several other people — whether employees or store customers — opened fire on the shooter, both inside and outside of the building. Outside the building a man could be seen afterward behind yellow police tape yelling "Where is my son?"

Guns and ammunition are sold in the front of the outlet that faces a main thoroughfare through Jefferson Parish. Customers who want to frequent the gun range generally go around to the side entrance of the building. Staff who work there often wear a sidearm.

Lopinto said two other people also were hit by gunfire and were hospitalized in stable condition. He said there were multiple shooters.

"We're trying to put it all together," the sheriff said during a short briefing with journalists.

None of the dead or wounded were immediately identified and details remained unclear.

Tyrone Russell and Wanetta Joseph were both in a conceal-and-carry course at the store when they heard what they both described as rapid firing. They said the gunfire sounded much louder than the usual muffled shooting that they are used to hearing inside the shooting range.

"We heard the gunshots and the screaming," said Russell. "When the police came, they escorted us out. I could see glass everywhere ... It was just like a really scary scene."

"It got extremely loud, like a bomb almost," said Joseph, who hid with other students under a table — not knowing if there were multiple shooters or if one was near the classroom. One instructor stayed with the students while two others left the room and headed toward the sound of gunfire.

Russell said that when he was led out, he could see a guy "laid out" in the parking lot not far from his car, which was struck by bullets. He described seeing shattered glass, bullet casings strewn about the store.

Caution tape surrounded the business to keep onlookers from getting close to the scene, where ambulances and numerous law enforcement vehicles had converged. A neighboring Taco Bell eatery had been evacuated.

Authorities remained at the scene as night fell.

Metairie is a major suburb of New Orleans, about 5 miles (8 kilometers) west of the city's iconic French Quarter, in the neighboring jurisdiction of Jefferson Parish.

This story has been updated to correct the name of the store to the Jefferson Gun Outlet.

'I thought we were done': Parts fall from sky in plane scare

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and DAVID ZALUBOWSKI Associated Press

BROOMFIELD, Colo. (AP) — David Delucia was settling back into his airplane seat and starting to relax on his way to a long-awaited vacation when a huge explosion and flash of light interrupted an in-flight announcement and put him in survival mode.

The Boeing 777-200, headed from Denver to Honolulu on Saturday with 231 passengers and 10 crew aboard, suffered a catastrophic failure in its right engine and flames erupted under the wing as the plane

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began to lose altitude.

As Delucia and his wife prepared for the worst, people in this Denver suburb reacted in horror as huge pieces of the engine casing and chunks of fiberglass rained down on sports fields and on streets and lawns, just missing one home and crushing a truck. The explosion, visible from the ground, left a trail of black smoke in the sky, and tiny pieces of insulation filled the air like ash.

The plane landed safely at Denver International Airport, and no one on board or on the ground was hurt, authorities said. But both those in the air and on the ground were deeply shaken.

"When it initially happened, I thought we were done. I thought we were going down," said Delucia, who stuffed his wallet in his pocket so he could be easily identified if the plane did go down. "The pilot did an amazing job. It was pretty unnerving."

The Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement that the airplane experienced a right-engine failure shortly after takeoff.

Video posted on Twitter showed the engine fully engulfed in flames as the plane flew through the air. Freeze frames from different video taken by a passenger sitting slightly in front of the engine and posted on Twitter appeared to show a broken fan blade in the engine.

The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating. Authorities have not released any details about what may have caused the failure.

United said in a separate statement that most passengers on United Flight 328 were rebooked on a new flight to Hawaii, but some chose to stay in a hotel overnight instead.

The Broomfield Police Department posted photos on Twitter showing large, circular pieces of debris that appeared to be the engine cowling leaning against a house in the suburb about 16 miles (40 kilometers) northwest of Denver. Police asked anyone injured on the ground to come forward.

Tyler Thal, who lives in the area, told The Associated Press that he was out for a walk with his family when he noticed a large commercial plane flying unusually low and took out his phone to film it.

"While I was looking at it, I saw an explosion and then the cloud of smoke and some debris falling from it. It was just like a speck in the sky, and as I'm watching that, I'm telling my family what I just saw and then we heard the explosion," he said in a phone interview. "The plane just kind of continued on, and we didn't see it after that."

Kirby Klements was inside with his wife when they heard a huge booming sound, he said. A few seconds later, the couple saw a massive piece of debris fly past their window and into the bed of Klements' truck, crushing the cab and pushing the vehicle into the dirt.

He estimated the circular engine cowling at 15 feet (4.5 meters) in diameter. Fine pieces of the fiberglass insulation used in the airplane engine fell from the sky "like ash" for about 10 minutes, he said, and several large chunks of insulation landed in his backyard.

"If it had been 10 feet different, it would have landed right on top of the house," he said in a phone interview with the AP. "And if anyone had been in the truck, they would have been dead."

Based on initial photos and videos posted by passengers, aviation safety experts said the plane appeared to have suffered an uncontained and catastrophic engine failure.

Such an event is extremely rare and happens when huge spinning pieces inside the engine suffer some sort of failure and breach an armored casing around the engine that is designed to contain the damage, said John Cox, an aviation safety expert and retired airline pilot who runs an aviation safety consulting firm called Safety Operating Systems.

"That unbalanced disk has a lot of force in it, and it's spinning at several thousand rotations per minute ... and when you have that much centrifugal force, it has to go somewhere," he said in a phone interview.

Pilots practice how to deal with such an event frequently and would have immediately shut off anything flammable in the engine, including fuel and hydraulic fluid, using a single switch, Cox said.

Former NTSB Chairman Jim Hall called the incident another example of "cracks in our culture in aviation safety (that) need to be addressed."

Hall, who was on the board from 1994 to 2001, has criticized the FAA over the past decade as "drifting

toward letting the manufacturers provide the aviation oversight that the public was paying for." That goes especially for Boeing, he said.

The last fatality on a U.S. airline flight involved such an engine failure on a Southwest Airlines flight from New York to Dallas in April 2018. A passenger was killed when the engine disintegrated more than 30,000 feet above Pennsylvania and debris struck the plane, breaking the window next to her seat. She was forced halfway out the window before other passengers pulled her back inside.

In that case, the breakdown was blamed on a broken fan blade in an engine of the Boeing 737. The Federal Aviation Administration ordered airlines to step up inspections of fan blades on certain engines made by CFM International, a joint venture of General Electric and France's Safran S.A.

In 2010, a Qantas Airbus A380 suffered a frightening uncontained engine failure shortly after takeoff from Singapore. Shrapnel from the engine damaged critical systems on the plane, but pilots were able to land safely. The incident was blamed on the faulty manufacturing of a pipe in the Rolls Royce engine.

Flaccus reported from Portland, Oregon. Associated Press reporters David Koenig in Dallas and Frank Bajak in Boston contributed to this report.

Debris falls from plane during emergency landing near Denver

By GILLIAN FLACCUS and DAVID ZALUBOWSKI Associated Press

BROOMFIELD, Colo. (AP) — Debris from a United Airlines plane fell onto Denver suburbs during an emergency landing Saturday after one of its engines suffered a catastrophic failure and rained pieces of the engine casing on a neighborhood where it narrowly missed a home.

The plane landed safely, and nobody aboard or on the ground was reported hurt, authorities said.

The Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement that the Boeing 777-200 returned to the Denver International Airport after experiencing a right-engine failure shortly after takeoff. Flight 328 was flying from Denver to Honolulu when the incident occurred, the agency said.

United said in a separate statement that there were 231 passengers and 10 crew on board. All passengers were to be rebooked on a new flight to Hawaii, the airline said.

The Broomfield Police Department posted photos on Twitter showing large, circular pieces of debris leaning against a house in the suburb about 25 miles (40 kilometers) north of Denver. Police are asking that anyone injured come forward.

Passengers recounted a terrifying ordeal that began to unfold shortly after the plane full of vacationers took off.

The aircraft was almost at cruising altitude and the captain was giving an announcement over the intercom when a large explosion rocked the cabin, accompanied by a bright flash.

"The plane started shaking violently, and we lost altitude and we started going down," said David Delucia, who was sitting directly across the aisle from the side with the failed engine. "When it initially happened, I thought we were done. I thought we were going down."

Delucia and his wife took their wallets containing their driver's licenses and put them in their pockets so that "in case we did go down, we could be ID'd," said Delucia, who was still shaken up as he waited to board another flight for Honolulu.

On the ground, witnesses also heard the explosion and were scared for those on board.

Tyler Thal, who lives in the area, told The Associated Press that he was out for a walk with his family when he noticed a large commercial plane flying unusually low and took out his phone to film it.

"While I was looking at it, I saw an explosion and then the cloud of smoke and some debris falling from it. It was just like a speck in the sky, and as I'm watching that, I'm telling my family what I just saw and then we heard the explosion," he said in a phone interview. "The plane just kind of continued on, and we didn't see it after that."

Thal was relieved to learn no one was injured or killed from what he saw.

Video posted on Twitter showed the engine fully engulfed in flames as the plane flew through the air.

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Kirby Klements was inside with his wife when they heard a huge booming sound, he said. A few seconds later, the couple saw a massive piece of debris fly past their window and into the bed of Klements' truck, crushing the cab and pushing the vehicle into the dirt.

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The National Transportation Safety Board is investigating.

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Hall, who was on the board from 1994 to 2001, has criticized the FAA over the past decade as "drifting toward letting the manufacturers provide the aviation oversight that the public was paying for." That goes especially for Boeing, he said.

Despite the scary appearance of a flaming engine, most such incidents don't result in loss of life, Cox said.

The last fatality on a U.S. airline flight involved such an engine failure on a Southwest Airlines flight from New York to Dallas in April 2018. A passenger was killed when the engine disintegrated more than 30,000 feet above Pennsylvania and debris struck the plane, breaking the window next to her seat. She was forced halfway out the window before other passengers pulled her back inside.

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"The flames scare the hell out of everybody. But they are the least of the problem because you're going to get them put out and you're going to shut off everything that can burn," Cox said.

Flaccus reported from Portland, Oregon. Associated Press reporters David Koenig in Dallas and Frank Bajak in Boston contributed to this report.

2 Myanmar protesters killed by police fire, several injured

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP) — Riot police in Myanmar shot dead two anti-coup protesters and injured several others on Saturday, as security forces increased pressure on popular revolt against the military takeover.

One of the victims was shot in the head and died immediately during the latest rally in the second-largest city of Mandalay, according to Frontier Myanmar, a news and business magazine. Another was shot in the chest and died en route to a hospital.

Several other serious injuries were also reported. The shootings occurred near Mandalay's Yadanabon dock, where tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons and slingshots were used on protesters earlier Saturday.

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The Irrawaddy news website also confirmed the deaths on social media.

At least five people were injured by rubber bullets and were carried away in ambulances, according to an Associated Press journalist who witnessed the violence.

Some 500 police and soldiers descended on the area after dock workers joined the national civil disobedience movement, refusing to work until the military junta that seized power in a Feb. 1 coup reinstates the democratically elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Protesters and residents fled the neighborhood amid the violence and security forces chased after them.

There were reports of sounds that resembled gunfire. A group of journalists also was forced to flee after being hit with tear gas and slingshot projectiles.

Earlier in the week in Mandalay, security forces cracked down on state railway workers in a similar fashion.

Across Myanmar, protests showed no signs of slowing down despite the crackdown — including a sixth consecutive night in which the internet was cut for many hours.

Demonstrators also gathered in Yangon, the biggest city, chanting and holding placards and images of Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest.

Singapore, which together with Myanmar is part of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations, condemned the use of lethal force as “inexcusable.”

“We strongly urge the security forces to exercise utmost restraint to avoid further injuries and loss of lives, and take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation and restore calm,” the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said, adding: “If the situation continues to escalate, there will be serious adverse consequences for Myanmar and the region.”

On Sunday, Facebook announced it took down the page run by the Myanmar military information unit “for repeated violations of our community standards prohibiting incitement of violence and coordinating harm.”

Earlier Saturday, protesters paid tribute to a young woman who died a day earlier after being shot by police during a rally in the capital, Naypyitaw.

An impromptu memorial created under an elevated roadway in Yangon attracted around 1,000 protesters. A wreath of bright yellow flowers was hung beneath a photograph of Mya Thwet Thwet Khine, who was shot on Feb. 9, two days before her 20th birthday.

Her death on Friday was the first confirmed fatality among thousands of protesters who have faced off against security forces since top military commander Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing took power.

Protesters at the memorial chanted and held up signs that read “End the dictatorship in Myanmar” and “You will be remembered Mya Thwet Thwet Khine.” The supporters also laid roses and rose petals on images of the woman.

U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price offered his government’s condolences and reiterated calls on the military to refrain from violence against peaceful protesters.

Security forces have been relatively restrained so far in confronting protesters in Yangon, but appeared to be toughening their stance in areas where there is less media presence.

The junta detained Suu Kyi and prevented Parliament from convening, saying elections in November were tainted by voting irregularities. The election outcome, in which Suu Kyi’s party won by a landslide, was affirmed by an election commission that has since been replaced by the military. The junta says it will hold new elections in a year’s time.

The U.S., British and Canadian governments have imposed sanctions on the new military leaders, and joined other nations in calling for Suu Kyi’s administration to be restored.

The coup was a major setback to Myanmar’s transition to democracy after 50 years of army rule. Suu Kyi came to power after her National League for Democracy party won a 2015 election, but the generals retained substantial power under the constitution, which was adopted under a military regime.

Spain: Peaceful protests for jailed rapper see more clashes

By JOSEPH WILSON and HERNÁN MUÑOZ undefined
BARCELONA, Spain (AP) —

A fifth night of peaceful protests to denounce the imprisonment of a Spanish rap artist once more devolved into clashes between police and the members of fringe groups who set up street barricades and smashed storefront windows Saturday night in downtown Barcelona.

Small groups made up mostly of young people began their nightly cat-and-mouse game with officers an hour after several thousand protesters gathered in the capital of Spain's Catalonia region, which also was where the worst violence took place during earlier demonstrations this week over rapper Pablo Hasél's detention.

Police were also pelted by rocks after a march in the Catalan town of Lleida, where Hasél spent 24 hours barricaded a university building before police took him away to serve a 9-month prison sentence for insulting the Spanish monarchy and praising terrorist violence in his music.

Catalonia's regional police force said there also was defiance in the city of Tarragona, where groups threw glass bottles at police lines and smashed store windows.

Police reported at least 11 arrests from Saturday, including three minors. The worst of the rioting occurred on Barcelona's Passeig de Gràcia, the city's most fashionable shopping boulevard home to art-deco apartment buildings considered architectural treasures.

The mob worked its way up the street, smashing store front windows, toppling motorbikes, and mounting barricades with metal street barriers and burning trash containers to slow the police pursuit. Some even took the fight to police lines, forcing officers to use shields to protect them from hurled rocks. Police said that they had identified one "youth" for targeting a police helicopter with a laser for two hours.

After pouring out of armored vans, police wielded batons and fired foam bullets to disperse the groups.

The disorder appears have come a fringe group of mainly younger people who constituted a small share of the thousands of participants who joined in marches to support Hasél and to oppose the Spanish laws used to prosecute him.

Around 90 people have been arrested and more than 100 people injured since Hasél's arrest on Tuesday. Barcelona Mayor Ada Colau made an appeal for calm.

"Defending the freedom of expression doesn't justify in any case the destruction of property, frightening our fellow citizens, and hurting businesses already hurt by the crisis" caused by the pandemic, the mayor said.

Marches were called for cities across Spain. Most were peaceful, but Pamplona in the central north saw clashes between police and people throwing bottles.

Madrid municipal authorities said that 300 National Police officers were called up to assist city police, but a protest of several hundred people concluded in the Spanish capital without any splintering off of troublemakers.

Spain's left-wing government announced last week before Hasél was detained that it would change the law to remove prison terms for offenses involving freedom of expression. It did not specifically mention the rap artist or set a timetable for the changes, and its pledge appears to have done little to release the social tension that has boiled over.

Two Democratic governors see stars dimmed by virus woes

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, two Democratic governors on opposite ends of the country were hailed as heroes for their leadership in a crisis. Now they're leaders on the ropes.

Andrew Cuomo of New York and Gavin Newsom of California are embroiled in distinct political woes. For Cuomo, it's a federal investigation into whether his administration sought to hide the true toll of the pandemic. For Newsom, it's fending off a recall effort fueled by opposition to his lockdowns — and his own personal missteps.

But for both men the bottom line is clear: If you're not careful, the same crisis that can raise your stock

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can just as easily bring you down.

"We've had too many mission accomplished moments," said Rebecca Katz, a New York City-based Democratic strategist who ran a primary challenge against Cuomo in 2018, in a reference to former President George W. Bush's premature boast days after the conquest of Iraq.

The COVID-19 virus has been an especially painful illustration of that point. The virus is now stretching into its second year, a timeline few could have comprehended when schools and workplaces were first shuttered last March and governors who control lockdowns played newly prominent roles in Americans' lives.

Cuomo and Newsom both seized the moment in their own ways. Cuomo went on television for daily briefings that were paternal, almost philosophical, and also sharply critical of the Trump administration. They became must-see TV across the country, aided in part by his CNN news host brother. Newsom, meanwhile, instituted early lockdowns, and for a time his state avoided the worst of the virus. He was a smoother, reassuring presence. He studiously avoided partisanship, even landing himself in an ad for President Donald Trump.

But ultimately it was their actions, not their tone or words, that brought them down to earth.

"This is all a bunch of tough stuff," said California strategist Rob Stutzman, noting that governors are judged on outcomes and the outcomes in this crisis have been bad everywhere. "At the end of the day, these different approaches the governors have taken have made very little difference because, well, it's a virus."

Several governors have managed to avoid major political backlash, like Republican Charlie Baker in Massachusetts or Democrat Jared Polis in Colorado. But the travails of Cuomo and Newsom show how big states are exceptionally tricky to run and always under the microscope — something also demonstrated this week in Texas, as the nation's second-largest state suffered extended power outages during a deep freeze that sparked criticism of its Republican governor, Greg Abbott.

"New York and California are under a magnifying glass," said Jared Leopold, former spokesman for the Democratic Governors Association. "Everything good that happens there looks five times better and everything bad looks five times worse."

While the coronavirus may have first landed on U.S. soil on the West Coast, it exploded into public consciousness in March as New York City was wracked by a hideous outbreak. As the epidemic spiraled, Cuomo on March 25 issued a directive barring nursing homes from refusing patients based solely on a COVID-19 diagnosis. Cuomo defended the directive as an effort to prevent catastrophic hospital overcrowding and discrimination against virus patients.

Despite his state's death toll — more than 46,000 people in New York state have died of COVID-19, according to Johns Hopkins University — Cuomo's popularity soared, and some Democrats in the spring and summer favorably contrasted his response with Trump's bravado and false optimism, wondering if Cuomo could replace Joe Biden on their ticket or sign on as a vice presidential candidate. In October, Cuomo took an early victory lap, releasing a book titled "American Crisis: Leadership Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic."

But the nursing home issue exploded onto the political scene with two recent revelations. First, the state's Democratic attorney general chastised the Cuomo administration for minimizing the death toll at nursing homes by excluding certain fatalities from the count. Cuomo's administration then revealed at least 15,000 people living in long-term care facilities have died of COVID-19, nearly double the number Cuomo had initially disclosed.

The New York Post reported that a member of Cuomo's administration told lawmakers it had withheld the numbers for fear of them being "used against us." A furious Cuomo at a press conference accused Ron Kim, a Democratic state legislator who spoke to the Post, of corruption.

Kim said Cuomo had called him and threatened to "destroy" him.

"The nursing homes story really exposed quite a bit about questions about his leadership style and the success of his leadership during COVID," said Christina Greer, a political science professor at Fordham University. "The governor wrote a book touting his accomplishments, and we don't know if we're halfway

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out of the pandemic.”

The meltdown in California has been more gradual. A month after Cuomo released his coronavirus book, an embarrassed Newsom was apologizing for attending a lobbyist’s birthday party at the posh French Laundry restaurant, even as he was telling Californians to avoid gatherings.

The restaurant scandal came as California’s image as a model of COVID response began to fade. Rising cases and shrinking capacity at hospitals prompted Newsom to reinstate stay-at-home orders between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Republicans had circulated recall petitions against Newsom months before, complaining about his handling of homelessness and the economy, but they shifted to include his COVID-19 response in their complaints and began racking up signatures.

In January, Newsom abruptly lifted the stay-at-home orders, sparking accusations he was abandoning science. He was then forced to retool the state’s vaccine distribution system. Now the state’s coronavirus numbers are dropping. His job approval rating has also.

Stutzman said Newsom is suffering for failing to provide the smooth, efficient government he promised when elected. But part of his fall, and Cuomo’s, was inevitable because they are no longer being compared to Trump and his often hands-off approach to the virus response.

“Any of these Democratic governors are going to come off these initial highs they got that were better than Republican governors,” Stutzman, a Republican, argued. “Democrats across the country got a false boost out of this because of Trump, but when it all nets out it looks the same.”

The governors’ troubles stand as a warning for Biden, a Democrat who has declared he now owns the pandemic response and will be judged by how he delivers.

“At least the Biden administration got to see how everyone else did first,” Katz said.

Riccardi reported from Denver. Associated Press writer Kathleen Ronayne in Sacramento, California, contributed to this report.

At Australian Open, Djokovic chases 18th Slam, Medvedev 1st

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Novak Djokovic lost his first career Grand Slam final at the U.S. Open. Then he won his second, which came at the Australian Open.

And look where he is now, more than a dozen years later: One victory from a ninth championship at Melbourne Park and his 18th major title overall, which would put him two behind rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal for the most by a man in tennis history.

Daniil Medvedev also lost his first career Grand Slam final at the U.S. Open. And now he will try to win in his second try, which comes at the Australian Open on Sunday (at 7:30 p.m. local time, 3:30 a.m. EST) — against Djokovic.

“I know that to beat him, you need to just show your best tennis, be at your best physically, maybe four or five hours, and be at your best mentally, maybe for five hours,” Medvedev said. “I would say to win a Slam, especially against somebody (like) Novak, is already a big motivation, and I don’t think there is anything that can make it bigger.”

It is an intergenerational showdown — Serbia’s Djokovic turns 34 in May; Russia’s Medvedev just turned 25 — and another in the simmering standoff between the Big Three and the next wave of up-and-coming players hoping to supplant the group that has dominated for more than 15 years.

Federer, Nadal and Djokovic have combined to win 14 of the past 15 majors (Dominic Thiem at last year’s U.S. Open was the exception), and 57 of the last 69.

“Spice it up a little bit,” by adding a new name to the list of Slam champs, suggested Stefanos Tsitsipas, the 22-year-old who came back from two sets down to eliminate Nadal in the quarterfinals before losing to Medvedev 6-4, 6-2, 7-5 in the semifinals. “Wouldn’t be bad.”

Here’s part of what makes this final intriguing: It pits one of the greatest ever to play the sport, and at

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a site he's dominated, against a player who currently is playing better than anyone in men's tennis.

The No. 1-seed Djokovic is 17-0 in Australian Open semifinals and finals, making him nearly as much of a lock on the blue hard courts of Melbourne Park as Nadal is on the red clay courts of Roland Garros.

"The more I win, the better I feel coming back each year," Djokovic said. "I think it's kind of also logical to expect that. The love affair keeps going."

No. 5 Medvedev, meanwhile, is on a 20-match winning streak dating to last season, a run that features 12 victories against members of the Top 10 (one against Djokovic).

"The confidence, when you beat everybody, is just great," Medvedev said, "because I think people start maybe to be a little bit scared about you."

Another reason to watch: These guys play somewhat similar styles.

"When he's in the zone he doesn't miss. He goes down the line, cross, forehand, backhand. He doesn't miss. That's what is the most, the toughest, part of playing against him," Medvedev said. "I think that's where I should be good, also."

Both are quite talented at roaming the court this way and that, covering ground to prolong points and frustrate foes, until finding an opening for switching from defense to offense in a snap.

That's how Medvedev produced the shot of the day — week? tournament? year? longer? — against Tsitsipas, ranging wide of the deuce court's doubles alley for a forehand return of serve, before sprinting to his left, sliding with his feet at an awkward angle and producing a down-the-line backhand passing winner that was simply spectacular.

He marked the moment with a yell, then raised his arms overhead and did a bit of a hand dance, getting a crowd that had been pulling for his opponent to shower him with praise.

"I wanted them to recognize me, I would say," Medvedev explained, "because the shot was unbelievable."

Djokovic's been doing that sort of thing for years.

And now that he's declared himself pain-free after hurting an abdominal muscle in his third-round victory — he initially declared it was torn — his full-on elasticity appears to be back at its best.

Then there is this aspect of the matchup: The one aspect of Medvedev's game that is superior, his serve, will go up against Djokovic's best-there-is return.

"For sure, when we get out there, we (will) both feel pressure," Medvedev said. "I want to win my first one. He wants to win No. 18."

Follow Howard Fendrich on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/HowardFendrich>

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Suspected hypothermia deaths in homes mount in Texas

By JAMIE STENGLE and MARION RENAULT Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — With the snow and ice clearing in Texas after days of unusually cold temperatures, bodies are being found of people who likely froze to death as they struggled to stay warm after electricity was cut to millions of homes

Of the around 70 deaths attributed to the snow, ice and frigid temperatures nationwide, more than a dozen were people who perished in homes that had lost their heat, and most of those were in Texas. They include an 11-year-old boy who died in his bed in Conroe, near Houston, and two older men found dead in their homes in the small West Texas town of Buffalo Gap in Taylor County.

Taylor County Sheriff Ricky Bishop said his office received many calls in recent days asking for checks on friends or family members who may be suffering due to the power outages.

"I can think of probably one point in one hour we probably got 10 of those calls," said Bishop, adding that some of the county's roads were covered in 4 foot (120 centimeter) deep snow drifts.

Hypothermia can set in if the body loses heat faster than it can produce it and if it falls below about 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Normal body temperature is around 98.6 degrees.

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"After hours and hours, it leads to a very dangerous condition," said Dr. Robert Glatter, an emergency physician at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

Matt Zavadsky, a spokesman for Fort Worth area ambulance provider MedStar, said most of the hypothermia calls they received were from people in their own homes, where temperatures had dipped to 50 degrees or lower.

MedStar reached a peak on Wednesday with 77 hypothermia calls, Zavadsky said. Some people reported numb hands and feet, while others had more severe symptoms.

"You had people who had been so cold for so long that they were shivering uncontrollably, they may have had a decreased level of consciousness, which is not uncommon when you are in hypothermia for a prolonged period of time," he said.

Some who were transported to hospitals had reached the point they were no longer shivering, "which is a very bad sign," Zavadsky said.

At first, the body will try to generate heat by shivering and boosting its heart rate. But if internal temperatures keep dropping, "those things start to slow down," said Dr. Jeff Pothof, an emergency room doctor at UW Health in Madison, Wisconsin. The body will restrict blood circulation to extremities to maintain blood in the core and keep internal organs warm.

Left untreated, hypothermia begins to affect the brain, making it hard to think clearly or move easily.

"You might not understand exactly what's going on," Pothof said. "And that's a vicious cycle because you can't take the action you need to."

Some of the older people who died in Texas were found outside their homes. It wasn't immediately clear what prompted them to go outside.

Poor circulation eventually prevents the heart, brain, and other vital organs from functioning, leading to death. About 32 people die from the cold annually in the U.S., according to the National Weather Service.

Extended nighttime lows in the single digits — as experienced by Texans this week — can be especially dangerous, Glatter said, since body temperatures naturally dip overnight.

"It can creep up on you," he said, especially if confusion has begun to set in. "Your ability to think clearly is not as good, so it's likely people won't pick up on those signs and symptoms."

Babies, children and seniors are at the highest risk for hypothermia because of poor circulation and temperature regulation. Those with heart problems, asthma, emphysema, chronic lung disease, diabetes and tobacco use are also vulnerable.

Some strategies for staying warm can be more hazardous than helpful.

Bundling up too much under blankets or layers of clothing can be dangerous if it leads to excessive sweating, which can pull heat away from the body.

And during weather-related power outages, people might use propane heaters, run generators or burn charcoal or wood indoors — all of which can lead to dangerous fires or deadly carbon monoxide poisoning.

"These are all setups for disaster," Glatter said.

Renault reported from New York City.

Moscow court rejects opposition leader Navalny's appeal

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A Moscow court on Saturday rejected Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny's appeal of his prison sentence, even as the country faced an order from a top European rights court to free the Kremlin's most prominent foe.

A few hours later, a judge in a separate case ordered Navalny to pay a fine for defaming a World War II veteran.

During the first court hearing, Navalny urged Russians to stand up to the Kremlin in a fiery speech mixing references to the Bible and "Harry Potter."

Navalny, 44, an anti-corruption crusader and President Vladimir Putin's most vocal critic, was arrested on

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Jan. 17 upon returning from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusation.

Earlier this month, Navalny was sentenced to two years and eight months in prison for violating terms of his probation while convalescing in Germany. He appealed the sentence and asked to be released. A Moscow City Court judge instead reduced the prison sentence to just over 2 1/2 years, deducting a month-and-a-half that Navalny spent under house arrest in early 2015.

The sentence stems from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that Navalny has rejected as fabricated and the European Court of Human Rights has ruled to be unlawful.

Navalny has been held in Moscow's Matrosskaya Tishina prison, but Russian news reports said that after losing his appeal, he would likely be sent to a prison in the western part of Russia within the next few days to serve out his sentence.

His arrest and imprisonment have fueled a huge wave of protests across Russia. Authorities responded with a sweeping crackdown, detaining about 11,000 people, many of whom were fined or given jail terms ranging from seven to 15 days.

In his speech at the hearing, Navalny referenced the Bible as well as "Harry Potter" and the animated sitcom "Rick and Morty" as he urged Russians to resist pressure from authorities and challenge the Kremlin to build a fairer and more prosperous country.

"The government's task is to scare you and then persuade you that you are alone," he said. "Our Voldemort in his palace also wants me to feel cut off," he added, in a reference to Putin.

"To live is to risk it all," he said, citing "Rick and Morty." "Otherwise, you're just an inert chunk of randomly assembled molecules drifting wherever the universe blows you."

Navalny also addressed the judge and the prosecutor, arguing that they could have a much better life in a new Russia.

"Just imagine how wonderful life would be without constant lying," he said. "Imagine how great it would be to work as a judge ... when no one would be able to call you and give you directions what verdicts to issue."

He insisted that he was unable to report to the authorities in line with his probation requirements while he was convalescing in Germany after his poisoning, emphasizing that he returned to Russia immediately after his health allowed.

"I wasn't hiding," he said. "The entire world knew where I was."

Navalny said he was an atheist before but has come to believe in God, adding that his faith helped him face his challenges. He said he believed the Bible phrase that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed, and that he felt no regret about deciding to return home to Russia.

"Even though our country is built on injustice and we all constantly face injustice ... we also see that millions of people, tens of millions of people, want righteousness," Navalny told the court. "They want the righteousness and sooner or later they will have it."

Asked about the impact of Navalny's prison sentence on Russia's politics, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the country's "rich and multifaceted" political scene will develop regardless of the verdict.

Russia has rejected Western criticism of Navalny's arrest and the crackdown on demonstrations as meddling in its internal affairs.

In a ruling Tuesday, the European Court of Human Rights ordered the Russian government to release Navalny, citing "the nature and extent of risk to the applicant's life." The Strasbourg-based court noted that Navalny has contested Russian authorities' argument that they had taken sufficient measures to safeguard his life and well-being in custody following the nerve agent attack.

The Russian government has rebuffed the European court's demand, describing the ruling as unlawful and "inadmissible" meddling in Russia's affairs. Russian state news agency RIA Novosti reported that the Russian Justice Ministry on Saturday sent a letter to the court asking it to revise its order.

In the past, Moscow has abided by European Court of Human Rights rulings awarding compensations to Russian citizens who have contested verdicts in Russian courts, but it never faced a demand by the

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European court to set a convict free.

In a sign of its long-held annoyance with the Strasbourg court's verdicts, Russia last year adopted a constitutional amendment declaring the priority of national legislation over international law. Russian authorities might now use that provision to reject the ECHR's ruling.

After losing his appeal, Navalny had a second court hearing on charges of slandering a World War II veteran and was ordered to pay a fine of 850,000 rubles (about \$11,500). Prosecutors asked for a 950,000-rubles (\$13,000) fine.

Navalny called the 94-year-old veteran and other people featured in a pro-Kremlin video last year as "corrupt stooges," "people without conscience" and "traitors." He rejected the slander charges, describing them as part of official efforts to disparage him.

Navalny said at the hearing that his accusers "will burn in hell."

Biden's 1st month was about erasing the mark of 'former guy'

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Joe Biden walked into the Oval Office for the first time as president a month ago, his pens were ready. Already.

Lining a fine wooden box, they bore the presidential seal and an imprint of his signature, a micro-mission accomplished in advance of his swearing-in.

Four years ago, pens were just one more little drama in Donald Trump's White House. The gold-plated signature pens he favored had to be placed on rush order in his opening days. Over time, he came to favor Sharpies over the government-issued pens.

On matters far more profound than a pen, Biden is out to demonstrate that the days of a seat-of-the-pants presidency are over.

He wants to show that the inflationary cycle of outrage can be contained. That things can get done by the book. That the new guy can erase the legacy of the "former guy," as Biden has called Trump.

On policy, symbolism and style, from the Earth's climate to what's not on his desk (Trump's button to summon a Diet Coke), Biden has been purging Trumpism however he can in an opening stretch that is wholly unlike the turmoil and trouble of his predecessor's first month.

The test for Biden is whether his stylistic changes will be matched by policies that deliver a marked improvement from Trump, and a month is not long enough to measure that. Further, the length of Biden's honeymoon is likely to be brief in highly polarized Washington, with Republicans already saying he has caved to the left wing of the Democratic Party.

The first time the nation saw Biden in the Oval Office, hours after he was sworn in, he sat behind the Resolute Desk with a mask on his face.

Trump, of course, had eschewed masks. Not only that, but he had made their use a culture war totem and political cudgel even as thousands of Americans were dying each day from a virus that properly worn masks can ward off.

Though Biden wore a mask in the campaign, seeing it on the face of the new president at the desk in the famed Oval Office made for a different message. Biden wished to make a sharp break with his predecessor while his administration came to own the deep and intractable crises that awaited him.

The strategy had been in the works since before the election and began with Biden at the desk signing a flurry of executive orders. The intent was clear: to unwind the heart of Trump's agenda on immigration, the pandemic and more while also rejoining international alliances and trying to assure historic allies that the United States could be relied upon once again.

"The subtext under every one of the images we are seeing from the White House is the banner: 'Under new management,'" says Robert Gibbs, who was press secretary for President Barack Obama.

"Whether showing it overtly or subtly, the message they are trying to deliver, without engaging the former president, is to make sure everyone understands that things were going to operate differently now and that hopefully the results would be different, too."

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In a whiteout of executive actions in his first weeks, Biden reversed Trump's course on the environment and placed the Obama health law at the center of the pandemic response with an extended special enrollment period for the insurance program that Trump swore to kill.

The Iran nuclear deal that Biden's predecessor abandoned is back on the diplomatic plate. The U.S. is back in the World Health Organization as well as the Paris climate accord.

But memberships and diplomatic outreach only go so far. The world wants to see how far Biden will actually go in making good on climate goals, whether he will steer more help to poorer countries in the pandemic and whether his words of renewed solidarity with NATO may only last until the next pendulum swing of U.S. politics.

In addition, Biden faces the reality that over the past four years China has moved in to fill the void left by the United States on trade, and allies have learned to rely less on the U.S. during the more hostile Trump era.

One month into Trump's presidency, he had already lost his national security adviser and his choice for labor secretary to scandal. The revolving door of burned-out, disgraced or disfavored aides was already creaking into motion.

Forces in the bureaucracy were leaking information and resisting his policies. Revelations were emerging about an FBI investigation into his campaign's contacts with Russian intelligence officials, a precursor of a special inquiry that would eventually morph into impeachment. Judges had already blocked his order to suspend the refugee program and ban visitors from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Biden's first month has been comparatively drama-free, with many of his Cabinet picks approved and no evident convulsions among his staff other than the departure of a White House press officer who made a profane threat to a journalist.

After 40 years in Washington, eight years as Obama's vice president and two failed presidential campaigns before his successful one, Biden has had a lifetime to think about the mark he wants to make as president and how to get rolling on it.

"Nobody who observed Joe Biden as a candidate should be surprised by any of this," said senior adviser Anita Dunn. "He had no learning curve in terms of the issues but also in how to be president."

There have been challenges nonetheless: the distraction of Trump's post-presidential impeachment trial, a more narrowly divided Senate than his predecessor faced and a nominee to lead the Office of Management and Budget who's been busy deleting years of social media posts assailing Republicans and some on the Democratic left.

Much of what Biden has set out to do has been to mark a change from Trump in both style and substance.

The Democrat framed his first month as one to start to "heal the soul" of the nation, repair the presidency and restore the White House as a symbol of stability and credibility.

He has acted to lower Washington's partisan rancor, disengaging almost completely from the Trump impeachment spectacle that consumed the capital for much of the month and not watching it live on TV. Yet his early efforts to work with Republicans on COVID-19 relief have stalled.

Gone are the predawn tweets that rattled Washington with impromptu policy announcements and incendiary rhetoric. Gone are the extended, off-the-cuff, combative exchanges with the "enemy of the people" mainstream press.

Gone are rosy projections about the virus, with ill-fated promises that the nation is "rounding the corner" on the pandemic.

In contrast with his predecessor, Biden has leveled with the public about the pandemic and the resulting economic devastation, acknowledging that things would get worse before they got better.

"You had the former guy saying that, well, you know, we're just going to open things up, and that's all we need to do," Biden told his first town-hall meeting as president, this past week. "We said, no, you've got to deal with the disease before you deal with getting the economy going."

A pattern emerged: The president and his team would deliberately set expectations low — particularly on vaccinations and school reopening — then try to land a political win by beating that timetable.

How low? On Friday in Michigan, he held out only the possibility that the country will be returning to

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normal by the end of the year. "God willing, this Christmas will be different than last but I can't make that commitment to you," he said.

Biden's team has installed a new discipline within the walls of the West Wing. The new president has only held one extended question-and-answer session with reporters, and his exchanges in the Oval Office or before boarding Marine One have been brief.

The messages from the White House track with the assessments Biden delivered in his inaugural address: The U.S. is being tested and the answers will not be easy.

The daily press briefings are back, this time with sign language. Pets roam the White House lawn again. Fires crackle in the White House fireplace. Biden says he begins his day by working out, making coffee and eating yogurt or Raisin Bran.

At his town hall event in Wisconsin, Biden repeatedly talked about how he doesn't want to talk about the former guy.

"I'm tired of talking about Donald Trump, don't want to talk about him anymore," he said. "For four years, all that's been in the news is Trump. The next four years, I want to make sure all the news is the American people."

That's a tall order. The ex-president maintains his hold on millions of supporters and his lock on much of the Republican Party, whether he ends up running again or not.

But to the extent Biden can, he is doing what Obama foresaw during the 2020 campaign if the Democrat won. Biden and running mate Kamala Harris would make it possible to ignore the Washington circus again, Obama told a rally, and give Americans some predictability whether they like Biden's course or not.

"You're not going to have to think about them every single day," Obama said. "It just won't be so exhausting. You'll be able to go about your lives."

Pandemic makes prostitution taboo in Nevada's legal brothels

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Before the coronavirus pandemic, tourist-dependent Nevada had a notorious attraction: It was the only place in America where someone could legally pay for sex.

These days, even in the state known for sin, the business is taboo.

Legal brothels have been shuttered for nearly a year, leaving sex workers to offer less-lucrative alternatives like online dates or nonsexual escort services. Those in the industry say many of the licensed prostitutes, who work as independent contractors, have struggled to qualify for unemployment benefits since closures began last March and some have opted to take their work into the shadows, offering sex illegally.

While the business of legal bordellos may seem incompatible with social distancing, sex workers and brothel owners say that's not the case. Like other close-contact industries such as massage therapy and dental services, they contend brothels should be allowed to reopen with protective measures.

"We could easily do work at arm's length, just the same as they do within the massage parlors, which are open in the state of Nevada," sex worker Alice Little said. "You can go to a dentist and have him put his hands in your mouth. You can go to a tattoo parlor and get your face tattooed right now. You can get piercings put in your face. You're certainly not masked for any of those things."

So far, Nevada officials haven't agreed.

A state task force that makes recommendations on coronavirus restrictions hasn't responded to pleas from brothel owners seeking a way to reopen. And a lawsuit Little filed against Gov. Steve Sisolak last year fizzled.

The Democratic governor recently said brothels, along with other adult entertainment like nightclubs and strip clubs, would stay closed at least through May 1. After that, the state may let counties decide whether to allow those businesses to open, as long as COVID-19 infections aren't surging.

Nevada, like many states, saw a spike of coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths around the winter holidays, but since mid-January, those numbers have been steadily declining.

Prostitution is only legal in Nevada's estimated 20 licensed brothels, whose sex workers undergo regular tests for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS and obtain required work cards from local law

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enforcement after passing an FBI background check.

A throwback to the state's days as a Wild West mining territory, brothels were illegal but tolerated in some areas until Nevada legalized them in 1971.

They're only allowed to operate in counties with populations of less than 700,000 people. Brothels and prostitution are illegal in the counties that include Las Vegas and Reno, but some brothels are a half-hour to an hour away. Some offer free limo rides from the casino-heavy cities.

Little, who was working at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch brothel in the capital of Carson City, says she has lost 95% of her income amid the closures. She said she's been providing virtual dates, webcam experiences and creating X-rated content through subscriber site OnlyFans, among other ventures.

"At this point, I am able to survive. I am able to pay my bills. I'm able to put food on the table, but I have had to dip into my savings," Little said.

Other brothel workers who are not comfortable linking their faces to online sex work have had a harder time pivoting to virtual services, she said. Finding a job outside the stigmatized sex industry also can be tough, Little said, because background checks can reveal the work authorization cards prostitutes must have in brothels.

Allissa Starr, who was working at Sheri's Ranch brothel in Pahrump, about an hour outside Las Vegas, said some women she worked with are illegally offering sex for money despite virus concerns.

"They're just doing what they can," she said.

Starr, like Little, started offering virtual dates, where she might share a glass of wine, dinner and conversation with clients. Starr said she eventually got assistance under the federal pandemic unemployment program for gig workers, but it was about 10% of what she had been making and is set to run out soon.

Starr said she's able to cover her bills but can no longer put thousands in savings. She moved to Pittsburgh to live closer to family and save on rent. She's starting a self-care business but said if Nevada's brothels reopen, she'd come back to work one week a month.

"It's a way to easily provide money for me and my family, and it's a way to provide security," Starr said.

Reopening the brothels, Starr said, is "a personal risk, just like traveling. If you wear your mask, if the girls got COVID tests before they came to the ranch, I think it could be done safely."

Mustang Ranch, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) east of Reno, appears to be the only brothel still offering some kind of companionship, taking advantage of an escort license it's had for about two decades. The license allows customers to hire women for nonsexual companionship.

Owner Lance Gilman said temperatures are taken, masks are worn and customers must come to the ranch and say where they'll go on a date, typically a restaurant or casino.

Gilman said it's a much-reduced operation — usually, about 30 women were available for hire 24/7. Only three or four women are working as escorts because many of them are uncomfortable leaving the security of the property for a date, he said.

Mustang Ranch submitted a proposed plan to state officials that suggests reopening for contactless dates in private rooms, with masks and gloves worn by workers.

"In this industry, much, if not the majority, of the courtesan-customer interaction does not involve physical contact even during normal business operations," the proposal says.

State officials haven't approved the plan.

Asked how the brothel could ensure sex workers and customers have no physical contact behind closed doors, Gilman said there's no way to make such a guarantee: "All you can do is rely upon the credibility and the ethics of the commitments that are made."

"Human nature is human nature," he said.

New legislation would protect drivers who hit protestors

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — When massive demonstrations against racial injustice erupted across the nation last summer, protesters used an increasingly common tactic to draw attention to their cause: swarming

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out onto major roads to temporarily paralyze traffic.

This method sometimes resulted in searing images of drivers plowing through crowds, causing serious injuries and in some cases, deaths.

Now, Republican politicians across the country are moving to stop the road-blocking maneuver, proposing increased penalties for demonstrators who run onto highways and legal immunity for drivers who hit them. The bills are among dozens introduced in Legislatures aimed at cracking down on demonstrations.

"It's not going to be a peaceful protest if you're impeding the freedom of others," said Rep. Kevin McDugle, the author of an Oklahoma bill granting criminal and civil immunity to people who drive into crowds on roads. "The driver of that truck had his family in there, and they were scared to death."

He referred to an incident in July in which a pickup truck pulling a horse trailer drove through Black Lives Matter protesters on Interstate 244 in Tulsa. Three people were seriously injured, including a 33-year-old man who fell from an overpass and was left paralyzed from the waist down.

Tumultuous demonstrations by left-leaning and right-leaning groups have stirred new debate about what tactics are acceptable free speech and which go too far. In addition to blocking roads, Black Lives Matter demonstrators have taken over parks and painted slogans on streets and structures, while right-wing groups have brandished firearms and stormed capitol buildings. Local authorities' responses have wavered as they try to avoid escalating conflicts.

Now legislators in Iowa, Missouri, Oklahoma, Utah and about a dozen other states have introduced new counterprotest measures.

The traffic-blocking tactic has attracted the most concern because of the obvious hazard.

In one particularly chilling incident in Minneapolis, a large tanker truck drove at high speed through thousands of protesters gathered on a closed highway. Remarkably, no one was seriously hurt, though a criminal complaint says at least one protester suffered abrasions.

Mark Faulk, a longtime Oklahoma activist who was arrested last year for blocking a roadway, said dramatic tactics are necessary to get people's attention.

"The idea of escalating it to the point where you disrupt the convenience of the citizens and of the status quo, you have to do that sometimes to make a point," Faulk said.

But Carmyn Taylor, 20, recalled the sight of a pickup truck bearing down on protesters spread across the six-lane I-244 in Tulsa.

"The most vivid thing I remember is when I got pulled to the ground. I remember seeing both sets of wheels run over my legs, which was a little traumatizing," said Taylor, who suffered a broken leg and a sprained ankle. "For the first two weeks after the accident, I couldn't walk."

In Seattle, Summer Taylor, 24, was killed and another person was seriously injured in July when a man drove his car into protestors on a closed Seattle freeway. A graphic video posted on social media showed the car swerving around several parked cars and slamming into the two protesters, sending them flying into the air.

In an incident in St. Louis in May, a 29-year-old man was dragged to his death beneath a tractor-trailer that drove into a sign-carrying group on a road.

Whether drivers face criminal charges in such incidents depends on the circumstances of each case, prosecutors say. The tractor-trailer driver in St. Louis has not been criminally charged, while the driver of the car in Seattle has pleaded not guilty to charges of vehicular homicide, vehicular assault and reckless driving.

District Attorney Steve Kunzweiler declined to file charges against the driver in Tulsa, saying several people in the crowd had attacked the vehicle with the driver's children inside. But Kunzweiler stopped short of endorsing proposals for harsher penalties for protestors or blanket immunity for drivers.

"There are any number of laws already in place that are readily available to be enforced," he said.

A bill granting drivers immunity for hitting protestors easily cleared an Oklahoma Senate committee recently on a 8-1 vote. Two others are pending in the state House.

But critics say the proposals are only designed to intimidate people, not to solve a problem.

"The biggest concern is that they chill speech and they chill folks gathering to protest," said Nicole McAfee,

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policy director for the Oklahoma chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

About 50 people were arrested during several days of protests in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Most of the arrests were for disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail, and rioting, a felony that carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. At least two men accused of burning a sheriff's van were charged under the state's anti-terrorism law, a felony that carries a sentence of up to life in prison. Those cases are pending.

Proposals in Oklahoma would increase the criminal penalties for blocking a roadway, including one making it a felony punishable by up to two years in prison, and making it more difficult for those arrested to be released from jail. Another bill would add participating in unlawful assemblies to the state's racketeering act aimed at organized crime.

State Rep. Emily Virgin, the Democratic leader in the Oklahoma House, said she wishes her Republican colleagues would focus on the underlying issues of police brutality and systemic racism instead of seeking ways to punish protesters.

"It seems that some of my colleagues took the wrong lesson from the demonstrations we saw this summer," Virgin said.

Enrollment at US community colleges plummets amid pandemic

By ANITA SNOW and COLLIN BINKLEY Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Peniella Irakoze is cold calling a list of 1,001 fellow students who didn't return to Phoenix College this semester, checking on how they're managing during the coronavirus pandemic.

The calls have become a regular part of her job at a community college like others across the U.S. that have experienced significant enrollment declines as students face challenges with finances, family life and virtual learning.

"I didn't know that so many people were struggling," said Irakoze, 20, who studies medical laboratory science and works part-time for the college. "So many students aren't coming back."

Nationwide, enrollment at community colleges — which offer two-year degrees and vocational training and often attract older students looking to learn new skills — dropped 10% from fall 2019 to fall 2020, according to the National Student Clearinghouse.

They were hit the hardest amid all colleges and four-year universities experienced only slight declines, beating many predictions that the outcome would be worse.

While it was no surprise that fewer freshmen enrolled at four-year and community colleges, delaying studies until campuses fully reopen, the pandemic took a much heavier toll on older adult students who frequently choose the community college route. Many lost jobs or have no time for their own schooling as they supervise their children's online classes.

"The majority of them are working, many of them in industries that have been decimated by the pandemic," said Martha Parham, a senior vice president for the American Association of Community Colleges. "Trying to navigate that and take classes is a very daunting challenge at this time."

Depression and anxiety also disrupted the academic careers of community college students, including Stephanie Cruz Vazquez.

She said her severe anxiety was amplified so much by her virus concerns that she decided last year to take a year off from fashion design classes at Mesa Community College near Phoenix.

"The pandemic really pushed me over the edge," said Cruz Vazquez, 20.

She ended up infected with COVID-19 along with her parents. They all recovered and Cruz Vazquez now works for a local city council race campaign with plans to return to college this year.

More Americans typically turn to community college education amid economic downturns, seeking to learn new job skills or change careers. But the depth of the pandemic's downturn, which kept many people homebound, seems to have upended usual trends, education experts said.

That troubles advocates and policy makers who cite community colleges as important options for low-income Americans. At a Senate hearing this month, Miguel Cardona, President Joe Biden's pick for educa-

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tion secretary, called for federal financial support to help hurting community colleges, calling them "this nation's best-kept secret."

Even in good economic times, many community college students struggle to stay in school while juggling the demands of supporting families, paying rent and covering tuition.

The added challenge of the pandemic was too much for many students, said Ralph Thompson, interim dean of students at Phoenix College.

Its enrollment was at 10,978 in the fall of 2019 but dropped to 9,446 a year later, a decline of 14%, according to the Maricopa County Community College District, which counts Phoenix College among its 10 community colleges.

Thompson assigned Irakoze to call fellow students to see how they are coping, saying they "need to feel engaged" during their isolation.

"The students need to hear that someone understands what they are going through," Thompson said.

Across the U.S., community colleges have reported surging demand from students who need help getting food, prompting them to expand food pantries and grocery programs — in some cases tripling the amount of food distributed in past years.

At MassBay Community College near Boston, meal assistance scholarship applications have increased 80% since last year. Dinora Torres — a single mother with four young daughters — said the program helped keep her enrolled.

"If I didn't have that, I don't know if I could have been able to make it," said Torres, 29, who hopes to transfer to a four-year university and get a bachelor's accounting degree. "It has been really hard. A lot of nights I'm not sleeping. Some days I would have to send my kids to my parents so I could work all day on catching up."

MassBay suffered a 10% enrollment decrease, but officials have been ramping up relief aid for students. Torres said donors arranged by the college bought her family a Thanksgiving meal and Christmas presents for her daughters.

"They got my daughters each a gift. I wasn't even going to celebrate the holidays this year because I didn't have the money," Torres said, holding back tears.

Advocates hope the enrollment downturn is temporary and some predict many students will return to classes when campuses reopen and jobs return.

But at least some are expected to forgo higher education, which experts say could translate to a lifetime of lower earnings and financial challenges.

"We are worried about losing some of them permanently," said David Podell, president of MassBay. "They may follow up later, but each year that they defer their education, the less they're going to make in a lifetime and the later the stability will come."

The shift also illustrates how the pandemic has widened educational racial inequalities.

According to the National Student Clearinghouse, the community colleges enrollment decrease was most pronounced among Black students and Native Americans, groups that both experienced 13% declines over the last year. White and Hispanic community college enrollment fell 10% and Asian enrollment dropped 5%.

About 60% of Phoenix College's students are racial minorities, but officials said it's too early to determine whether minorities experienced disproportionate declines.

Angelica Larraga, who is in a Phoenix College paralegal program, said the pandemic forced her to give up working as a traveling hair stylist because she could not visit clients' homes.

Larraga, 35, has sons ages 7 and 10 and said the last year has been stressful with them struggling with remote learning.

Scholarships pay for Larraga's tuition and books, but the family's finances were so tight last summer that they got help from the local food bank.

"I'm just trying to make everything work," Larraga said.

Binkley reported from Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Biden declares major disaster in Texas as federal aid flows

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Add Mother Nature to the pile of crises on President Joe Biden's plate.

A month into the job and focused on the coronavirus, Biden is seeing his disaster management skills tested after winter storms plunged Texas, Oklahoma and neighboring states into an unusual deep freeze that left millions shivering in homes that lost heat and power, and in many homes, water.

At least 69 deaths across the U.S. have been blamed on the blast of unseasonable weather.

The White House announced on Saturday that the president had declared a major disaster in Texas, and he has asked federal agencies to identify additional resources to address the suffering.

Biden came into office Jan. 20 promising to tackle a series of brewing crises, starting with the coronavirus pandemic and its ripple effects on the economy. He tacked on systemic racism and climate change as top priorities. And now he's contending with storms that have not only imperiled Americans but also delayed the shipment and administration of millions of doses of coronavirus vaccines.

Biden said Friday that he hopes to travel to Texas next week but doesn't want his presence and the accompanying presidential entourage to distract from the recovery.

"They're working like the devil to take care of their folks," Biden said of Texas officials. He said he'd make a decision early next week about travel.

Biden, who offered himself during the campaign as the experienced and empathetic candidate the nation needed at this moment in time, is working on several fronts to address the situation — and to avoid repeating the mistakes of predecessors who got tripped up by inadequate or insensitive responses in times of disaster.

Part of the job of being president is responding to the destruction left behind by earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes and other natural disasters, or events like deadly mass shootings, or even acts of terrorism.

Some have handled such situations better than others.

George W. Bush earned praise for his leadership after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks but stumbled during his administration's halting response to the humanitarian disaster that unfolded in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast four years later.

Barack Obama said he should have anticipated the blowback he got for going to the golf course right after he condemned the beheading of a kidnapped American journalist by Islamist militants in 2014. Obama was vacationing on Martha's Vineyard at the time.

Donald Trump was criticized for tossing rolls of paper towels into a crowd of people in Puerto Rico who had endured Hurricane Maria's pummeling of the island in 2017. He defended tossing the towels, saying the people were "having fun."

Bill Clinton, who famously claimed during the 1992 presidential campaign that "I feel your pain," was a natural at connecting with disaster victims.

Just this week, Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas showed how quickly one bad move during a crisis can become a public relations disaster for a politician.

Cruz came under attack for traveling to Mexico while his constituents suffered without power, heat and running water. His explanation — that his daughters pushed for the getaway because they were out of school — was particularly panned. Cruz later said the trip was a mistake.

Biden has tweeted about Texas and the other affected states, while the White House has issued numerous statements aimed at demonstrating that the federal government is in command of the situation. The president is getting regular updates from his staff and already declared states of emergency in Texas, Oklahoma and Louisiana — adding the disaster designation announced Saturday for Texas.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has shipped dozens of generators and supplies, including fuel, water, blankets and ready-to-eat meals, to the affected areas.

Biden has spoken to the governors of the seven states most affected by the winter weather. He tweeted a photo of himself on the phone with Republican Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas.

Oklahoma's Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt, a staunch supporter of Trump's, was quick to praise Biden for swift action on a disaster declaration.

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After speaking with Biden by telephone earlier this week, Stitt specifically thanked the president for "taking the time to reach out this afternoon and offer the federal government's help for Oklahomans. We had a very productive call and I look forward to working together to find solutions as we recover from this historic storm."

Barbara Perry, director of presidential studies at the University of Virginia's Miller Center, said Biden is "well-suited" to deal with the disaster because of his decades of service in the U.S. Senate and as a former vice president and because of "his genuine concern for people."

"He's got to show empathy right off the bat," Perry said in an interview. "It's important for a president to go to a place that's been battered, but be careful about the footprint. He doesn't want to make things worse."

Biden, should he decide to visit Texas next week, could also use the trip to press his point that climate change is real and must not go unaddressed, and that the state could do things like winterize its power plants to be better prepared for future storms, Perry said.

But he should take care to not do so in a scolding kind of way.

"We know he cares about climate change, and this is a way to convince people," Perry said.

Associated Press writer Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City contributed to this report.

Europe applauds Biden's approach, stresses cooperation

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Collective sighs of relief could be heard from many European capitals Saturday after U.S. President Joe Biden made clear in his first major foreign policy address since taking office that he rejected the "America First" and transactional approach of his predecessor and urged cooperation among Western allies.

At the same time, politicians and observers cautioned that some of the sources of tension from Donald Trump's presidency remained and that the allies have serious work ahead of them, once Biden's honeymoon is over.

"Biden gave exactly the speech that many Europeans wanted to hear - an America that pats you on the shoulders, that doesn't criticize or demand," wrote Germany's influential Der Spiegel magazine after Biden on Friday became the first American president to appear at the Munich Security Conference, albeit in virtual form.

"Will it stay that way? For the moment, it was certainly the right message: It was primarily intended to patch up the injuries of the Trump years," the magazine said in an analysis.

The annual Munich Security Conference has long been heralded as a gathering where world leaders are able to share and debate ideas in an informal setting.

Biden's speech highlighted the condensed agenda for this year's conference, which was held online due to the coronavirus pandemic.

In his keynote address, Biden assured other participants, including French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, that the United States was "determined to reengage with Europe, to consult with you, to earn back our position of trusted leadership."

Over the last four years, the NATO alliance was shaken by Trump's questioning of its relevance and his suggestion that the United States might not come to the aid of members who failed to meet pledges to commit 2% of gross domestic product to defense spending.

But Biden made no mention of Washington's opposition to the Germany-Russia joint Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and steered away from criticizing Germany and others for failing to meet NATO defense spending goals. Instead, he emphasized Washington's commitment to Article 5 of the NATO founding treaty, which states that an attack on one alliance member is considered an attack on all.

It is now important for Germany and the rest of Europe to seize upon the renewed U.S. willingness to engage in dialogue and work hard toward resolving areas of disagreement, said Juergen Hardt, the foreign

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policy spokesman for Merkel's parliamentary group.

"With his speech, Joe Biden reached out to Europe," Hardt said. "

The coming months must be used intensively to resolve numerous open issues, such as punitive tariffs, extra-territorial sanctions on Nord Stream 2, or digital tax," he said.

Merkel told reporters Friday after Biden's speech that it is up to Europe to take an example from his first days in office, and follow words with actions.

She cited the United States' return to the Paris climate agreement, its decision to stay in the World Health Organization and to engage with the U.N. Human Rights Council, to extend the New START treaty and to try to revive the Iran nuclear agreement as "important steps toward more multilateral cooperation."

"I can only support (the idea) that it is up to democratic countries not just to talk about freedom and values, but to produce results," Merkel said.

In a nod toward Biden's call for cooperation in addressing economic and national security challenges posed both by Russia and China, several leaders suggested more could be done.

The leader of the European Union's executive branch, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, noted at the conference that "a more and more assertive China" showed robust economic growth in 2020 despite the pandemic and "a more and more defiant Russia continues to breach international rules at home and abroad."

"It is up to us, the United States and Europe, to strengthen our cooperation again as proven and trusted partners, as indispensable allies, shoulder to shoulder," von der Leyen said. "Because if we lead the way, this is not only about joining forces, this is a signal to the world."

European Council President Charles Michel underlined the need for a common approach to "defend the rules-based international order from the attacks of autocratic regimes, whether from Russia, China or Iran," saying "a strong partnership needs strong partners."

"That's why we, in Europe, are growing stronger, to increase our strategic ability to act," Michel said.

France's Macron, who has pushed since his own presidency began in 2017 for Europe to do more for its own defense, suggested that by doing so, it would be strengthening the U.S. ability to focus more on the Pacific region.

"I think it is time for us to take much more of the burden of our own protection," he said.

Merkel, meanwhile, stressed that "it is very important that we develop a common trans-Atlantic Russia agenda, which on the one hand makes cooperative offers, but on the other hand very clearly names the differences."

"The second and perhaps more complicated thing is for us to develop a common agenda toward China," she said, noting that the country is both a systemic competitor and needs to tackle issues such as climate change.

"There is a great deal to do," Merkel said. "Germany stands ready for a new chapter of the trans-Atlantic partnership."

Angela Charlton and Sylvie Corbet in Paris, and Geir Moulson in Berlin contributed to this story.

Italy: Pope, others hail health workers on COVID anniversary

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis and Italy's president on Saturday marked a newly established annual day to honor doctors, nurses and other health care workers, exactly one year after the nation's first known native case of COVID-19 emerged.

In a message to honor those caring for COVID-19 patients, Frances hailed the "generous involvement, at times heroic, of the profession lived as mission."

On the evening of Feb. 20, 2020, a hospital in Codogno, northern Italy confirmed that a 38-year-old Italian man was infected with the coronavirus. The man had no links to anyone who had been in China, where the COVID-19 outbreak first erupted.

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A year on, Italy has so far seen more than 95,000 known dead, the second-high coronavirus toll in Europe after Britain.

Expressing gratitude to doctors, nurses and other health care workers, Francis likened their dedication to "a vaccine against individualism and selfishness." He said that such dedication "demonstrates the most authentic desire that dwells in the heart of man — be near to those who have the most need and give of oneself for them."

President Sergio Mattarella marked the first National Day of Health Care Personnel by mourning the many medical workers who contracted COVID-19 and died.

According to professional associations in the sector, at least 326 doctors and 81 nurses have died of COVID-19.

Mattarella said the professionalism and self-denial shown by the medical workers contributed to efforts "to avoid the epidemic's precipitating into an irreversible catastrophe."

The Italian leader said despite its many shortcomings, the national health care system has proven to be an institution "to preserve and to invest in, in order to protect" Italians collectively.

Some of the 209 billion euros (\$250 billion) in European Union funding to help Italy rebuild from the economic and other devastation of the pandemic will be earmarked to shore up and improve Italy's public health care system.

More COVID-19 anniversary commemorations are scheduled for Sunday in Italy, especially in the hard-hit north, where the outbreak first pummeled the nation.

Boy Scouts celebrate the first group of female Eagle Scouts

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Growing up in Minneapolis, Isabella Tunney followed the progress of her older brother with admiration and occasional envy as he worked toward earning the Boy Scouts' prestigious rank of Eagle Scout.

This weekend, at age 16, Tunney will be one of nearly 1,000 girls and young women honored by the Boy Scouts in a virtual celebration of the inaugural class of female Eagle Scouts. It's a major milestone, given the hallowed stature of a rank that has been attained over more than a century by astronauts, admirals, U.S. senators and other luminaries.

Only in 2018 did the Boy Scouts start accepting girls as Cub Scouts; older girls were admitted into the flagship scouting program in 2019. Overall, more than 140,000 girls have joined.

Tunney, like many of the girls attaining Eagle rank, worked intensively to amass the needed merit badges within two years. A minimum of 21 badges are required to attain Eagle; Tunney earned all 137, in subjects ranging from welding to white-water rafting to coin collection.

"The quarantine helped a lot," she said, referring to the lockdown ordered due to the COVID-19 pandemic. "I had a lot of time to spare."

For her Eagle Scout public service project, she organized a drive to collect essentials for families being assisted by a homeless shelter.

Tunney is a junior at St. Paul Academy and Summit School in St. Paul, Minnesota, and she is interested in a career related to the STEM disciplines — science, technology, engineering and math.

As a child, she loved tagging along with her older brother, Eugene, but was sad when he and their father would go off on weekend camping trips with the Scouts.

"I was very envious of all those," she said. "When the Boy Scouts opened up to girls, I was so excited to get the opportunity to participate myself."

Like Tunney, new Eagle Scout Sydney Ireland also was drawn to the Boy Scouts due to participation of an older brother. She became an unofficial member of his New York City unit at age 4 and over the ensuing years was outspoken in urging the Boy Scouts to officially admit girls.

Ireland, 19, is now a sophomore at Amherst College, taking classes remotely from the Massachusetts island of Nantucket. She's majoring in political science and psychology; law school and a career in politics could be on the horizon.

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"Scouting has influenced my life in nearly every facet," she said via email, crediting the leadership skills she learned in the Scouts for giving her the confidence to run for Amherst's student Senate.

The Boy Scouts say about 6% of all scouts attain Eagle rank – roughly 2.5 million since the award's creation in 1911, a year after the Boy Scouts of America was founded.

"This is a powerful moment for these young women, for all Eagle Scouts, and for our nation," said Jenn Hancock, the BSA's national chair for programs. "People recognize Eagle Scouts as individuals of the highest caliber, and for the first time, that title isn't limited by gender."

The celebration of the new Eagle Scouts comes at a challenging time for the Boy Scouts. Facing a wave of lawsuits, it filed for bankruptcy protection a year ago in a step toward creating a huge compensation fund for tens of thousands of men who were molested as youngsters decades ago by scoutmasters or other leaders.

The case has advanced slowly since then in a federal bankruptcy court in Delaware. The BSA is expected to unveil a plan soon explaining how the compensation fund will be financed in a way that enables the organization and its local councils to maintain their programs.

Many in the scouting community have retained their admiration for the BSA's mission – among them is Megan Wright of Omaha. Starting about 10 years ago, she helped run a Boy Scout troop to which her son belonged, and more recently she has been scoutmaster for her daughter's troop.

The daughter, 18-year-old Rebecca Wright, is among the new Eagle Scouts, having earned 102 merit badges. She now attends the University of Wisconsin-Madison and wants to be a genetics researcher.

"It's been fantastic to see girls be able to participate in this program," said Rebecca's mom. "Just seeing the pride, the sense of accomplishment, knowing that they have achieved what so few others have."

With no crowds, Louvre gets rare chance to refurbish

By THOMAS ADAMSON and ALEX TURNBULL undefined

PARIS (AP) — The 518-year-old Mona Lisa has seen many things in her life on a wall, but rarely this: Almost four months with no Louvre visitors.

As she stares out through bulletproof glass into the silent Salle des Etats, in what was once the world's most-visited museum, her celebrated smile could almost denote relief. A bit further on, the white marble Venus de Milo is for once free of her girdle of picture-snapping visitors.

It's uncertain when the Paris museum will reopen, after being closed on Oct. 30 in line with the French government's virus containment measures. But those lucky enough to get in benefit from a rare private look at collections covering 9,000 years of human history -- with plenty of space to breathe.

That's normally sorely lacking in a museum that's blighted by its own success: Before the pandemic, staff walked out complaining they couldn't handle the overcrowding, with up to 30,000-40,000 visitors a day.

The forced closure has also granted museum officials a golden opportunity to carry out long-overdue refurbishments that were simply not possible with nearly 10 million visitors a year.

Unlike the first lockdown, which brought all Louvre activities to a halt, the second has seen some 250 of the museum employees remain fully operational.

An army of curators, restorers and workers are cleaning sculptures, reordering artifacts, checking inventories, reorganizing entrances and conducting restorations, including in the Egyptian Wing and the Grande Galerie, the museum's largest hall that is being fully renovated.

"We're taking advantage of the museum's closure to carry out a number of major works, speed up maintenance operations and start repair works that are difficult to schedule when the museum is operating normally," Laurent le Guedart, the Louvre's Architectural Heritage and Gardens Director told AP from inside the Grande Galerie.

As le Guedart spoke, restorers were standing atop scaffolds taking scientific probes of the walls in preparation for a planned restoration, travelling back to the 18th century through layer after layer of paint.

Around the corner the sound of carpenters taking up floorboards was faintly audible. They were putting in the cables for a new security system.

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Previously, these jobs could only be done on a Tuesday, the Louvre's only closed day in the week. Now hammers are tapping, machines drilling and brushes scrubbing to a full week schedule, slowed down only slightly by social distancing measures.

In total, ten large-scale projects that were on hold since last March are under way — and progressing fast. This includes works in the Etruscan and Italian Halls, and the gilded Salon Carre. A major restoration of the ancient Egyptian tomb chapel of Akhetotep from 2400BC is also underway.

"When the museum reopens, everything will be perfect for its visitors — this Sleeping Beauty will have had the time to powder her nose," said Elisabeth Antoine-Konig, Artifacts Department Curator. "Visitors will be happy to see again these now well-lit rooms with polished floors and remodeled display cases."

Initially, only visitors with pre-booked reservations will be granted entry in line with virus safety precautions. Those who cannot wait are still able to see the Louvre's treasure trove of art in virtual tours online.

Adamson reported from Leeds, England

Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

What's safe after COVID-19 vaccination? Don't shed masks yet

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

You're fully vaccinated against the coronavirus — now what? Don't expect to shed your mask and get back to normal activities right away.

That's going to be a disappointment, if not a shock, to many people.

In Miami, 81-year-old Noemi Caraballo got her second dose on Tuesday and is looking forward to seeing friends, resuming fitness classes and running errands after nearly a year of being extremely cautious, even ordering groceries online.

"Her line is, 'I'm tired of talking to the cats and the parrots,'" said her daughter Susan Caraballo. "She wants to do things and talk to people."

But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention hasn't yet changed its guidelines: At least for now, people should follow the same rules as everybody else about wearing a mask, keeping a 6-foot distance and avoiding crowds — even after they've gotten their second vaccine dose.

Vaccines in use so far require two doses, and experts say especially don't let your guard down after the first dose.

"You're asking a very logical question," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, responded when a 91-year-old California woman recently asked if she and her vaccinated friends could resume their mah-jongg games.

In that webcast exchange, Fauci only could point to the CDC's recommendations, which so far are mum about exceptions for vaccinated people getting together. "Hang on," he told the woman, saying he expected updates to the guidelines as more people get the coveted shots.

What experts also need to learn: The vaccines are highly effective at preventing symptomatic COVID-19, especially severe illness and death — but no one yet knows how well they block spread of the coronavirus.

It's great if the vaccine means someone who otherwise would have been hospitalized instead just has the sniffles, or even no symptoms. But "the looming question," Fauci said during a White House coronavirus response briefing last week, is whether a person infected despite vaccination can still, unwittingly, infect someone else.

Studies are underway to find out, and hints are starting to emerge. Fauci pointed to recent research from Spain showing the more coronavirus an infected person harbors — what's called the viral load — the more infectious they are. That's not surprising, as it's true with other illnesses.

Some preliminary findings from Israel have suggested people infected after the first vaccine dose, when they're only partially protected, had smaller viral loads than unvaccinated people who got infected. That's

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encouraging if the findings hold up. Israel has vaccinated a large fraction of its population and scientists worldwide are watching how the outbreak responds as those inoculations increase.

Also critical is tracking whether the vaccines protect against new, mutated versions of the virus that are spreading rapidly in some countries, added Dr. Walter Orenstein, an infectious disease expert at Emory University. He's been vaccinated and is scrupulously following the CDC guidelines.

There are practical reasons. "It's hard to tell who got vaccinated and who didn't if you're just walking around the grocery store," noted University of Pennsylvania immunologist E. John Wherry.

And experts like Wherry get asked, repeatedly: Yes, there are rules for being in public, but what's safe for Grandma to do at home, with family or close friends, after she's vaccinated?

Not everyone's immune system is boosted equally from vaccines — so someone with cancer or the frail elderly may not get as much protection as a robust 70-something.

But most people should feel "more confident about going shopping, for example, or going to see your grandkids, or giving your daughter a hug," Wherry said.

That's because the chances of a fully vaccinated person getting seriously ill, while not zero, are low.

"Friends coming over for dinner, we should still try to follow the guidelines," Wherry added. "You never know who is compromised, where the vaccine may not work as well."

What if the fully vaccinated are exposed to someone who's infected? The CDC did recently ease those rules: No quarantine as long as the vaccinated person shows no symptoms and it's been at least two weeks but not longer than three months since their second dose.

Getting on an airplane? Vaccinated or not, the CDC still urges essential travel only.

International travel is an even tougher prospect. Expect countries that already have different quarantine and test requirements to come up with varying post-vaccination guidelines — especially since multiple types of vaccines, some better proven than others, are used around the world. There's also the concern about carrying those worrisome mutations from one country to another.

Stay tuned for updates to the advice as more people get vaccinated. Meanwhile, don't underestimate how important it is for the vaccinated to feel less anxiety as they run errands or go to work while still following the public health measures, said Dr. Luciana Borio, a former Food and Drug Administration scientist.

Even with a trip to the grocery store, "there was always this anxiety about, 'Was that the contact that's going to make me infected?'" Borio said. "That is a very powerful change in one's living situation."

Associated Press reporter Kelli Kennedy in Miami contributed to this report.

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4 for 4: Osaka wins Australian, stays perfect in Slam finals

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — As Naomi Osaka strode through the Champion's Walk leading to the court for the Australian Open final — headphones on her ears, racket bag strapped to her back — she reached out her left hand to tap a panel marked with her name and the year of her previous title there.

Not a big deal, she explained. Just a bit of superstition. Less than 10 minutes later, she began the match against Jennifer Brady. And less than 1 1/2 hours later, Osaka won the last point, because that's what she does when the stakes are the greatest on her sport's biggest stages.

Osaka improved to 4-0 in Grand Slam finals by grabbing six consecutive games to pull away in what initially was a tight contest, beating Brady 6-4, 6-3 at Melbourne Park on Saturday.

"You don't go into a final wanting to be the runner-up. For me, I feel like every opportunity that I play a Slam is an opportunity to win a Slam," said the 23-year-old Osaka, who will move up to No. 2 in the WTA rankings. "So I think maybe I put that pressure on myself too much, but honestly, it's working out in my favor right now."

Sure is.

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With serves that reached 122 mph (197 kph) and produced six aces, and returns that helped create six breaks, Osaka became the first woman to win her first four major finals since Monica Seles did it 30 years ago.

That is part of Osaka's 12-0 record in quarterfinals, semifinals and finals at the majors.

"She plays so aggressive that she puts so much pressure on you to perform well," said Brady, a 25-year-old from Pennsylvania who played college tennis at UCLA and was participating in a Slam final for the first time. "And that's something that not every tennis player has that ability to do."

Osaka, the 2020 AP Female Athlete of the Year, is also on a 21-match winning streak that dates to last season and includes her championship at last year's U.S. Open. She also won the U.S. Open in 2018, and the Australian Open in 2019.

"What I have learned on and off the court is it's OK to not be sure about yourself. For me, I feel like I've always forced myself to, like, be 'strong' or whatever. I think if you're not feeling OK, it's OK to not feel OK," Osaka said. "But you have to sort of go within yourself and figure things out in a way."

Osaka was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father, and moved to the United States with her family when she was 3. She has been a vocal advocate for Black victims of racism and police violence, saying she would refuse to play a match at one tournament last year to spotlight the issue.

"She's such an inspiration to us all, and what she's doing for the game is amazing in getting the sport out there," said Brady, who was seeded 22nd. "I hope young girls at home are watching and inspired by what she's doing."

Brady had to go through a hard quarantine for 15 days when she arrived in Australia in January because someone on her flight tested positive for COVID-19 when they arrived.

Playing Osaka represented a big step up in competition during this tournament for Brady, who had not faced anyone ranked in the Top 25 nor anyone who previously appeared in so much as one Grand Slam semifinal.

Brady's only previous final four appearance at a major came at the U.S. Open in September, when she lost to Osaka in three sets.

She wasn't able to push the champ as much this time on an evening that was breezy and cooler than it's been lately, with the temperature below 70 degrees Fahrenheit (20 degrees Celsius).

The attendance was announced at 7,381; spectators were allowed back after being barred earlier in the tournament during a COVID-19 lockdown.

"I didn't play my last Grand Slam with fans," Osaka said, "so just to have this energy, it really means a lot."

The final turned at 4-all, when Brady used an on-the-run lob winner that she punctuated by waving her arms to request more noise from the crowd. That earned a break point — convert that, and she would serve for the opening set.

But Osaka erased the chance with a cross-court forehand winner, and two errors by Brady made it 5-4. Osaka then broke to grab the set, helped by Brady's double-fault and a netted forehand on a short ball to end it.

"Happens maybe one in 10 times," Brady said of that mistake, "or hopefully less."

That was part of the run that put Osaka ahead 4-0 in the second set and she was on her way.

Now only two active women own more major trophies: Serena Williams, with 23, and her sister, Venus, with seven.

Osaka beat Serena Williams — a player she calls her idol — in the semifinals Thursday.

And as much as Osaka makes plain that she wants to keep adding to her Grand Slam collection, there are larger goals, too.

"This is going to sound really odd, but hopefully I play long enough to play a girl that said that I was once her favorite player or something," said Osaka, who signed autographs for fans after her victory. "For me, I think that's the coolest thing that could ever happen to me. ... That's how the sport moves forward."

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Hand-holding but no hugs: UK OKs some nursing home visits

LONDON (AP) — The British government announced a small step out of the nation's lockdown on Saturday — allowing nursing home residents to have a single friend or family member visit them indoors.

Residents and their visitors will be able to hold hands, but not hug.

The change takes effect March 8. For months, nursing home residents have only been able to see loved ones outdoors or through screens.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson says he will announce a "road map" out of lockdown on Monday. The government has stressed that easing restrictions will be slow and cautious. Store reopenings and outdoor socializing are unlikely before April, though children will go back to school from March 8.

Johnson's Conservative government has been accused of reopening the country too quickly after the first lockdown in the spring. Britain has had around 120,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe.

The number of new confirmed cases, hospitalization and deaths are all declining, but remain high, and Johnson said this week his reopening roadmap would follow "data, not dates."

The U.K. government is also racing to vaccinate the population as quickly as possible against the virus. So far almost 17 million people, a quarter of the population, have received the first of two doses of a vaccine.

The new nursing home measures apply in England. In other parts of the U.K. visiting rules vary, with Scottish residents able to have two visitors from March 8.

Afghan police: 3 separate Kabul explosions kill 5, wound 2

By TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Three sticky bomb attacks in the Afghan capital Kabul on Saturday killed at least five people and wounded two others, a police official said, amid a surge in violence in the war-torn country.

Kabul police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz said two explosions caused by sticky bombs attached to vehicles took place 15 minutes apart and a third targeting a police vehicle exploded about two hours later.

No group immediately claimed responsibility.

The majority of bomb attacks in the capital Kabul in recent months have been sticky bombs — explosive devices with magnets that are attached to vehicles and detonated by remote control or timer.

The second explosion targeted a car in a northwestern Kabul neighborhood in which national army soldiers were traveling, killing two soldiers. A civilian passerby was also killed.

The third explosion destroyed a police car in western Kabul killing two police officers. Meanwhile, the first blast targeted a civilian car wounding both travelers inside the vehicle.

Kabul police said investigations were underway.

The Islamic State group's local affiliate has claimed responsibility for some of the attacks, but many go unclaimed, with the government putting the blame on the Taliban. The insurgents have denied responsibility for most of the attacks.

Afghanistan has seen a nationwide spike in bombings, targeted killings and violence on the battlefield as peace negotiations in Qatar between the Taliban and the Afghan government have stalled. It's been over a month since the sides last met to discuss how to proceed.

Meanwhile, the new U.S. administration is reviewing the U.S.-Taliban peace deal signed Feb. 29 last year. A major part of the agreement was Washington's commitment to a May 1 withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Russia has stepped up efforts to try and find a way forward, visiting with regional players and officials and senior Taliban figures.

Zamir Kabulov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Afghanistan, met with Pakistani officials, including army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, on Friday to discuss the peace process. Pakistan is seen as a key player in the Afghanistan peace process since Taliban leadership maintains homes and headquarters in Pakistan,

Associated Press writer Kathy Gannon contributed to this story.

UK urges UN resolution for pause in conflicts for virus jabs

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Britain circulated a draft resolution to the U.N. Security Council on Friday demanding that all warring parties immediately institute a “sustained humanitarian pause” to enable people in conflict areas to be vaccinated for COVID-19.

The proposed resolution reiterates the council’s demand last July 1 for “a general and immediate cessation of hostilities” in major conflicts from Syria and Yemen to Central African Republic, Mali and Sudan and Somalia. The appeal was first made by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on March 23, 2020, to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.

The draft “emphasizes the need for solidarity, equity, and efficacy and invites donation of vaccine doses from developed economies to low- and middle-income countries and other countries in need, including through the COVAX Facility,” an ambitious World Health Organization project to buy and deliver coronavirus vaccines for the world’s poorest people.

The British draft stresses that “equitable access to affordable COVID-19 vaccines, certified as safe and efficacious, is essential to end the pandemic.”

It would recognize “the role of extensive immunization against COVID-19 as a global public good for health in preventing, containing, and stopping transmission, in order to bring the pandemic to an end.”

The draft, obtained by The Associated Press, follows up on British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab’s appeal to the 15-member Security Council on Wednesday to adopt a resolution calling for local cease-fires in conflict zones to allow the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines.

Britain says more than 160 million people are at risk of being excluded from coronavirus vaccinations because they live in countries engulfed in conflict and instability.

“Cease-fires have been used to vaccinate the most vulnerable communities in the past,” Raab said. “There’s no reason why we can’t... We have seen it in the past to deliver polio vaccines to children in Afghanistan, just to take one example.”

At Wednesday’s council meeting, Guterres sharply criticized the “wildly uneven and unfair” distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, saying 10 countries have administered 75% of all vaccinations and demanding a global effort to get all people in every nation vaccinated as soon as possible.

The U.N. chief told the high-level council meeting that 130 countries have not received a single dose of vaccine and declared that “at this critical moment, vaccine equity is the biggest moral test before the global community.”

The coronavirus has infected more than 109 million people and killed at least 2.4 million of them. As manufacturers struggle to ramp up production of vaccines, many countries complain of being left out and even rich nations are facing shortages and domestic complaints.

Guterres’ appeal for cease-fires last March to deliver COVID-19 medical items received some initial support, but the cease-fires were almost always short-lived.

While speed of developing vaccines has been impressive, COVAX has already missed its own goal of beginning coronavirus vaccinations in poor countries at the same time that shots were rolled out in rich countries late last year.

WHO says COVAX needs \$5 billion in 2021.

The draft resolution calls for the COVID-19 vaccination plans of countries to include “those at a higher risk of developing severe COVID-19 symptoms and the most vulnerable, including frontline workers, older people, refugees, internally displaced people, stateless people, migrants, persons with disabilities, among others, as well as people living in areas under the control of any non-state armed group.”

The proposed measure calls for increased scientific collaboration on new variants of COVID-19.

It asks Guterres to report at least every 90 days on all impediments to the COVID-19 response, including

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vaccination programs, in countries where conflicts and humanitarian emergencies are occurring.

It's not clear whether the resolution will be adopted.

Britain's U.N. ambassador, Barbara Woodward, said Wednesday that humanitarian organizations and U.N. agencies need the full backing of the council to be able to carry out their job.

Russia's U.N. ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, objected to the council focusing on equitable access to vaccines, saying this went beyond its mandate to preserve international peace and security. He indicated Moscow was not interested in a new resolution.

Florida is a model for voting. The GOP wants change anyway.

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida was a model citizen when it came to elections in 2020. The state showed off its years of voting reforms. Even as Donald Trump railed against voting systems elsewhere, he praised Florida and urged his supporters to trust its vote-by-mail system. And, indeed, results were reported quickly and accurately. Turnout soared.

It was all overseen by GOP officials. And Trump won, continuing Republicans' growing dominance in the state.

Yet three months later, Florida Republicans have set out to overhaul the state's voting system anyway. GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis on Friday proposed an array of voting changes, while state lawmakers have introduced legislation that makes it harder to vote by mail. To explain the efforts, Florida Republicans point not to evidence of problems but to the potential for voter fraud and suspicion about the process.

"We want everyone to vote, but we don't want anyone to cheat," DeSantis said Friday.

Florida Republicans' push to change voting laws shows how deep false claims about mass voter fraud spread by Trump have burrowed into Republicans' belief system. The party is now stampeding to solve a problem that most nonpartisan experts and courts say does not exist. Their efforts are threatening to dismantle years of bipartisan moves to boost voting in several states, including places where the GOP has thrived under the current system.

And it would result in making it more difficult to vote.

"We cannot comprehend where they're coming from," said Anjenys Gonzalez-Eilert of Florida Common Cause, noting the GOP has long been a supporter and beneficiary of mail voting in the state.

Similar efforts are being repeated across the country. State Republican lawmakers in Georgia, Arizona and Pennsylvania have introduced voting bills, many aimed at curbing mail voting.

The legislation reflects Republicans' widespread belief that new rules making it easier to vote by mail during the pandemic largely benefited Democrats and caused "irregularities." Although there were no signs of widespread irregularities, they often point to vote totals tilted in Democrat Joe Biden's favor as mail ballots were counted days after Election Day — a pattern that was new to many states but not a sign of fraud.

But that was not an issue in Florida. It has long allowed its election offices to start the laborious process of preparing mail ballots for counting — removing them from their envelopes and verifying voters' signatures well before Election Day. While ballot counts in many states new to mail voting dragged on for days, Florida's count was quick and efficient.

There was no evidence of fraud in Florida. Of the roughly 50 legal cases Trump and his allies brought challenging the election, none were filed in Florida. (Even in those states where Trump claimed there was fraud and tried to overturn the election, dozens of courts rejected his legal claims and no significant cases were proved.)

Florida officials take pride in their recent record. Ever since the drama of the 2000 presidential election recount — when "hanging chads" turned the state into a national joke — the state has worked to shed its image as the exemplar for elections gone wrong.

Election officers have worked to shore up trust in the state's election system — by changing how ballots are designed, modernizing vote-counting equipment and investing millions of dollars to protect against cyberthreats.

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Even DeSantis took credit for November's performance.

"We did it right," he said Friday before supporters in West Palm Beach.

Still, he argued for tightening voting laws. His proposal includes restricting the use of drop boxes where voters can deposit mail ballots and preventing other people from dropping off voters' ballots, a practice many label "ballot harvesting." DeSantis also seemed to endorse the Republican bill that would make mail balloting harder by requiring voters to request a mail ballot every year, rather than allow them to make one request that stands for two years' worth of elections.

The proposal is notable because for years Republicans dominated vote by mail in Florida, and it was embraced by the state's many older voters. It helped the GOP cement a durable statehouse majority and narrowly win statewide races.

But the Republicans in Florida lost that edge last year. Trump railed against mail voting, and GOP voters' trust in the system sank, according to polls. In Florida, his complaints alarmed state Republicans, and Trump sent out tweets stating that in Florida, where he voted by mail, the system was "Safe and Secure, Tried and True."

In the end, Democrats in the state outvoted Republicans by mail for the first time in years as a record 4.9 million Floridians voted by mail. Democrats cast 680,000 more mail ballots than Republicans did.

The new bill would essentially wipe those new Democratic voters from the rolls ahead of 2022, when DeSantis and Sen. Marco Rubio lead the list of incumbent Republicans up for reelection.

"Republicans used to have the advantage, and now it's the Democrats who have the advantage. So now it's time to make a change," said campaign strategist Mac Stipanovich, a former Republican.

"There's no doubt that these are voter suppression efforts," said Stipanovich, adding that the tactic in Florida could make voting by mail more difficult for people who are poor, less educated and don't have extensive experience in voting.

Republicans have pushed a similar change in Arizona, another state where GOP lawmakers helped create a bipartisan, popular system but are now moving to change it. Their effort suffered an early blow this week when the Arizona Senate voted down a bill to purge about 200,000 people from the state's absentee voter list. One Republican senator joined all 14 Democrats to kill the measure in a 15-15 tie.

In Georgia, a formerly red state that Democrats narrowly won both in November and then in two Senate runoff elections in January, lawmakers held a heated hearing over Republican proposals to curtail mail voting and eliminate early in-person voting on Sundays, when Black churches often send parishioners to the polls.

In Florida, state Sen. Dennis Baxley, the bill's author, says he isn't trying for any partisan advantage but simply wants to reverse a 2007 measure that created the two-year window.

Notably, Baxley was the lawmaker who helped pass that measure. He now says he can't remember his reasoning at the time. "Lots has happened in 13 years," he said. "I just think it's time for a reset."

Riccardi reported from Denver.

Cruz trip tests durability of scandal, memory of voters

By WILL WEISSERT and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ted Cruz's political career already featured many surprise twists before a jaunt to Mexico this week brought him a new level of notoriety.

The Texas senator was once the biggest threat to Donald Trump capturing the 2016 presidential nomination. During a particularly bitter stretch of that year's Republican primary, Cruz called Trump a "coward" and "pathological liar." By last month, however, Cruz was one of Trump's staunchest allies and a leader in the former president's baseless attempt to overturn the November election.

Such shifts are intended to keep Cruz in a strong position with the GOP base if he runs for the White House again in 2024. But they've also turned him into one of Washington's most villainized figures, someone willing to take any politically convenient position if it keeps his future ambitions alive.

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Cruz is under further attack for traveling to Cancun while his constituents suffered through a deadly winter storm that left hundreds of thousands without power and running water. His explanation — that his daughters pushed for the getaway because they were out of school — was particularly panned.

The optics of the trip are hardly ideal. But the question is whether, three years before he faces voters again, the political fallout will last.

“Ted Cruz is feeling the first post-Trump controversy,” said New Hampshire-based Republican strategist Mike Biundo. “I don’t think anybody knows exactly what will happen in this new reality that we’re living in.”

Before Trump got to Washington, scandals, lies and sometimes even simple but major gaffes wrecked political careers.

Despite later winning a congressional seat, former South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford will forever be remembered for fabricating a trek along the Appalachian Trail, just as former New York Rep. Anthony Weiner was undone by repeated sexting scandals and ex-Texas Gov. Rick Perry couldn’t live down the debate stage moment of forgetting the third of three federal agencies he’d promised to eliminate.

Once Trump was in the White House, his outlandish antics attracted so much attention that something that simply looked bad, like a senator’s leaving on vacation while his state was suffering, wouldn’t receive much notice.

Cruz is now navigating how much damage control is needed in a post-Trump political landscape.

He rushed home on Thursday and told reporters the trip was “obviously a mistake.” But he made no public appearances on Friday, and his office didn’t answer questions about his schedule or what he was doing to help Texans cope with the storm. His office simply released a statement backing Gov. Greg Abbott’s request for federal assistance.

Still, Cruz is still the best-known leader in the country’s largest red state, with a far higher national profile than Abbott, who has also been mentioned as a possible 2024 presidential contender, and Sen. John Cornyn, who coasted to reelection last year by a more comfortable margin than Cruz, who narrowly edged Democrat Beto O’Rourke in 2018.

Alice Stewart, a GOP strategist and veteran of Cruz’s presidential campaign, noted that the senator has years before he’ll have to run for reelection or president or both in 2024. That’s a lot of time to put the Cancun trip “in the rearview mirror,” even if Cruz’s political opponents will continue to trumpet it.

“People have come to tolerate a lot more during and after the era of Trump,” said Stewart, who noted that while social media often intensifies political scandals, it also tends to shorten their lifespans.

Rick Tyler also worked for Cruz’s 2016 campaign but has frequently criticized the senator for kowtowing to Trump since then. He said that “when Texas was down and out and embarrassed, frankly,” Cruz’s trip to the beach was unforgivable: “There’s no way this is going to be forgotten.”

“Cruz is very beatable,” Tyler said of the senator’s reelection prospects, especially if he tries again for the White House the same year. “He’s got to decide. By doing one or the other, you risk losing both.”

Of course, Cruz has effectively used being one of Washington’s most detested figures to his advantage in the past. He came to Congress as a conservative insurgent who infuriated both parties — even prompting fellow Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to once joke that no senator would convict one of their own for murdering Cruz in the chamber.

In 2016, Cruz won the Iowa caucuses and proved to have a solid national base of support, setting up a tense primary fight that would last for months. At one point, Trump attacked the looks of Cruz’s wife and baselessly suggested that his father had a hand in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Cruz lashed out at Trump in response and was later booed off the stage at that year’s Republican National Convention for failing to endorse the New Yorker.

But in the four years since, Cruz transformed into one of Trump’s biggest champions in Congress.

Among those close to Cruz, there is a sense that the senator hurt himself politically this week but that he remains well positioned for another White House bid should he opt to run again. His team believes Cruz is the most popular prospective 2024 candidate not named Trump among likely Republican primary voters.

Cruz was a fundraising force for his Republican colleagues in the House and Senate leading up to No-

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member's election. And his own fundraising has surged in the months since — including after he stood against the certification of President Joe Biden's victory in early January. His small-dollar donor base, in particular, which was large to begin with, has grown dramatically, aides say.

Even amid calls for Cruz to resign for his role in helping encourage Trump supporters who staged a deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, Republicans in San Antonio organized a rally celebrating him as "courageous."

Cruz is also planning to attend next week's influential Conservative Political Action Conference, where he can further ingratiate himself with the GOP's most fervent activists, who aren't likely to hold Cancun against him.

Cruz allies note that the second-place finisher in the previous Republican primary often becomes the nominee in the next election. But moving forward, there is a sense internally that Cruz's political strength is directly linked to his relationship with Trump, whose feelings are difficult to gauge.

Regina Thomson, a former Cruz loyalist who fought Trump's nomination at the 2016 GOP convention, has since warmed to Trump. She said that Cruz's Cancun trip didn't bother her, but that ultimately, she and other conservative activists would likely follow Trump's lead.

"If you would ask a lot of (Cruz's former) grassroots supporters today, they'd say Trump did such a good job they'd like him to run again," Thomson said. "And if Trump doesn't run, I think a lot of people will look to him to see who he's supporting."

Peoples reported from New York.

10 years after quake, Christ Church Cathedral finally rising

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand (AP) — The Christ Church Cathedral was arguably New Zealand's most iconic building before much of it crumbled in an earthquake 10 years ago. The years of debate that followed over whether the ruins should be rebuilt or demolished came to symbolize the paralysis that has sometimes afflicted the broader rebuild of Christchurch.

As the city on Monday marks one decade since the quake struck, killing 185 people and upending countless more lives, there are finally signs of progress on the cathedral.

It's being rebuilt to look much like the original that was finished in 1904, only with modern-day improvements to make it warmer and safer, even to add extra much-needed bathrooms. But first, workers must stabilize the remains.

Peter Carrell, the Anglican bishop of Christchurch, said reopening it will represent a key milestone.

"I think it will be hugely significant, because it will be one of the final pieces in the jigsaw of putting Christchurch back together," Carrell said. "It will be a healing of the heart of Christchurch after the earthquake."

Still, the doors aren't expected to open for another six years. Preserving what's left is more costly and time-consuming than demolishing and starting again. And so far, the mix of funds from insurance, church, council and government sources adds up to only about two-thirds of the 154 million New Zealand dollar (\$111 million) price tag.

Keith Paterson, the project director, said the aim is for a fundraising team to raise the rest of the money from both local and international donors.

"We're very confident we'll get the money in by the time the project is finished," said Carrell. "We've got plenty of money to start with."

Elsewhere in the city, shiny new buildings are popping up, along with innovative playgrounds and parks. But where some buildings once stood there are now just empty parking lots, and the migration of shops and businesses to the suburbs that happened after the quake hasn't yet fully reversed.

There also remains a disparity in neighborhoods. Parts of the city to the west look much as they did before the quake. But in the east, where the ground was prone to liquefaction, entire suburbs have been razed.

Authorities have deemed the land too unstable for rebuilding. Some suburbs now look like giant parks,

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with a few fruit trees and power lines the only sign that homes were once there.

Richard Cosgrove's house by the Avon River in the suburb of Dallington was one of those torn down. The communications adviser recalls the enormous forces at play during the quake.

"The whole area sunk massively," he said. "We had a wooden villa built in 1922. Basically, the four corners went in separate directions."

Cosgrove said the strong community bonds that formed as neighbors tried to salvage their homes and worked on improving the area ended when the government declared it unsafe for rebuilding.

"That broke the community apart," he said.

Cosgrove and his wife now live outside the city on a small farm.

"We thought if we moved anywhere else in the city it would remind us of what we lost, so we decided to build a new life in the country," he said.

But he remains upbeat about Christchurch and its future. He said the adversity people have suffered has brought the community together and made it stronger and more resilient, and that many of the foreign workers who came to help rebuild have been so impressed they have stayed.

"We've got a really great city," Cosgrove said. "It's quite an impressive rebuild that's gone on. I think of all the great things they have done."

Still, he says, it would have been nice if it had all happened a little sooner.

Inspector general reviews Trump relocation of Space Command

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — The Department of Defense's inspector general announced Friday that it was reviewing the Trump administration's last-minute decision to relocate U.S. Space Command from Colorado to Alabama.

The decision on Jan. 13, one week before Trump left office, blindsided Colorado officials and raised questions of political retaliation. Trump had hinted at a Colorado Springs rally in 2020 that the command would stay at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs.

But the man with whom Trump held that rally, Republican Sen. Cory Gardner, lost his reelection bid in November, and Colorado, unlike Alabama, voted decisively against Trump. The Air Force's last-minute relocation of command headquarters to Huntsville, Alabama — home of the U.S. Army's Redstone Arsenal — blindsided Colorado officials of both parties, who have urged the Biden administration to reconsider the decision.

On Friday, the inspector general's office announced it was investigating whether the relocation complied with Air Force and Pentagon policy and was based on proper evaluations of competing locations.

Colorado officials of both parties were thrilled. "It is imperative that we thoroughly review what I believe will prove to be a fundamentally flawed process that focused on bean-counting rather than American space dominance," said Rep. Doug Lamborn, a Republican whose district includes Space Command.

The state's two Democratic U.S. senators, Michael Bennet and John Hickenlooper, also hailed the probe. "Moving Space Command will disrupt the mission while risking our national security and economic vitality," the senators said in a joint statement. "Politics have no role to play in our national security. We fully support the investigation."

Among other duties, the Space Command enables satellite-based navigation and troop communication and provides warning of missile launches. Also based at Peterson are the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, and the U.S. Northern Command.

The Space Command differs from the U.S. Space Force, launched in December 2019 as the first new military service since the Air Force was created in 1947. The Space Command is not an individual military service but a central command for militarywide space operations. It operated at Peterson from 1985 until it was dissolved in 2002, and it was revived in 2019.

The Air Force accepted bids from locations for the command when it was revived and was considering six finalists, including Huntsville, when Trump hinted it'd stay in Colorado Springs.

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Weather experts: Lack of planning caused cold catastrophe

BY SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

This week's killer freeze in the U.S. was no surprise.

Government and private meteorologists saw it coming, some nearly three weeks in advance. They started sounding warnings two weeks ahead of time. They talked to officials. They issued blunt warnings through social media.

And yet catastrophe happened. At least 20 people have died and 4 million homes at some point lost power, heat or water.

Experts said meteorologists had both types of sciences down right: the math-oriented atmospheric physics for the forecast and the squishy social sciences on how to get their message across.

"This became a disaster because of human and infrastructure frailty, a lack of planning for the worst case scenario and the enormity of the extreme weather," said disaster science professor Jeannette Sutton of University at Albany in New York.

The event shows how unprepared the nation and its infrastructure are for extreme weather events that will become bigger problems with climate change, meteorologists and disaster experts said.

Insured damages — only a fraction of the real costs — for the nearly week-long intense freeze starting Valentine's Day weekend are probably \$18 billion, according to a preliminary estimate from the risk-modeling firm Karen Clark & Company.

Kim Klockow-McClain heads the National Weather Service's behavioral insights unit, which focuses on how to make forecasts and warnings easier for people to understand and act on.

People heard the message and got the warnings, she said. For various reasons — thinking cold is no big deal, not having experienced this type of extreme cold, and focusing more on snow and ice than the temperature — they were unprepared, Klockow-McClain said.

"The meteorology was by far the easiest part of this," Klockow-McClain said.

Private winter storm expert Judah Cohen of Atmospheric and Environmental Research first blogged about the danger on Jan. 25. He said the meteorological signal from the Arctic, where the cold air was escaping from, "was literally blinking red. It was the strongest I'd seen."

At the University of Oklahoma, meteorology professor Kevin Kloesel, who also is the school's emergency manager, sent out an alert on Jan. 31 warning of "sub-freezing temperatures and the possibility of sub-zero wind chills." By Feb. 7, almost a week before the worst of the freeze started, he was sending multiple warnings a day.

University of Oklahoma meteorology professor Jason Furtado tweeted about "off the chart" cold on Feb. 5.

The weather service started talking about the freeze about two weeks ahead of time and gave "the most accurate forecast we can do along with consistent messaging," said John Murphy, the agency's chief operating officer. "The magnitude and severity of the event is one that some people weren't fully prepared for."

Texas A&M University meteorology professor Don Conlee said forecasting private and public was "probably the best I have seen in my meteorological career."

So why did so many entities seem unprepared?

One of the main problems was the Texas power grid, which is overseen by the Electric Reliability Council of Texas.

Sutton said there was "a huge failure" on that part of the infrastructure.

"Institutional memory appears to be less than 10 years because this happened in 2011 and there was a comprehensive set of recommendations on how this might be avoided in the future," Kloesel said in an email.

The grid operator's chief executive officer, Bill Magness, told reporters Thursday that the agency prepared based on past cold outbreaks and "this one changes the game because it was so much bigger, so much more severe and we've seen the impact it's had."

Essentially saying it was so big it wasn't planned for "is not a great way to plan," Sutton said, "especially

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if we are supposed to learn from our failures.”

Another possible issue is that meteorologists who do warnings weren't familiar with the fragility of the Texas grid, so they were not able to emphasize power more in their warnings, Klockow-McClain said.

Also, this was so unusual that ordinary people had no idea how to handle it, Sutton said. It simply wasn't something they had experienced before.

People also think they know cold, even though this was different and extreme, so people likely judged the forecasts based on much milder chills, Klockow-McClain said.

The forecast also included snow and ice that probably got people's attention more than the temperature drop, Klockow-McClain said.

“Human beings, we live our lives as though we are not at risk,” Sutton said. “We come up with all kinds of rationale for ‘we're going to be OK.’”

This story corrects the spelling of the name of a Texas A&M University meteorology professor. It is Don Conlee, not Corlee.

AP writer Paul Weber in Austin, Texas, contributed to this report.

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears .

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Southern cities hit hard by storms face new crisis: No water

By ADRIAN SAINZ, PAUL J. WEBER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Southern cities slammed by winter storms that left millions without power for days have traded one crisis for another: Busted water pipes ruptured by record-low temperatures created shortages of clean drinking water, shut down the Memphis airport on Friday and left hospitals struggling to maintain sanitary conditions.

In Texas, 7 million people — a quarter of the population of the nation's second-largest state — were under orders to boil tap water before drinking it because low water pressure could have allowed bacteria to seep into the system. A man died at an Abilene health care facility when a lack of water pressure made medical treatment impossible.

About 260,000 homes and businesses in the Tennessee county that includes Memphis were told to boil water because of water main ruptures and pumping station problems. Restaurants that can't do so or don't have bottled water were ordered to close. And water pressure problems prompted Memphis International Airport to cancel all incoming and outgoing Friday flights.

In Jackson, Mississippi, most of the city of about 161,000 had no running water. Crews pumped water to refill city tanks but faced a shortage of chemicals for treatment because icy roads made it difficult for distributors to deliver them, Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba said.

He said the city's water mains are more than 100 years old and not built to handle the freezing weather that hit the city as multiple storms dumped record amounts of snow across the South.

“We are dealing with an extreme challenge with getting more water through our distribution system,” said Lumumba.

The city was providing water for flushing toilets and drinking, but residents had to pick it up, leaving the elderly and those living on icy roads vulnerable.

Lisa Thomas said her driveway on a hill in Jackson was a sheet of ice. Her husband, who is on a defibrillator and heart monitor, has only enough heart medication to get him through Sunday because she hasn't been able to go to the pharmacy.

“People are in dire need here,” Thomas said.

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Paul Lee Davis got to the front of the line at a water station set up by city officials only to have the water run out. He was still waiting for it to be replenished three and a half hours after arriving.

"We need water, the stores all are out. I don't see what choice we have," Davis said.

The water woes were the latest misery for people across the South who went without heat or electricity for days after the ice and snow storms earlier in the week, forcing rolling blackouts from Minnesota to Texas.

Texas electrical grid operators said electricity transmission had returned to normal for the first time since historic snowfall and single-digit temperatures created a surge in demand for electricity to warm up home — buckling the state's power grid and causing the widespread blackouts.

Smaller outages remained, but Bill Magness, president of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said the grid now can provide power throughout the entire system.

Gov. Greg Abbott ordered an investigation into the failure for a state known as the U.S. energy capital. ERCOT officials have defended their preparations and the decision to begin forced outages Monday as the grid reached a breaking point.

The storms also left more than 330,000 from Virginia to Louisiana without power. About 60,000 in Oregon on Friday were still enduring a weeklong outage following a massive ice and snow storm. Oregon's governor ordered the National Guard to go door-to-door in the hardest-hit areas to ensure residents have enough food and water.

The extreme weather was blamed for the deaths of at least 69 people, including many who perished struggling to get warm and a Tennessee farmer who tried to save two calves that apparently wandered onto a frozen pond.

Federal Emergency Management Agency acting administrator Bob Fenton said teams in Texas were distributing fuel, water, blankets and other supplies.

"What has me most worried is making sure that people stay warm," Fenton said on "CBS This Morning."

In many areas, water pressure dropped after lines froze and because people left faucets dripping to prevent pipes from icing, authorities said.

As of Friday afternoon, more than 1,300 Texas public water systems and 159 counties had reported weather-related operational disruptions affecting more than 14.9 million people, according to Texas Commission on Environmental Quality spokeswoman Tiffany Young.

More than 1 million gallons (3.8 million liters) of water was being trucked Friday to the Texas capital. But Austin's water director, Greg Maszaros, implored residents to minimize the use of home faucets because "there's still a lot of unknowns as we pressurize the system."

In Dallas, David Lopez said the plumbing company he works for received more than 600 calls for service over the last week.

"It's pretty much first come, first served," said Lopez, as he and a colleague manhandled a new water heater out of their van on Friday. "Everyone's got emergencies."

Houston residents probably will have to boil tap water in the fourth-largest U.S. city until Sunday or Monday, said Mayor Sylvester Turner.

Water service was restored Friday to two Houston Methodist community hospitals, but officials still were bringing in drinking water and some elective surgeries were canceled, spokeswoman Gale Smith said.

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis said it was forced to switch to bottled water and bagged ice for all consumption and that staff and patients were washing with hand sanitizer and no-rinse bathing wipes. All non-urgent surgeries were postponed.

Central Arkansas Water in the Little Rock area asked customers to conserve water to help protect its system as the ground began to warm and pipes thawed. The city of Hot Springs warned Thursday night that its water supply was "critically low" and also asked customers to conserve.

In Little Rock, the Museum of Discovery reported that a broken pipe flooded its building — causing extensive damage to theaters, galleries and offices and killing one display animal, a blue-tongued skink lizard.

More than 192,000 Louisiana residents -- some still struggling to recover from last August's Hurricane Laura -- had no water service Friday, according to the state health department. Tens of thousands more

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remained under boil-water advisories.

Bulk and bottled water deliveries were planned Friday to the hardest-hit Louisiana areas with a focus on hospitals, nursing homes and dialysis centers, Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said, adding that he was hopeful that warmer weather expected during the weekend would speed up repairs.

In the Louisiana community of Hackberry, Nicole Beard said her boyfriend crawled under his house to try to fix a broken water line but couldn't because he didn't have the right parts and it was too dark. She was using bottled water and sent her two daughters to stay at another home.

"People are still just struggling over here," she said.

Acacia Coronado is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Sainz reported from Memphis. Associated Press journalists Andrew DeMillo in Little Rock, Arkansas; Rebecca Santana in New Orleans; Gillian Flaccus in Portland; Jake Bleiberg in Dallas; Ken Miller in Oklahoma City; Leah Willingham in Jackson, Mississippi; Melinda Deslatte in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Michael Warren in Atlanta; and Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, contributed.

The story was corrected to show that at least 69 people have died, not at least 70.

'Kimye' is no more: Kardashian files to divorce West

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Kimye" is kaput.

Kim Kardashian West filed for divorce from Kanye West Friday after 6 1/2 years of marriage, court records show. The move brings an impending end to one of the most followed celebrity unions of the 21st century — the marriage of a reality TV superstar and a hip-hop and fashion phenomenon with four kids, a vast fortune to split and even more fame.

Kardashian is seeking joint custody of the children and her filing states the couple have a prenuptial agreement that will determine how their assets will be divided. It cites irreconcilable differences for their breakup and does not list a separation date.

The couple began dating in 2012 and had their first child in 2013. West proposed later that year using the giant screen at the empty waterfront ballpark of the San Francisco Giants, and the two married May 24, 2014, in a ceremony at a Renaissance fortress in Florence, Italy.

The beginning of the end of the marriage comes after the September announcement that the show that made her family's name, "Keeping Up With The Kardashians," was coming to an end in 2021 after 14 years.

It was the first marriage for the West, 43, and the third for Kardashian, 40. While the union wasn't long, it outlasted the predictions of many cynics who thought doom was inevitable given the two oversized personalities, West's well-known volatility and the fact that Kardashian's previous marriage, to former NBA player Kris Humphries, was fleetingly brief.

Kardashian's first marriage at age 19 in 2000 to music producer Damon Thomas lasted until 2004, and in 2011, she married Humphries in a heavily hyped wedding that was televised in a two-part special on "Keeping Up With the Kardashians."

She filed for divorce less than three months later, though was still legally married in 2012 when she and West, a friend for years who had paid tribute to her in his songs, became a couple, and she became pregnant.

Since the Humphries divorce, Kardashian has retained the services of perhaps the best-known divorce attorney in the country, Laura Wasser, dubbed the "Disso Queen" after representing clients that include Angelina Jolie, Johnny Depp and Britney Spears. Wasser filed the divorce Friday in Los Angeles Superior

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Court. It was first reported by celebrity website TMZ.

Kardashian is a Los Angeles-area lifer, but West is from Chicago and spends much of his time, including many of the latter months of the marriage, at his ranch in Wyoming, and has said he wants his kids with him there.

Their four children are all 7 or under: North, age 7, Saint, age 5, Chicago, age 3, and Psalm, 21 months old.

Both Kardashian and West have parlayed their initial fame — his for being a sought-after hip-hop producer and the rapper behind “Stronger” and “Gold Digger,” hers for becoming a reality TV star on a par with a movie star — into bigger endeavors, and have amassed considerable wealth with it.

West’s Yeezy fashion line, with its pricey clothing and coveted Adidas sneakers, has become as much part of his life and persona and his music. Kardashian went from famous socialite to major businesswoman, with mobile apps and games in her name, along with beauty products and clothes.

West has 30 million followers on Twitter, Kardashian has nearly 200 million on Instagram. Both are among the most posted-about people in the history of social media.

West was a vocal Donald Trump supporter who became a minor candidate for president last year; he ended up having little effect on the election. Kardashian has taken preliminary steps toward becoming a lawyer after devoting herself increasingly to freeing the unjustly imprisoned, which had led to meetings with Trump.

While their marriage was extremely high profile in some ways as two experts in self-promotion became a team, the two did not appear together in public all that frequently. And the inner workings of their marriage were usually a well-guarded secret that took years to spill out into public view. On “Keeping Up with the Kardashians,” West appeared only occasionally, mostly serving as an oft-discussed off-screen character, and unlike other Kardashian couplings, viewers didn’t see even made-for-TV versions of fights or especially tender moments.

They had more than their share of globe-trotting, scene-making and controversy-stirring moments however, from a trip to Jerusalem for North’s baptism, to fashion weeks around the world including one in Paris where Kardashian was bound and robbed, to West’s years-long feud with Taylor Swift, which Kardashian got sucked into.

But their careers did not have much overlap, and they spent much of their married time far apart.

And her carefully curated persona stood in contrast to his erratic public moments that often resulted in wild statements and over-sharing tweet storms.

In one of these, since deleted, in July 2020, West said he had been trying to divorce Kardashian, that her mother Kris Jenner was a tyrant and that the family was trying to force him into psychiatric treatment.

Kardashian responded with a statement on Instagram, urging people to have compassion for West as he struggled with mental illness.

“He is a brilliant but complicated person who on top of the pressures of being an artist and a black man, who experienced the painful loss of his mother, and has to deal with that pressure and isolation that is heightened by his bi-polar disorder,” Kardashian said. “Those who are close with Kanye know his heart and understand his words some times do not align with his intentions.”

West has not tweeted since election night. Kardashian was silent Friday on social media.

AP Entertainment Writer Leanne Italie contributed to this story from New York.

Follow AP Entertainment Writer Andrew Dalton on Twitter: twitter.com/andyjamesdalton.

Biden defends progress on COVID as weather delays 6M shots

By ZEKE MILLER and RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

PORTAGE, Mich. (AP) — President Joe Biden toured a state-of-the art coronavirus vaccine plant Friday, intent on showcasing progress even as extreme winter weather across the U.S. handed his vaccination campaign its first major setback, delaying shipment of about 6 million doses and causing temporary clo-

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tures of inoculation sites in many communities.

While acknowledging the weather is "slowing up the distribution," Biden said at the Pfizer plant in Michigan that he believes "we'll be approaching normalcy by the end of this year." His speech melded a recitation of his administration's accomplishments in its first month confronting the pandemic, a vigorous pitch for his \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill and criticism of his predecessor.

The disruptions caused by frigid temperatures, snow and ice have left the White House and states scrambling to make up lost ground as three days' worth of vaccine shipments were temporarily delayed. Even the president's trip to see Pfizer's largest plant was pushed back a day due to a storm affecting the nation's capital.

Before the trip, White House coronavirus response adviser Andy Slavitt said the federal government, states and local vaccinators are going to have to redouble efforts to catch up after the interruptions. The setback comes just as the vaccination campaign seemed to be on the verge of hitting its stride. All the backlogged doses should be delivered in the next several days, Slavitt said, still confident that the pace of vaccinations will recover.

Biden has set a goal of administering 100 million shots in his administration's first 100 days, and he said Friday that's still on track and it's only a beginning.

He went on to say that by the end of July his administration can deliver 600 million doses for Americans. Still, Biden cautioned that timetable could change, citing the current weather delays and concerns about new strains of the virus as well as the possibility that production rates could fluctuate.

"I believe we'll be approaching normalcy by the end of this year," he said. "God willing, this Christmas will be different than last, but I can't make that commitment to you."

Taking a swipe at former President Donald Trump, whom he did not cite by name, Biden allowed that the previous administration shepherded the approval of two highly effective vaccines. But "it's one thing to have a vaccine available, the problem was how to get to people's arms."

The Pfizer plant Biden toured, near Kalamazoo, produces one of the two federally approved COVID-19 shots. Weather-related delays have affected distribution of both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

Introducing Biden before the speech, Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla called his administration "a great ally" and cited a range of actions that have helped the company as it looked for ways to increase production. In a press release, the company said it has been shipping 5 million doses a week in the U.S. on average, and expects to more than double that by the end of March.

Biden walked through an area of the plant called the "freezer farm," which houses some 350 ultra-cold freezers, each capable of storing 360,000 doses of the Pfizer-BioNtech vaccine. Double-masked, the president stopped to talk with some of the workers.

The scene was a sharp contrast to the vibe across much of the country, where progress was on hold. Bad weather forced many injection sites to temporarily close, from Texas to New England, and held up shipments of needed doses.

In Memphis, a city where some of the doses were stranded, the storm stymied 77-year-old Bill Bayne in his pursuit of his second dose. He got his first shot Jan. 29 and was told he'd hear back about the second sometime this week. With local vaccination sites shut down, no notification came.

Bayne said the eight inches of snow outside his home is the most he's seen in 50 years of living there.

"I want that shot bad enough," Bayne said. "I would've gotten there some way."

White House adviser Slavitt said the 6 million doses delayed won't spoil and the vaccine is "safe and sound" under refrigeration.

But as shipments resume and scale up, vaccinators in communities across the country are going to have to work overtime to get shots into arms. "We as an entire nation will have to pull together to get back on track," Slavitt told reporters at the White House coronavirus briefing.

Slavitt said about 1.4 million doses were being shipped Friday as the work of clearing the backlog begins.

A confluence of factors combined to throw off the vaccination effort. First, shippers like FedEx, UPS and pharmaceutical distributor McKesson all faced challenges with snowed-in workers. Then, said Slavitt, road

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closures in many states kept trucks from delivering their assigned doses of vaccine. And finally, more than 2,000 vaccination sites were in areas with power outages.

Still, the government is going ahead with plans to open five new mass vaccination centers, one in Philadelphia, and four others in the Florida cities of Miami, Orlando, Tampa and Jacksonville.

The U.S. had administered an average of 1.7 million doses per day in the week that ended on Tuesday, evidence that the pace of the vaccination program was picking up. Now, the question is how long it will take to recover from the impact of the weather-related delays.

The delays were so severe that Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker suggested he would explore sending his state's national guard to collect doses from icebound shipping hubs in Memphis, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky.

The Virginia Department of Health reported that it was expecting delays on about 90% of its expected 120,000 doses this week and warned that delays could cascade into next week.

In North Carolina, none of the more than 163,000 first and second doses of the Moderna vaccine scheduled to arrive this week have been delivered, the state health department said. Only a limited number of the nearly 127,000 expected Pfizer vaccines have been shipped.

Oklahoma moved to reschedule vaccine clinics to this weekend, when it expects its 110,000 doses to be delivered, aiming to make up appointments from this week.

AP's Suman Naishadham in Phoenix contributed to the report.

EXPLAINER: How have storms affected COVID-19 vaccinations?

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO and LINDA A. JOHNSON AP Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Efforts to vaccinate Americans against COVID-19 have been stymied by a series of winter storms and outages that have hobbled transportation hubs and highways in parts of the country not used to extreme cold weather.

That has created challenges for carriers such as UPS and FedEx, which have been on the front lines packaging and shipping the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines around the country. Both UPS's hub in Louisville, Kentucky, and FedEx's key hub in Memphis, Tennessee, have been affected. Meanwhile, several states have complained about vaccination delays and have had to cancel appointments.

The fact that 6 million doses have languished in airport hubs for several days during a once-in-a-century pandemic has raised questions about how the U.S. government and the nation's largest shipping companies haven't been able — so far at least — to break the logjam.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

White House officials say the snowstorms and power outages created a variety of challenges that slowed vaccination efforts in different ways. First, shippers like FedEx, UPS, and pharmaceutical distributor McKesson had to deal with workers who were snowed-in and couldn't package, ship the vaccine kits and do other jobs. Then, road closures in many states kept trucks from delivering the vaccines. Finally, more than 2,000 vaccination sites were in areas with power outages.

Still, the government is moving ahead with plans to open five new mass vaccination centers, one in Philadelphia, and four others in the Florida cities of Miami, Orlando, Tampa and Jacksonville.

HOW ARE CARRIERS TRYING TO FIX THE ISSUE?

FedEx says it's relying on other hubs around the country to fix the problem. That includes its shipping hub in Indianapolis — the company's second largest after Memphis — and regional sorting hubs like the ones in Oakland, California, and Newark, N.J. FedEx says it's not warehousing any COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. UPS has been less forthcoming, saying only that it has "extensive contingency plans" to keep goods moving when roadways are impassable or airports are closed because of severe weather. Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear told CNN Friday morning that the UPS hub in Louisville is up and running again.

The bad weather hit just as the carriers were already under strain due to the surge in online shipping, says Michael Zimmerman, a partner in the strategic operations practice of global management consulting

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firm Kearney. While the rerouting can help, the carriers will still have to deal with a lot of backups at each stage of the process, from shipping to sorting.

WHAT IS THE VACCINES' NORMAL ROUTE FROM FACTORY TO CLINICS?

Pfizer has been shipping its vaccine doses for U.S. states directly from its factory outside Kalamazoo, Michigan, using its existing network of shipping companies, which includes UPS and FedEx. The two-dose vaccine requires ultracold storage, at minus 112 degrees Fahrenheit to minus 76 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 80 degrees Celsius to minus 60 degrees Celsius), which will keep it stable for up to six months.

Moderna is using a third party contract manufacturer for at least some of its vaccine production. Drug wholesaler McKesson, chosen by the federal government to distribute most COVID-19 vaccines, is handling shipments to hospitals and other medical providers. Some of those are going through transportation hubs in Louisville, Kentucky, and Memphis, both of which have had their operations slowed by this week's winter storms.

Moderna's vaccine is shipped frozen, at minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit to 5 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 25 to minus 15 degrees Celsius). The vaccine vials also can be thawed after delivery and kept unopened in a regular refrigerator for a month before use.

HAVE THE DELAYS CAUSED VACCINES TO SPOIL?

Not as far we know. The White House says it's working with shippers to make sure no vaccines are ruined during the weather delays.

A Pfizer spokesman said Wednesday that the company hasn't had any of its vaccine spoiled due to weather-related shipment delays — but that was a couple of days ago. However, Pfizer ships its vaccine vials packed with dry ice in special thermal containers that can maintain the correct temperature for up to 30 days. On Friday, the company submitted data to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration indicating their vaccine is stable at temperatures a little below freezing for two weeks.

FedEx is delivering the Moderna vaccine, along with kits for administering it, for McKesson. FedEx uses Bluetooth sensor devices affixed to vaccine shipments to monitor their temperature and location to prevent problems, and has years of experience transporting vaccines and other medical products that require tight temperature control.

HOW HAVE THE DELAYS PLAYED OUT IN STATES?

A number of states including North Carolina, Tennessee and Washington have complained about the delays, citing cancellations in appointments. In Tennessee, the state's health agency said distributors have been unable to pack and ship the COVID-19 vaccine this week due to the winter weather. According to a spokesperson, "many vaccine clinics" were closed again Friday and appointments were being rescheduled.

In Washington state, health officials estimated that more than 90% of this week's allocation of vaccine doses would arrive late due to bad weather across the country, forcing the state to temporarily close two of its four mass vaccination sites and reschedule appointments there for next week. A third mass vaccination site was closing for the day, Saturday, because there weren't any vaccines.

HOW LONG WILL THE DELAYS LAST?

The White House says the backlog should be cleared next week — most of it in the next few days.

White House coronavirus response adviser Andy Slavitt said 1.4 million doses were already in transit as of Friday, and that UPS and FedEx will do Saturday deliveries.

How damaging this week's delays will have been is an open question.

Ernie Nichols, associate professor of supply chain management at the University of Memphis in Tennessee, says he doesn't see the interruption as a big problem once things thaw. However, Foster Finley, global co-leader of the transportation and infrastructure practice at AlixPartners, says catching up in a week might be difficult.

AP Medical Writer Linda A. Johnson reported from Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania. AP White House reporter Zeke Miller in Portage, Michigan, AP Health Care reporter Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar in Washington, and AP reporters Adrian Sainz in Memphis, Tennessee, Gene Johnson in Seattle, and Dylan Lovan in Louisville, Kentucky, contributed to this report.

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Manchin's opposition threatens to sink Biden budget nominee

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nomination of Neera Tanden to lead the White House Office of Management and Budget was thrown in doubt Friday as Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia became the first Democratic lawmaker to oppose her confirmation.

During her confirmation hearings, Tanden apologized for spending years attacking top Republicans on social media. She is a former adviser to Hillary Clinton and served as president of the liberal-leaning Center for American Progress. With the Senate evenly divided between 50 Republicans and 50 Democrats, she'll likely need support from at least one Republican to win confirmation.

"I believe her overtly partisan statements will have a toxic and detrimental impact on the important working relationship between members of Congress and the next director of the Office of Management and Budget," Manchin said in a statement. He went on to say that, at a time of grave crisis, "it is more important than ever that we chart a new bipartisan course that helps address the many serious challenges facing our nation."

It's the first real test that Biden has faced on a nomination, with most of his picks for Cabinet positions sailing through the chamber with bipartisan support. Tanden had also disparaged some Democrats on social media, most notably Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont.

Biden, asked Friday whether he would pull Tanden's nomination, said he wouldn't.

"I think we are going to find the votes and get her confirmed," Biden said.

Moments earlier, the White House had issued a statement defending her.

"Neera Tanden is an accomplished policy expert who would be an excellent Budget Director and we look forward to the committee votes next week and to continuing to work toward her confirmation through engagement with both parties," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

Tanden would be the first woman of color to lead the OMB, which leads efforts to ensure an administration's priorities are reflected in legislation and regulations.

The Senate Budget Committee is scheduled to vote on her nomination next week.

Osaka eyes 4th Slam title in Australian Open final vs Brady

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

Whether or not Naomi Osaka claims the Australian Open championship — and make no mistake, she will be expected to win — this much seems certain: Tennis has a new dominant force.

Sure, it's clearly possible that Osaka could be beaten by the 22nd-seeded American Jennifer Brady in the title match at Melbourne Park on Saturday.

Brady is, after all, emerging as a force on hard courts, too, thanks to a big serve and big forehand. She pushed Osaka to three sets before losing to her in the U.S. Open semifinals last September, then shrugged off a two-week hard quarantine in Australia to reach her first Grand Slam final.

It is the No. 3-seeded Osaka, though, who overpowered and overwhelmed Serena Williams in the semifinals Thursday.

Who is riding a 20-match winning streak dating to last season.

Who already has spent time at No. 1 in the rankings.

Who is seeking her second Australian Open title and fourth Slam trophy — and she is still only 23.

Like 23-time major champion Williams, there is a determination that Osaka manages to display when the finish line is near on their sport's most important stages: She has run her record to a combined 11-0 in Grand Slam quarterfinals, semifinals and finals.

Osaka often speaks about wanting more consistency, whether that's at lower-level WTA tournaments or at every Grand Slam event.

She does occasionally stumble early at the majors, such as a third-round exit a year ago as the defending champion in Australia or a first-round loss at Wimbledon in 2019.

But once she gets close to the end, she seals the deal.

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"For me, I have this mentality that people don't remember the runners-up. You might, but the winner's name is the one that's engraved," explained Osaka, who was born in Japan to a Japanese mother and Haitian father before the family moved to New York when she was 3.

"I think I fight the hardest in the finals," she continued. "I think that's where you sort of set yourself apart."

Williams had been 8-0 in Australian Open semifinals until Osaka put a stop to that by winning 6-3, 6-4, reeling off the last eight points of the match after the second set was even at 4-all.

When they hugged at the net at the end, this is what went through Osaka's mind: "Always a surreal moment, just to see her in real life, like, close up."

Osaka has long viewed the 39-year-old Williams as an idol.

Their games are quite similar at the most foundational level: speedy serves, dangerous forehands and that steely attitude on court.

Brady got a sense of that during the entertaining matchup in New York last year against Osaka.

"She just puts a lot of pressure on you to serve well, because she's holding serve in, like, 45 seconds. ... She's coming at you with a lot of power, so it also puts a lot of pressure on you to be aggressive and try to get the first strike. Otherwise you're the one running, and I don't want to be running," said Brady, a 25-year-old from Pennsylvania who played college tennis at UCLA. "She just puts a lot of pressure on you to perform well."

Brady acknowledged that she expects to deal with some nerves against Osaka this time.

That's only natural, given the stakes.

The key will be limiting how much — and for how long — that affects her play.

"Listen, I don't know how I'm going to feel on Saturday. I can say I can enjoy the moment and just try to play tennis and not really think too much about it. But there's going to be moments, there's going to be games, there's going to be points, where I'm going to be thinking about, 'Wow, this could be my first Grand Slam title,'" said Brady, who needed five match points in the last game to close her three-set semifinal win over Karolina Muchova.

"Yeah, I will definitely have those thoughts," she said. "But it's more just trying to control the emotions, really."

Follow Howard Fendrich on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/HowardFendrich>

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/hub/tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Biden declares 'America is back' in welcome words to allies

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden used his first address before a global audience Friday to declare that "America is back, the transatlantic alliance is back," after four years of a Trump administration that flaunted its foreign policy through an "America First" lens.

Speaking to the annual Munich Security Conference virtually, Biden ticked through a daunting to-do list — salvaging the Iran nuclear deal, meeting economic and security challenges posed by China and Russia and repairing the damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic — that he said would require close cooperation between the U.S. and its Western allies.

Without mentioning Donald Trump's name once in his speech, Biden mixed talk of a reinvigorated democratic alliance with a rebuke of his predecessor's approach, a message warmly received by Western allies.

"I know the past few years have strained and tested the transatlantic relationship," Biden said. "The United States is determined to reengage with Europe, to consult with you, to earn back our position of trusted leadership."

The president also participated Friday in a virtual meeting of the Group of Seven industrialized nations, where leaders managed to work Biden's campaign theme into their closing joint statement, vowing to "work together to beat COVID-19 and build back better."

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"Welcome back, America," said European Council President Charles Michel, effectively summing up the mood of the Munich conference.

But while such happy talk conveyed the palpable sense of relief among allies at Biden's full-throated commitment to mending frayed U.S.-Europe relations, plenty has changed over the past four years in ways creating new challenges.

China has cemented its place as a fierce economic competitor on the continent as the U.S. has reconsidered long-held national security and economic priorities embedded in the transatlantic alliance. Populism has grown through much of Europe. And other Western countries have, at moments, sought to fill the vacuum left as America stepped back from the world stage.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel noted that some differences between the U.S. and Europe remain "complicated." Europe sees China's economic ambitions as less of an existential threat than the U.S. does and has its own strategic and economic concerns that are not always in sync with Biden on Russia as well.

Still, Merkel, who had a strained relationship with Trump, didn't hide her preference for an American foreign policy informed by Biden's world view.

"Things are looking a great deal better for multilateralism this year than two years ago, and that has a lot to do with Joe Biden having become the president of the United States of America," Merkel said. "His speech just now, but also his administration's first announcements, have convinced us that this is not just talk but action."

Biden made his address to a global audience as his administration this week took steps to reverse key Trump administration policies.

He said that the U.S. stands ready to rejoin talks about reentering the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal abandoned by the Trump administration. The Biden administration announced Thursday its desire to reengage Iran, and it took action at the United Nations aimed at restoring policy to what it was before Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018.

Biden also spoke out about the two-decade war in Afghanistan, where he faces a May 1 deadline to remove the remaining 2,500 U.S. troops under a Trump administration negotiated peace agreement with the Taliban. He also called for cooperation in addressing economic and national security challenges posed by Russia and China and identified cyberspace, artificial intelligence and biotechnology as areas of growing competition.

"We must prepare together for long-term strategic competition with China," Biden declared.

His message was girded by an underlying argument that democracies -- not autocracies -- are models of governance that can best meet the challenges of the moment. The president urged fellow world leaders to show together that "democracies can still deliver."

At the G-7, administration officials said, Biden focused on what lies ahead for the international community as it tries to extinguish the public health and economic crises created by the coronavirus pandemic. He announced the U.S. will soon begin releasing \$4 billion for an international effort to bolster the purchase and distribution of vaccine to poor nations, a program that Trump refused to support.

Biden's turn on the world stage came as the U.S. officially rejoined the Paris climate agreement, the largest international effort to curb global warming. Trump announced in June 2017 that he was pulling the U.S. out of the landmark accord, arguing that the pact would undermine the American economy.

Biden announced the U.S. intention of rejoining on the first day of his presidency, but he had to wait 30 days for the move to go into effect. He has said that he will make considerations about climate change into every major domestic and foreign policy decision his administration faces.

"This is a global existential crisis," Biden said.

Biden also encouraged G-7 partners to make good on their pledges to COVAX, an initiative by the World Health Organization to improve access to vaccines, even as he reopens the U.S. spigot.

Trump had withdrawn the U.S. from WHO and refused to join more than 190 countries in the COVAX program. The Republican former president accused WHO of covering up China's missteps in handling the virus at the start of the public health crisis that unraveled a strong U.S. economy.

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Biden urged greater international cooperation on vaccine distribution amid growing calls for his administration to distribute some U.S.-manufactured vaccine supplies overseas.

French President Emmanuel Macron has called on the U.S. and European nations to allocate up to 5% of current vaccine supplies to developing countries — the kind of vaccine diplomacy that China and Russia already are deploying.

Biden, who announced last week that the U.S. will have enough vaccine by the end of July to inoculate 300 million people, remains focused for now on making sure every American is vaccinated, administration officials say. Macron on Friday again pressed the U.S. and Europe to do more.

"It is up to Europeans and Americans to allow all the poor and emerging countries in the world to get access to vaccines as fast as possible," he said.

Allies were listening closely to what Biden had to say about a looming crisis with Iran.

Iran informed the International Atomic Energy Agency this week that it would suspend voluntary implementation next week of a provision in the 2015 deal that allowed U.N. nuclear monitors to conduct inspections of undeclared sites in Iran at short notice unless the U.S. rolled back sanctions by Feb. 23.

"We must now make sure that a problem doesn't arise of who takes the first step," Merkel told reporters. "If everyone is convinced that we should give this agreement a chance again, then ways should be found to get this agreement moving again."

—
Associated Press writers Darlene Superville in Washington, Geir Moulson in Berlin and Angela Charlton in Paris contributed to this report.

Will voters remember? Cruz trip tests durability of scandal

By WILL WEISSERT and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Ted Cruz's political career already featured many surprise twists before a jaunt to Mexico this week brought him a new level of notoriety.

The Texas senator was once the biggest threat to Donald Trump capturing the 2016 presidential nomination. During a particularly bitter stretch of that year's Republican primary, Cruz called Trump a "coward" and "pathological liar." By last month, however, Cruz was one of Trump's staunchest allies and a leader in the former president's baseless attempt to overturn the November election.

Such shifts are intended to keep Cruz in a strong position with the GOP base if he runs for the White House again in 2024. But they've also turned him into one of Washington's most villainized figures, someone willing to take any politically convenient position if it keeps his future ambitions alive.

Cruz is under further attack for traveling to Cancun while his constituents suffered through a deadly winter storm that left hundreds of thousands without power and running water. His explanation — that his daughters pushed for the getaway because they were out of school — was particularly panned.

The optics of the trip are hardly ideal. But the question is whether, three years before he faces voters again, the political fallout will last.

"Ted Cruz is feeling the first post-Trump controversy," said New Hampshire-based Republican strategist Mike Biundo. "I don't think anybody knows exactly what will happen in this new reality that we're living in."

Before Trump got to Washington, scandals, lies and sometimes even simple but major gaffes wrecked political careers.

Despite later winning a congressional seat, former South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford will forever be remembered for fabricating a trek along the Appalachian Trail, just as former New York Rep. Anthony Weiner was undone by repeated sexting scandals and ex-Texas Gov. Rick Perry couldn't live down the debate stage moment of forgetting the third of three federal agencies he'd promised to eliminate.

Once Trump was in the White House, his outlandish antics attracted so much attention that something that simply looked bad, like a senator's leaving on vacation while his state was suffering, wouldn't receive much notice.

Cruz is now navigating how much damage control is needed in a post-Trump political landscape.

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He rushed home on Thursday and told reporters the trip was "obviously a mistake." But he made no public appearances on Friday, and his office didn't answer questions about his schedule or what he was doing to help Texans cope with the storm. His office simply released a statement backing Gov. Greg Abbott's request for federal assistance.

Still, Cruz is still the best-known leader in the country's largest red state, with a far higher national profile than Abbott, who has also been mentioned as a possible 2024 presidential contender, and Sen. John Cornyn, who coasted to reelection last year by a more comfortable margin than Cruz, who narrowly edged Democrat Beto O'Rourke in 2018.

Alice Stewart, a GOP strategist and veteran of Cruz's presidential campaign, noted that the senator has years before he'll have to run for reelection or president or both in 2024. That's a lot of time to put the Cancun trip "in the rearview mirror," even if Cruz's political opponents will continue to trumpet it.

"People have come to tolerate a lot more during and after the era of Trump," said Stewart, who noted that while social media often intensifies political scandals, it also tends to shorten their lifespans.

Rick Tyler also worked for Cruz's 2016 campaign but has frequently criticized the senator for kowtowing to Trump since then. He said that "when Texas was down and out and embarrassed, frankly," Cruz's trip to the beach was unforgivable: "There's no way this is going to be forgotten."

"Cruz is very beatable," Tyler said of the senator's reelection prospects, especially if he tries again for the White House the same year. "He's got to decide. By doing one or the other, you risk losing both."

Of course, Cruz has effectively used being one of Washington's most detested figures to his advantage in the past. He came to Congress as a conservative insurgent who infuriated both parties — even prompting fellow Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to once joke that no senator would convict one of their own for murdering Cruz in the chamber.

In 2016, Cruz won the Iowa caucuses and proved to have a solid national base of support, setting up a tense primary fight that would last for months. At one point, Trump attacked the looks of Cruz's wife and baselessly suggested that his father had a hand in the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Cruz lashed out at Trump in response and was later booed off the stage at that year's Republican National Convention for failing to endorse the New Yorker.

But in the four years since, Cruz transformed into one of Trump's biggest champions in Congress.

Among those close to Cruz, there is a sense that the senator hurt himself politically this week but that he remains well positioned for another White House bid should he opt to run again. His team believes Cruz is the most popular prospective 2024 candidate not named Trump among likely Republican primary voters.

Cruz was a fundraising force for his Republican colleagues in the House and Senate leading up to November's election. And his own fundraising has surged in the months since — including after he stood against the certification of President Joe Biden's victory in early January. His small-dollar donor base, in particular, which was large to begin with, has grown dramatically, aides say.

Even amid calls for Cruz to resign for his role in helping encourage Trump supporters who staged a deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, Republicans in San Antonio organized a rally celebrating him as "courageous."

Cruz is also planning to attend next week's influential Conservative Political Action Conference, where he can further ingratiate himself with the GOP's most fervent activists, who aren't likely to hold Cancun against him.

Cruz allies note that the second-place finisher in the previous Republican primary often becomes the nominee in the next election. But moving forward, there is a sense internally that Cruz's political strength is directly linked to his relationship with Trump, whose feelings are difficult to gauge.

Regina Thomson, a former Cruz loyalist who fought Trump's nomination at the 2016 GOP convention, has since warmed to Trump. She said that Cruz's Cancun trip didn't bother her, but that ultimately, she and other conservative activists would likely follow Trump's lead.

"If you would ask a lot of (Cruz's former) grassroots supporters today, they'd say Trump did such a good job they'd like him to run again," Thomson said. "And if Trump doesn't run, I think a lot of people will look

to him to see who he's supporting."

Peoples reported from New York.

Pentagon chief urges immediate reduction in Taliban violence

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, in his first news conference as Pentagon chief, said Friday that progress toward peace in Afghanistan and an end to U.S. military involvement there depends on the Taliban reducing attacks. He said, right now, "clearly the violence is too high."

He refused, however, to say when the U.S. will decide if it will meet the May 1 deadline for full troop withdrawal, or if America and its NATO allies will try to renegotiate the peace deal with the Taliban and keep some troops there longer.

"We are mindful of the looming deadlines, but we want to do this methodically and deliberately," Austin said. "But we're focused on making sure that we make the right decisions, and we'll go through this process deliberately."

Afghanistan is shaping up as a major national security dilemma for Austin and the rest of President Joe Biden's fledgling national security team. There is little political appetite to keep U.S. troops in Afghanistan, but pulling them out risks further empowering the Taliban and causing a resurgence in terrorism.

Under the deal with the Taliban struck by the Trump administration one year ago this month, the United States promised a phased withdrawal of troops, so that by May 1, 2021, all foreign troops would be gone. For their part, the Taliban committed to starting peace talks with the Afghan government, ending attacks on American forces, and publicly renouncing all ties to al-Qaida and other extremist groups.

Speaking to Pentagon reporters, Austin made it clear that the Taliban violence "must decrease now," and that progress in negotiations with the Afghan government must move forward.

Austin, a retired four-star Army general who oversaw U.S. forces in Afghanistan and across the Mideast for three years during the Obama administration, said the Biden administration is reviewing the options for its next steps in Afghanistan, where U.S. troops have been deployed for nearly 20 years.

American forces make up about 2,500 of the roughly 10,000 troops training and advising the Afghans. And allies have suggested a willingness to continue the mission if needed.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said Friday that her government is willing to keep troops in Afghanistan longer if needed to ensure that the country does not descend into chaos.

"Withdrawal must not mean that the wrong forces get the upper hand again," she said.

Austin, who met with NATO defense ministers this week, said he assured allies that they will be kept informed as the U.S. considers its options. And, he said he told them that "the United States will not undertake a hasty or disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan that puts their forces or the alliance's reputation at risk."

In remarks earlier Friday to a virtual meeting of the Munich Security Conference, Biden gave no indication of his plan for troop levels in Afghanistan. He pledged to support the peace process and to ensure that Afghanistan does not revert to being a launching pad for international terrorist attacks.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Thursday the allies are holding out hope for a "re-energized" peace process that could lead to a cease-fire as a step toward a final political settlement. Short of that, the choices for the U.S. and NATO are difficult.

"We are faced with very hard and difficult dilemmas," Stoltenberg told reporters after Austin and his fellow NATO defense ministers consulted by video teleconference. "Because, if we stay beyond May 1, we risk more violence, we risk more attacks against our own troops, and we risk, of course, also to be part of a continued presence in Afghanistan that will be difficult. But, if we leave, then we also risk that the gains we have made are lost and that Afghanistan again could become a safe haven for international terrorists."

In other comments on Friday, Austin said the ongoing Pentagon effort to root out racism and extremism in the military will likely identify just a small number of problems in the force. "But, quite frankly, they'll

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probably be a little bit larger than most of us would guess," he added. "I would just say that ... small numbers in this case can have an outsized impact."

Austin also said he spoke on Thursday with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, who is the kingdom's defense chief. He said he delivered the message that Biden has decided the U.S. will no longer support offensive Saudi military operations in Yemen.

"They heard that message loud and clear," said Austin, who knows many key leaders in the Middle East from his years as head of U.S. Central Command from 2013 to 2016.

Mars landing team 'awestruck' by photo of descending rover

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The world got its first close-up look at a Mars landing on Friday, as NASA released a stunning picture of its newest rover being lowered onto the dusty red surface.

The photo was released less than 24 hours after the Perseverance rover successfully touched down near an ancient river delta, where it will search for signs of ancient life and set aside the most promising rock samples for return to Earth in a decade.

NASA equipped the spacecraft with a record 25 cameras and two microphones, many of which were turned on during Thursday's descent.

The rover is shown in extraordinary detail just 6 1/2 feet (2 meters) off the ground, being lowered by cables attached to an overhead sky crane, the red dust kicked up by rocket engines. NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, promises more photos in the next few days and possibly also an audio recording of the descent.

"This is something that we've never seen before," flight system engineer Aaron Stehura noted at a news conference. "It was stunning, and the team was awestruck. There's just a feeling of victory that we were able to capture these and share it with the world."

Chief engineer Adam Steltzner called the picture "iconic," putting it right up there with photos of Apollo 11's Buzz Aldrin on the moon, Saturn as seen by Voyager 1, and the Hubble Space Telescope's "pillars of creation" shot.

A number of thumbnail images have been beamed down so far, too many to count, said Pauline Hwang, strategic mission manager for surface operations. "The team went wild" at seeing these first pictures, she said.

The picture is so clear and detailed that deputy project scientist Katie Stack Morgan at first thought she was looking at a photo from an animation. "Then I did a double take and said: 'That's the actual rover!'"

The vehicle is healthy, according to officials, after landing on a flat, safe surface in Jezero Crater with just 1 degree of tilt and relatively small rocks nearby. For now, the systems still are being checked. It will be at least a week before the rover starts driving.

The river delta — awash 3 billion to 4 billion years ago — is just over 1 mile (2 kilometers) away. Scientists consider it the most likely place to find rocks with evidence of past microscopic life.

Another photo of Perseverance's front right wheel, near rocks full of holes, already has scientists salivating. They're eager to learn whether these rocks are volcanic or sedimentary.

It's the ninth time that NASA has successfully landed on Mars — and the fifth rover.

As it did with 2012's Curiosity rover — still roaming 2,300 miles (3,750 kilometers) away — NASA's Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter photographed Perseverance descending beneath its massive parachute. In each case, the spacecraft and chute resembled specks.

Curiosity's cameras caught a stop-motion movie of the last two minutes its descent, but the images were small and fuzzy. NASA loaded up the heftier Perseverance and its descent stage with more and better cameras, and made sure they were turned on for the entire seven-minute plunge through the Martian atmosphere.

China will attempt to land its own much smaller rover in late spring. It's been orbiting Mars for 1 1/2 weeks. The United Arab Emirates also put a spacecraft into Martian orbit last week.

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Back in Paris pact, US faces tougher climate steps ahead

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and SETH BORENSTEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — World leaders welcomed the United States' official return to the Paris climate accord Friday, but politically trickier steps lie just ahead for President Joe Biden, including setting a tough national target in coming months for cutting damaging fossil fuel emissions.

And even as Biden noted the country's first day back in the climate pact, the globe's dangerous warming was just one of a long list of urgent problems he raised in a video speech to European leaders on Friday, a month into his administration. Before bringing up climate issues, he touched on the global pandemic, sputtering national economies and tense relations with China, among other matters that threaten to impede and delay tackling the nation's status as the world's top carbon polluter after China.

Despite all the other challenges, Biden said, speaking to the Munich security conference, "we can no longer delay or do the bare minimum to address climate change. This is a global existential crisis, and all of us will suffer if we fail."

Biden signed an executive order on his first day in office reversing the pullout ordered by President Donald Trump. Trump said soon after he took office that he would start the process of pulling the U.S. from the Paris accord, but it didn't take effect until Nov. 4, 2020, because of provisions in the agreement.

Officially, the United States was only out of the worldwide global climate pact for 107 days. It was part of Trump's withdrawal from global allegiances in general and his oft-stated but false view that global warming was a laughably mistaken take by the world's scientists.

More broadly, Trump reversed Obama-era initiatives to rein in oil, gas and coal emissions and opened new federal lands and waters to exploration and drilling. Biden is working to overturn those measures and additionally has pledged a \$2 trillion remake of U.S. power grids, transportation systems and other infrastructure to sharply cut fossil fuel pollution.

While Friday's return is heavily symbolic, world leaders say they expect America to prove its seriousness to the cause. They are particularly eager for the United States to announce its new national 2030 target for cutting fossil fuel emissions, which scientists agree are altering the Earth's climate and worsening the extremes of drought, hurricanes, flooding and other natural disasters.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Thursday that the official American reentry "is itself very important," as is Biden's announcement that the U.S. will return to providing climate aid to poorer nations, as promised in 2009.

"It's not about how many days. It's the political symbolism that the largest economy refuses to see the opportunity of addressing climate change," said Christiana Figueres, the former United Nations climate chief. She was one of the leading forces in hammering out the mostly voluntary 2015 agreement in which nations set their own goals to reduce greenhouse gases.

One fear was that other nations would follow America in abandoning the climate fight, but none did, Figueres said. She said the real issue was four years of climate inaction by the Trump administration. American cities, states and businesses still worked to reduce heat-trapping carbon dioxide but without the participation of the federal government.

"We've lost too much time," Figueres said.

Inger Andersen, the environment program director at the United Nations, said America has to prove its leadership to the rest of the world, but she said she has no doubt it will when it submits its required emissions cutting targets.

"We hope they will translate into a very meaningful reduction of emissions, and they will be an example for other countries to follow," Guterres said.

The Biden administration is working now on a target that balances meaningful cuts in emissions with

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political and financial realities. Settling on a U.S. emissions goal by April, when Biden plans to host world leaders for an Earth Day summit, would help the administration prod other countries for ambitious emissions cuts as well. That spring meeting should see countries start “to put the down payments on the table,” John Kerry, Biden’s climate envoy, said Friday.

Republican leaders already are fighting it.

Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, the top Republican on the Senate energy panel, has criticized Biden for rejoining the Paris accord, tweeting: “Returning to the Paris climate agreement will raise Americans’ energy costs and won’t solve climate change. The Biden administration will set unworkable targets for the United States while China and Russia can continue with business as usual.”

University of Maryland environment professor Nate Hultman, who worked on the Obama administration’s official Paris goal, said he expects a 2030 target of cutting carbon dioxide emissions between 40% and 50% from the 2005 baseline levels.

A longtime international goal, included in the Paris accord with an even more stringent target, is to keep warming below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) since pre-industrial times. The world has already warmed 1.2 degrees Celsius (2.2 degrees Fahrenheit) since that time.

The United States’ return to the Paris accord and an ambitious target for emissions cuts would make limiting warming “to well below 2 degrees — not just to 2 degrees but below 2 degrees — a lot more likely,” said climate scientist Zeke Hausfather, energy and climate director for the Breakthrough Institute.

Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City. Associated Press writer Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

On Twitter, follow Ellen Knickmeyer at @ellenknickmeyer and Seth Borenstein at @borenbears.

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NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn’t happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

Fake tweet attributes climate change comment to Sen. Ted Cruz

CLAIM: In 2016, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz tweeted, “I’ll believe in climate change when Texas freezes over.”

THE FACTS: The tweet is fabricated. It cannot be found on Cruz’s verified Twitter account, nor is it on websites that track deleted tweets by public officials. The phony tweet spread on social media this week following an uproar over a trip the Republican senator took to Cancun, Mexico, while Texans grappled with a deadly winter storm. The crisis was held up as evidence that as climate change worsens, government officials need to do more to prepare for more extreme weather. Multiple Facebook and Twitter users reposted the false tweet, noting that perhaps Cruz changed his stance on climate change after experiencing the abnormal subfreezing temperatures in Texas. “And the Green New Deal just got another supporter,” a Twitter user who shared the fake tweet wrote on Friday. In addition to the tweet not appearing on Cruz’s official Twitter account, it also does not appear on the digital archive Wayback Machine, nor can it be found on ProPublica’s Politwoops dataset listing tweets deleted by Cruz. His office had not responded to a request for comment at the time of publication. Cruz came under intense criticism for fleeing Texas amid dire conditions as numerous media outlets, including The Associated Press, reported on his family trip to Cancun. He returned home a day after arriving in Mexico, calling the trip a “mistake.”

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

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Frozen wind turbines were not the leading cause of Texas power outages

CLAIM: Wind turbines freezing over in the cold weather were primarily responsible for Texans losing heat and electricity this week.

THE FACTS: Failures in natural gas, coal and nuclear energy systems were responsible for nearly twice as many outages as frozen wind turbines and solar panels combined, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which operates the state's power grid, said in a press conference Tuesday. With millions of Texas residents without power this week amid frigid temperatures, some government officials and conservative commentators falsely claimed that wind turbines and solar energy were the main culprits. "We should never build another wind turbine in Texas," Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller wrote in a Facebook post Tuesday. "The experiment failed big time." "This is a perfect example of the need for reliable energy sources like natural gas & coal," tweeted U.S. Sen. Steve Daines, a Republican from Montana. A viral photo of a helicopter de-icing a wind turbine was shared with claims it showed a "chemical" solution being applied to one of the massive wind generators in Texas. The only problem? The photo was taken in Sweden years ago, not in the U.S. in 2021. The helicopter sprayed hot water onto the wind turbine, not chemicals. Natural gas and coal provide the bulk of electricity in Texas, "and that's the bulk of the cause of the blackouts," according to Mark Jacobson, director of the Atmosphere/Energy Program and professor of civil and environmental engineering at Stanford University. ERCOT said Tuesday that of the 45,000 total megawatts of power that were offline statewide, about 30,000 consisted of thermal sources — gas, coal and nuclear plants — and 16,000 came from renewable sources. On top of that, while Texas has ramped up wind energy in recent years, the state still relies on wind power for only about 25% of its total electricity, according to ERCOT data. The agency confirmed that wellhead freeze-offs and other issues curtailing supply in natural gas systems were primarily to blame for new outages on Tuesday after severe winter weather caused failures across multiple fuel types in recent days. Renewable energy is a popular scapegoat for new problems as more frequent extreme weather events strain infrastructure, according to Emily Grubert, an assistant professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology. "It's easy to focus on the thing that you can see changing as the source of why an outcome is changing," Grubert told the AP. "The reality is that managing our systems is becoming more difficult. And that's something that is easy to blame on the reaction to it, but it's not actually the root cause."

— Associated Press writers Ali Swenson in Seattle and Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

Posts share false FEMA phone number for storm aid in Texas

CLAIM: FEMA is paying for hotel rooms in Texas for anyone without heat and water. Call 1-800-745-0243.

THE FACTS: As winter storms ravaged much of the South, posts online shared inaccurate information targeting Texans in need. Posts on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook falsely claimed that Texans could call the Federal Emergency Management Agency to receive a hotel room. "FEMA is paying for hotel rooms!!! In Texas Call 1-800-745-0243," the text posts said. The posts encouraged users to pass the information along to Texans in need of a place to stay. "Please share, this is legit and been verified! Stay safe friends," one Facebook post said. FEMA confirmed that the number is not a valid. The Associated Press called the number, which connected to a technical support line for the disaster relief agency. A FEMA spokesperson said the agency is not offering assistance for hotels and that the state of emergency declaration for Texas does not cover such assistance. "It covers such things as generators to help run police and fire stations or hospitals," FEMA said in a statement. "It also covers supplies such as food, water and blankets." On Sunday, Biden made a Texas emergency declaration allowing FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security to respond with disaster relief.

— Associated Press writer Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed this report.

Photo of icy boats is from Switzerland, not Texas

CLAIM: Photo shows boats covered with ice in a marina in Galveston, Texas, during this week's record

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freeze.

THE FACTS: As massive storms pummeled the southern Plains with snow, sleet and freezing rain this week, leaving millions without heat or electricity, a viral photo falsely claimed to show the severity of the cold in Galveston, Texas. The image, viewed more than 100,000 times on Facebook, featured a row of boats tied to a dock and covered in a thick layer of ice. "Meanwhile in Galveston," read one post with the image. "Galveston Texas today," read another post Tuesday. "This is a historic pic. Wow." However, a reverse-image search reveals the photo of the frozen boats was taken more than a decade ago, and has gone viral online several times before this week. The image was originally captured by Swiss photographer Jean-Pierre Scherrer in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2005, according to posts on PBase.com, an online photo blog. Scherrer took several pictures of frozen boats, cars and trees near Lake Geneva after an ice storm. A note from Scherrer on the photo-sharing site clarifies that his photos were indeed taken in Geneva, Switzerland, not Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, or elsewhere. Even though the image is being shared in the wrong context, it's true that severe winter weather has covered large swaths of Texas, including Galveston, in snow and ice.

— Ali Swenson

Video clip of Biden interview with People magazine was altered

CLAIM: People magazine video footage shows President Joe Biden stumped for words and unable to respond during an interview as his wife, first lady Jill Biden, looks on.

THE FACTS: The video was altered. The 33-second clip shows Jill Biden staring at her husband as he remains speechless. The clip began circulating on Sunday and had amassed almost a million views by Tuesday. It was later taken down. The altered segment was taken from a Feb. 3 interview where the first couple discuss their marriage and first days in the White House. The video edited together close-ups of Biden to make it seem as though he was at a loss for words. The manipulated footage includes the words "not to be shown to public" across the bottom, which falsely suggests it was a behind-the-scenes clip. "The video posted on these twitter links were copied, altered and manipulated from PEOPLE's video interview with the President and First Lady which originally ran on February 3, 2021," Marnie Perez, a spokeswoman for People, said in an email. Social media users shared posts with the altered video on Facebook and Twitter. "The Commander-in-Chief, ladies and gentlemen..." one post with more than 9,000 likes on Twitter said. Another caption with the altered video said, "biden's reaction to Trump's acquittal." The official video from People can be found on the magazine's website and on YouTube. In the interview, Biden discusses the role his wife played in his political career, "I'm not sure but for Jill, I don't think I would have stayed involved in public life," the president says. "Jill came along at a really important point and put the family back together."

— Beatrice Dupuy

Wreath-laying ceremony video doesn't show Biden faked inauguration

CLAIM: Video footage shows that certain aspects of the wreath-laying ceremony for President Joe Biden at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on Jan. 20 were different from past presidents' ceremonies, proving Biden's inauguration was fake.

THE FACTS: Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration was official and he is the 46th president of the United States. Differences between Biden's ceremony at the Arlington National Cemetery and other presidential wreath-laying ceremonies in the past can be attributed to cold weather and coronavirus precautions, according to Shaunteh Kelly, chief of media relations for the U.S. Army Military District of Washington. The video titled "The Inauguration Deception" falsely claims that minor differences between the videos are proof Biden's presidency is illegitimate. "I was looking at Biden's inauguration again and I noticed none of the military had any ranks or honors on their jackets," the narrator says in the video. It's true that the soldiers wore different jackets in Biden's ceremony than in the other ceremonies. However, there's no nefarious reason for that. Instead, it's because the clips of former Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama show

them participating in wreath-laying ceremonies on warmer days — on Memorial Day in 2003 and Veterans Day in 2012, respectively — while Biden's ceremony took place on a cold day in January 2021. "Per Army Regulation AR 670-1, awards and accommodations are authorized on ceremonial blouse but not on ceremonial overcoats or raincoats," Kelly said. President Donald Trump's ceremony in the video took place on Jan. 19, 2017, and military awards and accommodations were visible. That's because the weather in Washington on that sunny day "did not warrant ceremonial overcoats," according to Kelly. The narrator in the video also identifies differences in the ceremonial proceedings. For example, while Bush, Obama and Trump walked with a soldier to place the wreath on its stand, Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris did not, only stepping up to the wreath once it was already in place. That's because the ceremonial proceedings were changed to accommodate COVID-19 precautions. "Bush, Obama and Trump's wreath ceremonies captured in the video clips were all conducted prior to COVID-19," Kelly said. "Since the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Army Military District of Washington has eliminated the wreath bearer's movement position to adhere to CDC safety measures and physical distancing standards." Footage of Trump participating in a wreath-laying ceremony during the pandemic, on Veterans Day in 2020, shows he followed the same precautions. The narrator also claims that Biden and Harris walking into the ceremony from the left was a break from the norm, but archival footage shows Bush and Obama walked in the same way. Finally, the narrator points out that Bush, Obama and their fellow former President Bill Clinton attended Biden's ceremony. He suggests the presence of so many past presidents at the ceremony is a cause for suspicion. Not so, according to Kelly, who explained the former presidents were "invited guests of President Biden."
— Ali Swenson

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Trump repeats election claims in interviews, is unchallenged

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In the first television interviews of his post-presidency, Donald Trump repeated his false claims that the election was stolen from him 10 times — each instance unprompted and unchallenged.

Trump emerged this week for interviews with Fox News Channel, Newsmax and One America News Network tied to the death of Rush Limbaugh.

Each network actively appeals to Trump's base conservative audience. And the way the interviews were conducted illustrates how difficult it may be to change the minds of supporters who believe the former president's unfounded narrative.

Nearly a month after he left office, Trump drove his point home on each network:

— "The election was stolen," he told OANN's White House correspondent Jenn Pellegrino. "We were robbed. It was a rigged election."

— "We did win the election, as far as I'm concerned. It was disgraceful what happened," he said to Greg Kelly on Newsmax.

— "You would have had riots going all over the place if that happened to a Democrat," he said when interviewed by Harris Faulkner and Bill Hemmer on Fox News Channel.

At no point did an interviewer interrupt Trump to correct or challenge the claims. He brought up the election grievances six times with Kelly, twice with Pellegrino and twice with the Fox team. The subject didn't come up in a later interview with Fox's Sean Hannity.

No interviewer introduced the topic. Except for Kelly, each questioner stuck strictly to the subject of Trump's relationship with Limbaugh.

"We probably have 100 questions for you, but so many of these are not appropriate for this venue, so we'll keep it on this topic for now," Hemmer said.

Hemmer arguably teased the subject, though, when he asked Trump if he had spoken to Limbaugh

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post-election.

"Rush thought we won, and so do I," Trump said.

So, in fact, do many of his supporters. An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll taken between Jan. 28 and Feb. 1 found that 65% of Republicans say that Joe Biden was not legitimately elected president last November.

When Trump supporter Mike Lindell, CEO of My Pillow, started making election fraud claims in a Newsmax interview on Feb. 2, anchor Bob Sellers interrupted him to read a statement saying that "election results in every state were certified and Newsmax accepts the results as legitimate and final. The courts have also accepted that view."

When Lindell pressed his claims, Sellers walked off the set.

But a day later, Sellers apologized, saying "there is no question I could have handled the end of the interview differently." Kelly read no statement about certified election results after Trump's claims.

Asked about the exchange, Newsmax spokesman Brian Peterson said, "while we believe the former president is entitled to his own opinion on the matter, Newsmax has accepted the election result as final and legal."

Only on Fox News was Trump even called a "former president" on air during his appearances. Kelly referred to "President Trump" and "Joe Biden."

"A lot of people are in awe of you, and I am one of those people," Kelly told Trump.

Television ratings from last week's impeachment trial starkly indicate the extent to which Trump supporters resist news that shakes their world view. Trump fans weren't much interested in the trial, anyway, but during coverage of the second day of the impeachment managers' argument to convict Trump, Fox News Channel's audience was only 815,000, the Nielsen company said.

The next day, when Trump's lawyers offered their defense, Fox's audience more than doubled to 2.21 million, Nielsen said.

CNN and MSNBC, which appeal to more liberal audiences, had differences, too, but not to that extent. MSNBC had 3 million viewers for the second day of prosecution, and 2.67 million for Trump's defense. CNN's audience went from 2.87 million to 2.54 million.

Utah Republican Sen. Mitt Romney, in a statement this week explaining his vote in favor of Trump's conviction, spoke about the need for Americans to accept the truth.

"There is one untruth that divides that nation today like none other," he said. "It is that the election was stolen, that there was a massive conspiracy, more secret and widespread than any in human history, so brilliant in execution that no evidence can be found of it and no observer among the tens of thousands in our intelligence agencies will speak of it."

Now, post-impeachment, it falls on everyone to affirm Biden's election, he said.

"The division in America will only begin to heal in the light of this truth," Romney said.

Guns in capitol buildings divide states after armed protests

By IRIS SAMUELS and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press/Report for America

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — In the past year, insurrectionists have breached the U.S. Capitol and armed protesters have forced their way into statehouses around the country. But the question of whether guns should be allowed in capitol buildings remains political, and states are going in opposite directions.

In Montana, a law signed Thursday allows anyone with a permit to bring a concealed firearm into the Statehouse, reversing a decadeslong ban and fulfilling a longtime hope of Republicans who took control of the governor's mansion and the Legislature this year. GOP-dominated Utah passed a law this month allowing people to carry concealed weapons in its Capitol and elsewhere in the state without a permit.

Guns are allowed in statehouses in some form in 21 states, according to a review by The Associated Press. Eight states allow only concealed firearms inside their capitols, while two states allow only open carry.

Montana and Utah are two of at least 13 states that do not have metal detectors at the entrance to their capitols. The statehouses are open to the public even as many have closed because of the coronavirus

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pandemic.

Several other states, though, are moving to restrict guns inside their capitols. In Michigan, where armed protesters forced their way inside the Statehouse last year and the FBI said it uncovered a plot to kidnap the governor, a state panel banned the open carry of guns after the Jan. 6 riot in Washington, D.C.

Democratic state Sen. Dayna Polehanki said that "tensions are high" in Michigan following the assaults, and she's disappointed that concealed weapons are still allowed in the Statehouse.

"What they said is that weapons, guns, bullets are still welcome in our state Capitol as long as we can't see them. It doesn't make anyone safer," she said.

Vermont lawmakers, meanwhile, are considering expanding their Statehouse ban on guns to other government buildings. In Washington state, a measure that would ban open carry of guns in the Capitol and near permitted demonstrations has cleared a committee and is awaiting a vote by the full Senate.

"The purpose of openly carrying a weapon is to chill other people's voices. And it works," said its sponsor, Democratic state Sen. Patty Kuderer.

In nearby Oregon, crowds opposed to the Statehouse being closed to the public during a pandemic-related session stormed the building, including at least one person armed with an AR-15. And in Idaho, self-styled "patriots," anti-vaccination groups and others forced their way past police at the Capitol in August, shattering a window as they pushed and shoved into a gallery.

In Montana, though, Republican Rep. Seth Berglee said the U.S. Capitol riot didn't affect his thinking about the law he sponsored.

"People that have a permit are extremely law-abiding, and they are the type of people I would want to have around. I see them as being a deterrent to bad things happening," he said.

There's a similar proposal this year in Oklahoma, where gun rights advocates are again pushing to allow people with a license to carry firearms inside the Capitol. It hasn't yet had a hearing.

"A person needs to be able to protect themselves, no matter where they are," said Don Spencer, president of the Oklahoma Second Amendment Association.

Not everyone in Montana feels safer with the new law, however. Democratic House Minority Leader Kim Abbott said more guns could add a chilling new dimension to debates in polarized times.

"If you have more guns in the building when you're talking about things that are so personal and intense ... you do worry about things escalating," she said.

Whitehurst reported from Salt Lake City. Associated Press reporter Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and AP reporters around the country contributed. Samuels is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Suspected Russian hack fuels new US action on cybersecurity

By BEN FOX and ALAN SUDERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Jolted by a sweeping hack that may have revealed government and corporate secrets to Russia, U.S. officials are scrambling to reinforce the nation's cyber defenses and recognizing that an agency created two years ago to protect America's networks and infrastructure lacks the money, tools and authority to counter such sophisticated threats.

The breach, which hijacked widely used software from Texas-based SolarWinds Inc., has exposed the profound vulnerability of civilian government networks and the limitations of efforts to detect threats.

It's also likely to unleash a wave of spending on technology modernization and cybersecurity.

"It's really highlighted the investments we need to make in cybersecurity to have the visibility to block these attacks in the future," Anne Neuberger, the newly appointed deputy national security adviser for cyber and emergency technology said Wednesday at a White House briefing.

The reaction reflects the severity of a hack that was disclosed only in December. The hackers, as yet unidentified but described by officials as "likely Russian," had unfettered access to the data and email of

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at least nine U.S. government agencies and about 100 private companies, with the full extent of the compromise still unknown. And while this incident appeared to be aimed at stealing information, it heightened fears that future hackers could damage critical infrastructure, like electrical grids or water systems.

President Joe Biden plans to release an executive order soon that Neuberger said will include about eight measures intended to address security gaps exposed by the hack. The administration has also proposed expanding by 30% the budget of the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Agency, or CISA, a little-known entity now under intense scrutiny because of the SolarWinds breach.

Biden, making his first major international speech Friday to the Munich Security Conference, said that dealing with "Russian recklessness and hacking into computer networks in the United States and across Europe and the world has become critical to protecting our collective security."

Republicans and Democrats in Congress have called for expanding the size and role of the agency, a component of the Department of Homeland Security. It was created in November 2018 amid a sense that U.S. adversaries were increasingly targeting civilian government and corporate networks as well as the "critical" infrastructure, such as the energy grid that is increasingly vulnerable in a wired world.

Speaking at a recent hearing on cybersecurity, Rep. John Katko, a Republican from New York, urged his colleagues to quickly "find a legislative vehicle to give CISA the resources it needs to fully respond and protect us."

Biden's COVID-19 relief package called for \$690 million more for CISA, as well as providing the agency with \$9 billion to modernize IT across the government in partnership with the General Services Administration.

That has been pulled from the latest version of the bill because some members didn't see a connection to the pandemic. But Rep. Jim Langevin, co-chair of the Congressional Cybersecurity Caucus, said additional funding for CISA is likely to reemerge with bipartisan support in upcoming legislation, perhaps an infrastructure bill.

"Our cyber infrastructure is every bit as important as our roads and bridges," Langevin, a Rhode Island Democrat, said in an interview. "It's important to our economy. It's important to protecting human life, and we need to make sure we have a modern and resilient cyber infrastructure."

CISA operates a threat-detection system known as "Einstein" that was unable to detect the SolarWinds breach. Brandon Wales, CISA's acting director, said that was because the breach was hidden in a legitimate software update from SolarWinds to its customers. After it was able to identify the malicious activity, the system was able to scan federal networks and identify some government victims. "It was designed to work in concert with other security programs inside the agencies," he said.

The former head of CISA, Christopher Krebs, told the House Homeland Security Committee this month that the U.S. should increase support to the agency, in part so it can issue grants to state and local governments to improve their cybersecurity and accelerate IT modernization across the federal government, which is part of the Biden proposal.

"Are we going to stop every attack? No. But we can take care of the most common risks and make the bad guys work that much harder and limit their success," said Krebs, who was ousted by then-President Donald Trump after the election and now co-owns a consulting company whose clients include SolarWinds.

The breach was discovered in early December by the private security firm FireEye, a cause of concern for some officials.

"It was pretty alarming that we found out about it through a private company as opposed to our being able to detect it ourselves to begin with," Avril Haines, the director of national intelligence, said at her January confirmation hearing.

Right after the hack was announced, the Treasury Department bypassed its normal competitive contracting process to hire the private security firm CrowdStrike, U.S. contract records show. The department declined to comment. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., has said that dozens of email accounts of top officials at the agency were hacked.

The Social Security Administration hired FireEye to do an independent forensic analysis of its network logs. The agency had a "backdoor code" installed like other SolarWinds customers, but "there were no

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indicators suggesting we were targeted or that a future attack occurred beyond the initial software installation," spokesperson Mark Hinkle said.

Sen. Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee, said the hack has highlighted several failures at the federal level but not necessarily a lack of expertise by public sector employees. Still, "I doubt we will ever have all the capacity we'd need in-house," he said.

There have been some new cybersecurity measures taken in recent months. In the defense policy bill that passed in January, lawmakers created a national director of cybersecurity, replacing a position at the White House that had been cut under Trump, and granted CISA the power to issue administrative subpoenas as part of its efforts to identify vulnerable systems and notify operators.

The legislation also granted CISA increased authority to hunt for threats across the networks of civilian government agencies, something Langevin said they were only previously able to do when invited.

"In practical terms, what that meant is they weren't invited in because no department or agency wants to look bad," he said. "So you know what was happening? Everyone was sticking their heads in the sand and hoping that cyberthreats were going to go away."

Suderman reported from Richmond, Va.

G-7 vows 'equitable' world vaccine access, but details scant

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Leaders of the Group of Seven economic powers promised Friday to immunize the world's neediest people against the coronavirus by giving money, and precious vaccine doses, to a U.N.-backed vaccine distribution effort.

But the leaders, under pressure over their vaccination campaigns at home, were unwilling to say exactly how much vaccine they were willing to share with the developing world, or when.

Chancellor Angela Merkel said after the G-7 leaders held a virtual meeting that fair distribution of vaccines was "an elementary question of fairness."

But she added, "No vaccination appointment in Germany is going to be endangered."

After their first meeting of the year -- held remotely because of the pandemic -- the leaders said they would accelerate global vaccine development and deployment" and support "affordable and equitable access to vaccines" and treatments for COVID-19. They cited a collective \$7.5 billion from the G-7 to U.N.-backed COVID-19 efforts.

"This is a global pandemic, and it's no use one country being far ahead of another," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said as he opened the virtual summit with the leaders of the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Japan. The U.K. holds the G-7 presidency this year.

"We've got to move together," Johnson said, speaking from the prime minister's 10 Downing St. residence to the other leaders in their far-flung offices. "So, one of the things that I know that colleagues will be wanting to do is to ensure that we distribute vaccines at cost around the world."

Wealthy nations have snapped up several billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines, while some countries in the developing world have little or none.

G-7 leaders are eager to avoid looking greedy — and don't want to cede the terrain of vaccine diplomacy to less democratic but faster-moving countries such as China and Russia.

Johnson, whose country has reported almost 120,000 virus-related deaths, promised to give "the majority of any future surplus vaccines" to the U.N.-backed COVAX effort to vaccinate the world's most vulnerable people.

But Foreign Office Minister James Cleverly said it was "difficult to say with any kind of certainty" when or how much Britain could donate.

French President Emmanuel Macron gave a firmer target, saying Europe and the U.S. should allocate up to 5% of their current COVID-19 vaccine supplies to the poorest countries quickly.

"This is worth an enormous amount. It is worth our credibility," Macron said after the meeting,

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"If we can do this, then the West will have a presence" in African countries, he said. If not, those countries will turn to Chinese and Russian vaccines and "the power of the West will...not be a reality."

Macron's office said France was ready to hand over 5% of its doses but would not give exact numbers or a date.

As the African continent awaits delivery of doses through COVAX, an African Union-created vaccines task force said Friday that it would be getting 300 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine in May. The AU previously secured 270 million doses from AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson for the continent of 1.3 billion people.

The governments of Canada and the European G-7 nations are under pressure to speed up their domestic vaccination campaigns after being outpaced by Britain and the U.S.

Asked later Friday about Macron's proposal, Germany's Merkel said that "we have not yet spoken about the percentage."

"We haven't yet spoken about the timing" either, the chancellor told reporters in Berlin. "That still has to be discussed."

Development and aid groups welcomed the commitments but said rich Western countries needed to do more, and soon.

Gayle Smith, chief executive of anti-poverty group the ONE Campaign, said "world leaders are finally waking up to the scale of this crisis."

"It beggars belief that in the midst of a global pandemic a handful of countries have accumulated over a billion vaccines more than they will need, while 130 countries have no vaccines at all," she said.

The summit marked Biden's his first major multilateral engagement since taking office. America's allies hope that U.S. re-engagement with the world following the "America first" years under former President Donald Trump will mean a more coordinated response on issues such as the pandemic and climate change.

Biden signed the U.S. up to the COVAX initiative, which Trump refused to support, and has pledged to distribute \$4 billion in U.S. funding to the program.

The G-7 meeting — and a speech by Biden at the Munich Security Conference on Friday — comes the day the United States officially rejoins the Paris climate agreement, the largest international effort to curb global warming. Trump pulled the U.S. out of the landmark accord in 2017.

The Biden administration also said it was ready to join talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the 2015 deal to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions, which was repudiated by Trump.

In a joint statement reflecting the United States' re-embrace of international institutions, the G-7 leaders vowed to "make 2021 a turning point for multilateralism and to shape a recovery that promotes the health and prosperity of our people and planet."

They said post-pandemic economic recovery efforts must put the fight against climate change and dwindling biodiversity "at the center of our plans."

A full G-7 summit is scheduled to take place in June at the Carbis Bay seaside resort in southwest England.

Associated Press writers Sylvie Corbet and Angela Charlton in Paris, Samuel Petrequin in Brussels, Geir Moulson in Berlin and Cara Anna in Nairobi, Kenya, contributed to this story.

It's final: Harry and Meghan won't return as working royals

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Buckingham Palace confirmed Friday that Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, will not be returning to royal duties, and Harry will give up his honorary military titles — a decision that makes formal, and final, the couple's split from the royal family.

When Harry and Meghan stepped away from full-time royal life in March 2020, unhappy at media scrutiny and the strictures of their roles, it was agreed the situation would be reviewed after a year.

Now it has, and the palace said in a statement that the couple, also known as the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, have verified "they will not be returning as working members of the Royal Family. "

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It said Queen Elizabeth II had spoken to 36-year-old Harry and confirmed "that in stepping away from the work of the Royal Family, it is not possible to continue with the responsibilities and duties that come with a life of public service."

The palace said Harry's appointment as captain general of the Royal Marines and titles with other military groups would revert to the queen before being distributed to other members of the family.

Harry served in the British army for a decade, including on the front line in Afghanistan, and retains a close bond with the military. He founded the Invictus Games competition for wounded troops, which first was held in 2014 at London's Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

The Invictus Games Foundation said Harry would remain its patron. But he is relinquishing positions as patron of the Rugby Football Union, the Rugby Football League and the London Marathon Charitable Trust.

Meghan, 39, will be stripped of her role as patron of Britain's National Theatre and the Association of Commonwealth Universities.

"While all are saddened by their decision, the Duke and Duchess remain much loved members of the family," the palace statement said.

American actress Meghan Markle, a former star of the TV legal drama "Suits," married the queen's grandson Harry at Windsor Castle in May 2018. Their son, Archie, was born a year later.

In early 2020, Meghan and Harry announced they were quitting royal duties and moving to North America, citing what they said were the unbearable intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media toward the duchess, who identifies as biracial.

The couple agreed to no longer use the title "royal highness" or receive public funds for their work, although it was unclear at the time if those decisions would stand.

They retain their titles of duke and duchess, and Harry is still sixth in line to the British throne. Harry and Meghan now live in Santa Barbara, California and are expecting their second child. The couple recently announced they would speak to Oprah Winfrey for a TV special to be broadcast next month.

Angela Levin, who has written a biography of Prince Harry, said the queen's anxiety about what the Winfrey interview might disclose may have prompted the royal family to announce the split with Harry and Meghan sooner than planned.

"They're out on their own," she said. "They've got the freedom that they longed for."

They continue to have a tense relationship with sections of the British media. Earlier this month, Meghan won a legal victory in a lawsuit against the publisher of the Mail on Sunday, when a British judge ruled the newspaper invaded her privacy by publishing part of a letter she wrote to her estranged father.

News of their break with the palace comes as Harry's grandfather, 99-year-old Prince Philip, is in a London hospital, where he was admitted on Tuesday after feeling unwell.

A spokesperson for the couple hit back at suggestions that Meghan and Harry were not devoted to duty.

"As evidenced by their work over the past year, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex remain committed to their duty and service to the U.K. and around the world, and have offered their continued support to the organizations they have represented regardless of official role," the spokesperson said in a statement.

"We can all live a life of service. Service is universal."

Hilary Fox contributed to this story.

VIRUS TODAY: Winter weather impacting U.S. vaccination plans

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Friday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— The White House is scrambling to find ways around Mother Nature as frigid temperatures, snow and ice have dealt the first major set back to the Biden administration's planned swift rollout of coronavirus vaccines. The administration is working with states to make up for "lost ground" even as President Joe Biden planned to visit a Pfizer vaccine manufacturing plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan. The president's trip

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itself had been pushed back a day to Friday due to wintry weather in the nation's capital.

— Sales of previously occupied U.S. homes rose again last month, a sign that the housing market's strong momentum from 2020 may be carrying over into this year. The housing market has mounted a strong comeback since last summer after declining sharply in the spring when the coronavirus outbreak hit. Existing U.S. home sales rose 0.6% in January from the previous month to a seasonally-adjusted rate of 6.69 million annualized units, the National Association of Realtors said Friday. It was the strongest sales pace since October. Sales surged last year to the highest level since 2006 at the height of the housing boom.

— Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz said state residents have received more than 1 million doses of coronavirus vaccine. Updated figures show that Minnesota health care providers have administered 1,016,210 doses. The governor's office said 728,081 Minnesotans have received at least one dose, including 286,543 who've completed the two-dose series. The seven-day rolling average of doses administered is now 29,705, a pace that has been picking up as limited supplies have allowed.

THE NUMBERS: According to data from Johns Hopkins University, there were 69,230 new COVID-19 cases and 2,452 deaths in the United States on Thursday. The record high for new cases was 300,282 on Jan. 2 and the record high for deaths was 5,443 on Feb. 12.

DEATH TOLL: The total number of deaths from COVID-19 in the U.S. reached 493,718.

QUOTABLE: "Our city is ready to administer COVID-19 vaccines swiftly, safely, and equitably — and as soon as doses arrive in Los Angeles, we will get them into people's arms immediately," Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said in a statement.

ICYMI: If you were hoping to catch a show at Carnegie Hall this season, you're out of luck. The venerable concert hall said it was calling off an entire season for the first time in its 130-year history because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The storied New York City venue has canceled performances from April 6 through July to extend a closure that started March 13 soon after the virus began taking hold in the United States. Carnegie Hall hopes to reopen in October for the 2021-22 season.

ON THE HORIZON: New data indicate the COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer and German partner BioNTech could be stored for two weeks without the ultracold storage currently required, potentially making its use a bit easier. The companies said Friday they've submitted findings from ongoing stability testing to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which has authorized the vaccine's emergency use in the U.S., and will send the data to regulators around the world in the next few weeks.

Find AP's full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Nonprofits step up to protect fertility for cancer patients

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

Roshni Kamta remembers that spring day two years ago when she left for work on her usual crowded New York City subway line, carrying precious cargo. Inside the light white bag, which she stored inside the refrigerator at work, were her egg freezing supplies — syringes and the hormone medications she would inject into her body at work to maintain her medicating schedule.

Fertility preservation wasn't something that Kamta, then just 22 years old, had ever thought about, let alone planned for. But a shocking breast cancer diagnosis a few months earlier had transformed everything. After some quick decisions, she found herself poised to undergo an egg retrieval procedure days before embarking on cancer treatments.

These treatments — radiation, surgery and some types of chemotherapy — can damage fertility. Yet procedures to preserve fertility can exceed \$15,000. Fertility advocates say only 10 states mandate that insurance companies cover these costs for patients whose medical treatments will likely render them infertile. The result is that many cancer patients are stuck with crushing out-of-pocket costs in the brief time they have before starting treatments.

The barriers to access amount to a stressful financial burden for nearly 88,000 young adults the American

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Cancer Society says are diagnosed with cancer in the U.S. every year. That's where Kamta, now 24, found herself in 2019. She said her insurance company denied her coverage after her diagnosis.

"Cancer wasn't my choice," she said. "I had no control over this, and now they were telling me they can't help me with something for the future? Just the way they word things in their policy made me angry."

Kamta turned, as many do, to her only option for aid — a nonprofit. She applied for and was approved for a grant by The Chick Mission, a New-York based organization that pays the full cost of fertility preservation procedures for women with cancer. The Chick Mission has plans to expand its program with 100 need-based grants in six states for women under age 40 who are newly diagnosed with cancer. All told, after negotiating lower rates with clinics, it expects to spend \$650,000 on the grants.

Advocates aren't sure how many nonprofits like it exist, and they say the need far exceeds the availability of aid. Joyce Reinecke, executive director of the Alliance for Fertility Preservation, notes that some other organizations — including Team Maggie For A Cure, based in Georgia, and Fertility Within Reach in Massachusetts — also offer financial aid. But most don't cover the full cost of treatment.

In 2004, the nonprofit Fertile Hope became the first nonprofit to offer financial assistance to cancer patients. It was later acquired by The Livestrong Foundation, a cancer charity that now administers the program under the name "Livestrong Fertility" and has become one of the leading organizations that provide free or discounted services and medications. Greg Lee, Livestrong's president, says the charity has saved 14,000 couples about \$76 million in costs.

While noting that these organizations can serve as a lifeline for the fortunate, advocates say that a system of dependence on a web of far-flung nonprofits is far from an ideal solution for cancer patients.

"Needing to know how to apply for a grant or crowd fund for your healthcare is not what our country should be doing," said Cynthia Pearson, executive director of the Washington-based advocacy group National Women's Health Network. Yet "sometimes it's important for people to step in and make a difference right away when that individual woman can't wait for a system or policy change."

That was Amanda Rice's reason for launching The Chick Mission in 2017 while undergoing treatment herself for breast cancer. The organization emerged from her own stress-filled frustrations with her insurer, UnitedHealthcare, which informed her, she said, that she didn't meet its standard definition of infertility. She said she was told that to qualify for coverage, she needed to try for six months to become pregnant.

At the time, Rice was on the verge of a divorce and couldn't afford to wait that long for her cancer treatments.

"I can't stop for six months and try to have a baby," she said.

Her anger and anxiety would boil over, she said, and lead to depression.

Tracey Lempner, a spokeswoman for UnitedHealthcare, didn't comment on Rice's specific case. But she said in a statement to The Associated Press that in states that don't mandate coverage of fertility preservation, the insurer offers "customers the choice to include coverage for fertility preservation as part of their benefit plan."

Lempner said UnitedHealthcare regularly reviews its coverage "to ensure it is consistent with other plans in the market." Starting in July, she added, "fertility preservation will be available as a standard benefit" on certain UnitedHealthcare plans.

For now, many insurance plans in the United States don't cover fertility preservation for young cancer patients. Because the costs are so steep, Mindy Christianson, the medical director of the Johns Hopkins Fertility Center, says some of her patients have declined the procedures.

"A lot of the studies have shown that women and girls later on regret not doing fertility preservation," she said.

For Rice, who was diagnosed with cancer three times since 2014, two insurance coverage denials that she says she received left a psychological scar. She paid to freeze her eggs, and launched The Chick Mission with her eyes fixed on grants and advocacy.

The Chick Mission has received some support from foundations but is seeking an institutional donor. Most of its funding comes from grassroots donations amounting to \$5,000 or less. With that money, it has

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helped women freeze at least 1,000 eggs. At least one woman, Rice said, has given birth.

"This is the insurance policy for them that their insurance wouldn't cover," she said. "We have a few more that are out of treatment, that are married and that are looking to start their families. And I think we will have more babies to come this year or early next."

The Chick Mission also works within a coalition of other organizations to advocate for state laws that would mandate that insurance companies cover such costs for cancer patients.

New York enacted such a law in 2019, though advocates say it isn't expansive enough because it applies only to large insurers' policies. The Chick Mission seeks to help women who fall through the cracks in that state — as well as in New Jersey, California, Colorado and Illinois. It has also extended its reach to Texas, where a similar bill is in the works, said Tracy Weiss, a cancer survivor who serves as the group's executive director.

As Reinecke sees it, momentum is on their side. She has seen an increase in support since 2017, the year Connecticut became the first state to pass a coverage mandate.

"People started to jump in and give support and help us," Reinecke said. "I do think going forward as a coalition of cancer and reproductive organizations has been helpful. It does make asking for this coverage easier over time."

With that in mind, advocates are holding out hope of helping enact a federal mandate one day.

"The ultimate goal of The Chick Mission," Weiss said, "is to be out of business."

The Associated Press receives support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and non-profits. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

VIRUS DIARY: It's mud, mud everywhere in UK's 3rd lockdown

By SHEILA NORMAN-CULP Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — It's apparently not enough for Britons to endure almost 120,000 COVID-19 deaths and face a new variant of the virus that scientists say is more contagious and more deadly. Not enough to struggle through a third lockdown in less than a year, a shutdown now in its ninth week in London with no end in sight.

No, all of this has to come smack in the middle of Britain's mud season, the time formally known as winter.

While everyone in the U.K. is already lacking Vitamin D, the sun chooses to take a months-long work stoppage and named winter storms kept sweeping eastward across the Atlantic. Storm Bella marched in right after Christmas, bringing gusts up to 106 mph (92 kph) and rains that dumped 3.2 inches (80.2 mm) on a village in Scotland. A sodden, freezing version of a hurricane. Storm Darcy roared in last week from the opposite side, bringing an icy Arctic blast and the U.K.'s coldest temperature in 25 years.

British meteorologists have as many ways to describe rain as the Inuit do snow, since the daily forecast is just an estimate of how much rain will hit when and with what force. Even my husband, who grew up in sun-soaked Southern California, realizes that one just runs or walks or shops in the rain here; it's impossible to dodge it.

Unlike the southeastern U.S., which floods during the summer-fall hurricane season, Britain floods in the dead of winter, bringing hypothermia alongside germ-laden waters. Rivers across England and Scotland are bursting: 73 flood alerts were in effect on Friday alone. And this year, few gyms or schools are available for emergency housing for fear they will turn into COVID-19 factories. It's a Dickensian time.

The lockdown in London began Dec. 20, literally the day before the darkest day of the year. Forget about fun: bars, nightclubs, museums, gyms, theaters and cinemas are closed, except for a few restaurant takeouts. Even outdoor venues like London's Hampstead Heath bathing ponds, a bracing 55 degrees Fahrenheit (13 degrees Celsius) when I last took a dip in October, are shut.

You're allowed out once a day for exercise, more for food shopping. Even British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had to defend himself over a cycling trip to a park seven miles away, though it was deemed not to have violated lockdown rules.

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So the only thing left for most to do is walk or run. And having millions trudging in the cold winter rain has done exactly what one would expect: create acres and acres of squishy mud.

Farmers across the country are upset over trekkers who, in their efforts to avoid sodden right-of-way paths, trample around them. Only they are not marching over grass but corn, barley and wheat crops, creating mud highways 25 feet wide.

Dogs in the parks have black mud-line streaks across their bellies. Knee-high wellies — plastic-molded boots that are often caked with mud — are worn by everyone from toddlers to grannies with hiking poles.

While protected against the weather, too many in London's parks still forget the key pandemic-era weapon: a mask. In an hour-long trek across Regent's Park, Primrose Hill Park or Hampstead Heath you can pass hundreds of maskless people and outsized social "bubbles." It takes all the composure I can muster not to lecture every one of them.

My husband and I now avoid the grand parks on the weekends, but walking on uneven cobblestones and pavement in London's grittier areas brings sore joints and foot ailments. It's a minor price to pay, however, compared with the waves of grief wrought by the virus on families and medical workers.

Years from now, when my grandchildren ask, "What did you do during the pandemic, Mimi?" I will tell them: I spent 10 hours a day hip-deep in emotionally wrenching pandemic news. The rest of the time I was out in the mud, trying to stay safe.

Virus Diary, an occasional feature, showcases the coronavirus pandemic through the eyes of Associated Press journalists around the world. Follow London-based AP editor Sheila Norman-Culp on Twitter at [twitter](http://twitter.com/snormanculp) at <http://twitter.com/snormanculp>

Old habits imperil Iraq as doctors warn of second virus wave

By ABDULRAHMAN ZEYAD Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — In the busy emergency room of Baghdad's main public hospital, Ali Abbas stood face uncovered, waiting for his sickly father. Dozens of other patients and their relatives mingled without masks.

It's a scene that confounds health workers in Iraq, who warn that the country is entering a new wave of coronavirus cases, in part because many shirk precautions.

"I don't believe in the coronavirus, I believe in God," the 21-year-old Abbas said in the middle of the hospital floor, defying the facility's rules requiring masks.

On Friday, Iraq was under its first full day of a new curfew imposed by the government in response to infection rates that have shot back up again after easing last autumn. The curfew runs all day Friday to Sunday, and from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. the rest of the week. Mosques and schools are closed, large gatherings prohibited, and the wearing of masks and other protective gear will be enforced, according to a statement from the government.

A complete lockdown, including closing airports and borders, is also being considered, two government officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

New cases, down under 600 a day just a month ago, have sharply increased, reaching 3,896 a day on Feb. 18 and approaching September's daily peak of more than 5,000. The Health Ministry says 50% of the new cases are from the new, more infectious strain that first broke out in the U.K. More than 657,000 people have been infected by the virus in Iraq and 13,220 have died since February.

Doctors told The Associated Press they've seen the flare-up coming for weeks. They blame a careless public and a government unable to fully enforce virus protocols.

"I am a doctor fighting public ignorance, not the pandemic," said Mohammed Shahada, a pulmonologist at Baghdad's al-Zahra Hospital.

At al-Zahra Hospital, the year began with just four patients in the 90-bed isolation ward. By the start of February, that jumped to 30 severe virus patients. Shahada expects more in the coming weeks.

At his private clinic, some patients have walked out rather than abide by his strict face mask requirement, he said.

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Ismail Taher, a doctor at Baghdad's Sheikh Zayed hospital, estimated that only one in 10 people walking into his hospital wear masks.

The Health Ministry said earlier this month that a new wave was being driven by religious activities -- including Friday prayers and visits to shrines -- and large crowds in markets, restaurants, malls and parks, where greetings with handshakes and kisses are the norm.

The ministry also blamed "some people who are openly questioning the existence of the pandemic."

That's a common sentiment.

"It's just the flu," said Yahya Shammari, a 28-year old college graduate. "I went to the hospital twice with no mask on and I didn't get infected."

Rahem Shabib, 32, said he noticed how infection rates dipped following the Shiite Muslim Arbaeen pilgrimage in October. "So God is stronger than COVID-19," he said.

The Arbaeen brings millions from around the world to Iraq for commemorations connected to the 7th century killing of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Islam's Prophet Muhammad. This year, Iraq banned foreign pilgrims from attending, considerably reducing the numbers.

Mac Skelton, a medical sociologist at the American University of Iraq in Sulaimaniyah, said the dismissive attitude was not so much rooted in ignorance as in the realities Iraqis face.

Iraqis have endured so many calamities the past few decades, including wars, political violence and sanctions, that COVID-19 "may not stack up as a major problem," he said.

Also government pandemic policies, centered on hospitals, don't mesh with how Iraqis cope with illness, said Skelton. Amid years of instability, Iraqis had to come up with their own strategies, because health care was either not available or they distrusted hospitals, which at the height of sectarian fighting became dangerous places to go to.

So they seek out pharmacists, nurses, help from neighbors, or even cross borders to treat illness.

"Most doctors are not that surprised, they know patients would refuse to go to hospital unless they were gasping for air and had no choice," said Skelton, director of the university's Institute of Regional and International Studies.

This also suggests Health Ministry statistics, based on tests at government labs, are an undercount, as many Iraqis may forgo testing altogether and opt to recover at home.

Iraq's centralized health system, largely unchanged since the 1970s, has been ground down by decades of wars, sanctions, and prolonged unrest since the 2003 U.S. invasion. Successive governments have invested little in the sector.

The mingling of virus patients with others has also exacerbated case numbers, doctors said. Shahada's hospital was once reserved solely for virus patients; but no longer, and COVID-19 patients and others share rooms where CT scans, MRIs and X-rays are taken, Shahada said.

So far, Iraq has not faced shortages in medical supplies or ICU capacity. But that could change if cases soar, doctors said.

The Health Ministry said it plans to begin administering vaccines by the end of March. The government has allocated funds to secure 1.5 million vaccines from Pfizer and signed a contract for 2 million more from AstraZeneca. Little has been announced about how inoculation will proceed.

Now more than ever, government officials worry it will be difficult to change entrenched habits.

As restrictions eased after September, life returned to Iraq. In Baghdad, restaurants are packed and face masks seldom seen. Further south in Basra, residents go about the day as though the pandemic never reached the southern shores, sharing meals in crowded cafes and shaking hands.

"Changing public awareness is the only way to stop another lethal virus outbreak," Health Minister Hasan al-Tamimi told the AP at the sidelines of a recent press conference.

Associated Press writer Samya Kullab in Baghdad contributed to this report.

Prosecutor son seeks father's release in fatal Brink's heist

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By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

David Gilbert went to prison a revolutionary, raising his fist and scorning authorities who prosecuted him for an infamous 1981 armored truck robbery in which a guard and two police officers were killed.

Four decades later, advocates for the 76-year-old inmate's release include San Francisco's chief prosecutor, the son left behind at 14 months old when both his parents were arrested.

"As long as I can remember, I've known that the most likely scenario is that my father is going to die in prison," said Chesa Boudin, sworn in as district attorney last year.

Boudin ran a progressive campaign in which he said visiting his parents Kathy Boudin and Gilbert in prison showed him the criminal justice system was broken.

Gilbert is among the last surviving people still imprisoned in the bungled 1981 Brink's robbery north of New York City, often seen as a last gasp of '60s radicalism. The robbery still stirs emotions, especially among local officials and relatives of the slain men who have watched with exasperation as others convicted in the crime, including Kathy Boudin, walk out of prison.

As one of many voices lobbying New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Chesa Boudin's support for his father's clemency is personal. But the case also revolves around questions of justice the Democrat and former public defender deals with as a district attorney.

"No matter whether my father lives the rest of his life in a cage or whether he's released to spend his few remaining years with family, we can't undo the harm that his crime cost. And we can't bring back the men who were so wrongfully killed that day," he said in a recent interview. "At what point is enough enough? I don't know."

Gilbert is serving a 75-year-to-life sentence at the Shawangunk Correctional Facility for the Oct. 20, 1981 robbery of \$1.6 million from a Brink's truck at a suburban Rockland County mall. He is eligible for parole in 2056.

Veterans of the Weather Underground, a militant group that grew out of the anti-Vietnam War movement, joined with members of the Black Liberation Army in a robbery they considered a justified "expropriation" to establish a Black nation in the South called the Republic of New Afrika.

Brink's guard Peter Paige and two Nyack policemen, Sgt. Edward O'Grady and Officer Waverly Brown, were killed in the holdup and ensuing shootout at a nearby roadblock.

Gilbert, an unarmed getaway driver, was charged with robbery and murder since people were killed during the crime. He and two co-defendants cast themselves as freedom fighters and deemed their trial illegitimate. At one court session, Gilbert and co-defendant Judith Clark raised their fists and shouted "Free the land!"

Steve Zeidman, the lawyer and CUNY School of Law professor spearheading the clemency campaign, said Gilbert has a spotless prison record and has helped fellow inmates since running an AIDS education program during that epidemic. Supporters of his release range from fellow inmates to former South African archbishop Desmond Tutu.

As COVID-19 spreads through New York's prisons, Zeidman stressed that Gilbert is especially vulnerable as one of the system's oldest and longest-serving inmates. Gilbert is eligible for the vaccine, though his son said he had yet to receive a shot.

Chesa Boudin was dropped off at a babysitter before the robbery and was later raised by his parents' Weather Underground compatriots, Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn. Growing up, his relationship with his biological parents was defined by phone calls and prison visits.

Boudin recalls Gilbert telling elaborate adventure stories on the phone starring the boy and his friends sailing down the Amazon River or in some other exotic locale. Each call would be an episode. Pictures taken at prison visits over the decades show a young boy with tousled hair grow into the bearded lawyer eventually elected DA.

Kathy Boudin avoided a harsher sentence by pleading guilty and was paroled in 2003. Clark was granted parole in 2019, three years after Cuomo commuted her sentence, noting her "exceptional strides in self development."

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Each release raises vocal opposition

John Hanchar, O'Grady's nephew, asked why Gilbert's case was worthy of public attention when so many inmates with lesser convictions get none. Hanchar contends Gilbert helped plan a crime that left a lasting hole in the lives of the slain men's families.

"We've moved on with our lives. But fair is fair. If you want to say that this guy spent 40 years in prison and he's going to leave an old man, I don't care if he leaves tomorrow," Hanchar said. "But don't tell me that he didn't kill these people."

There's a separate effort to secure the release of former Black Liberation Army leader Mutulu Shakur, the 70-year-old stepfather of slain rapper Tupac Shakur. He is at a federal medical center in Kentucky and has advanced-stage bone marrow cancer. Shakur was convicted of leading a group responsible for a series of armed robberies in New York and Connecticut, including the Brink's heist.

Zeidman, who also handled Clark's case, said Gilbert's case "kicked into high gear" with a clemency filing last year and they have since added supplemental material. Advocates hope Cuomo intervenes as he did with Clark, though clemencies for more serious crimes are rare among the state's 33,000 inmates. The Democrat announced 14 pardons and seven commutations last Christmas Eve, a traditional time for announcements.

Zeidman said he has not received a formal decision from Cuomo's administration.

Gilbert declined a request to answer questions about his role in the crime and arguments for his release that The Associated Press posed in a letter to him. Zeidman and Boudin describe Gilbert as remorseful and no threat to society.

"This is just a question about how do we balance retribution against other social interests," Boudin said.

'Alone': How Italian town with 1st known virus death fared

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

VO, Italy (AP) — Italy delivered the first shocking confirmation of locally transmitted coronavirus infections outside of Asia a year ago Sunday, with back-to-back revelations of cases more than 150 kilometers (nearly 100 miles) apart in the country's north.

First, a 38-year-old man in Codogno, an industrial town in the Lombardy region, tested positive for COVID-19, sending panicked residents to pick up their children from school, stock up on provisions at grocery stores and search in vain for surgical masks at pharmacies.

By the evening of Feb. 21, a 77-year-old retired roofer from Vo, a wine-making town in the Veneto region, had died — at the time, the first known fatality from a locally transmitted case of the virus in the West, setting off alarm bells far and wide.

In the days and weeks that followed, densely populated Lombardy would become the epicenter of Italy's outbreak and, by the end of March, countries the world over would be under lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus that has now taken 2.4 million lives. But Vo, as one of the first towns in the West to be isolated, has a unique story, providing some of the first scientific insights into the deadly virus.

Adriano Trevisan's death sent shockwaves through the town west of Venice. Trevisan, well-known around Vo and a regular at a card game in a local bar, had been hospitalized for two weeks with circulatory issues related to a heart condition that could not be resolved with drugs, according to his physician, Dr. Carlo Petruzzi. There was no reason to suspect the coronavirus — as the retiree had had no contact with China, until then a key element in diagnosis.

After being advised of the death, Mayor Giuliano Martini, who doubles as the town's chief pharmacist, ordered schools and nonessential businesses to close and forbade residents from leaving the town, even for work. He asked local volunteer groups to help ensure food and pharmaceutical supplies entering the town were ferried to shelves. The town's three family doctors were put into quarantine because of suspected contact, and the closest hospital, a 30-minute drive away, was closed.

"It was like a war film," Martini said. "We were completely alone."

Surrounded by vineyards and farmland, the town of 3,270 people nestled against Monte Venda has long

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enjoyed bucolic isolation. But by three days after Trevisan's death, its isolation was ensured by government decree: Rome dispatched soldiers to seal the town's 12 access roads. Blockades were also set up around the 10 towns near Milan where the other early case of local transmission was confirmed.

"There was a sense of bewilderment, I would call it," said Dr. Luca Rossetto, one of the practitioners in Vo. "Even myself, with an old specialization in preventative hygiene, should have the right mindset. But there was an absolute disorientation."

Rossetto reviewed his recent cases and realized he had seen seven people in the previous days with pneumonia-like symptoms. A week later, the 69-year-old physician himself was hospitalized with the virus, a light case from which he recovered.

Veneto Gov. Luca Zaia, meanwhile, instinctively ordered blanket testing for all of the residents of Vo, with the aim of understanding the outbreak's origin. That he was even able to make such a call is thanks to the foresight of University of Padua virologist Andrea Crisanti, who had ordered the necessary tools after the virus appeared in China. Many places around the world struggled to institute testing so quickly.

Crisanti recognized that there would be value in testing the entire town immediately after the contagion was confirmed and then again after two weeks. And his work offered early insight into how the virus spread — clarity that Crisanti said was never properly translated into action.

The results of the first round of nasal swab tests, available on Feb. 27, showed that nearly 3% of the population had been infected. That indicated that the virus had been circulating in the town since the end of January, according to Crisanti.

"With that data, we should have closed both Veneto and Lombardy, immediately," Crisanti said. But decision-makers, he said, "didn't perceive the extent of the problem."

The question of whether more more restrictions on movement should have been instituted sooner has been hotly debated in Italy, with many politicians noting that such decisions were extremely difficult given that the measures come with a heavy economic and social cost and infringe on freedoms. There is even a criminal investigation into whether officials waited too long to lock down two towns in Lombardy.

Shutting down Vo proved remarkably effective in stopping the transmission. When Crisanti conducted the second round of testing on March 7, no new cases were detected.

Crisanti said that the findings — which were published by the journal *Nature* in June but known to Italian officials immediately — made clear that isolation and mass testing were the best way to contain the virus before vaccines.

While Crisanti succeeded in persuading the Veneto region to increase testing, it wasn't until March 9 — 17 days after the virus had been simultaneously detected in two Italian regions, with cases multiplying and a mass exodus toward the south under way — that then-Premier Giuseppe Conte ordered the entire country on a near-total lockdown that would last seven weeks.

By the end of May, as cases began to recede in Italy, more than 232,684 people had been infected, mostly in the north, and 33,415 had died.

Scientists still don't know how the virus arrived in Vo.

Though struck at the same time, Veneto fared much better than Lombardy, which became the epicenter of both of Italy's surges. It has half the population and its industry is more spread out, but experts have also credited its health system, which enables close contact among family doctors, district administrators and hospital officials and which is less reliant on private facilities. Another key element in its virus fight was the testing system created by Crisanti.

Crisanti urged the government in Rome in August to expand its capacity for nasal swab tests in the hopes of keeping transmission low after a successful lockdown. While the government has, Crisanti is disappointed that it has relied heavily on rapid tests — as many other places have and as some experts have recommended — rather than strategically deploying more reliable nasal swabs to isolate outbreaks.

By October, Italy was battling a resurgence that has proved even deadlier than the spring peak, with the toll now at nearly 95,000. New clusters of a variant first found in Britain have led to localized lockdowns around the country, forcing the cancellation of one of the virus anniversary commemorations this

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weekend in Lombardy.

If the virus' arrival last February caught the country off-guard, the long-predicted fall resurgence was "madness," Crisanti said.

Vo, too, suffered a resurgence that is only now abating. The town's pandemic death toll doubled, to 6. Boasting an unusually high number of restaurants per capita at 45 eateries, Vo is now an echo of its former self. The weddings, baptisms and first communions that drew dwellers of nearby cities to the hillside town have been limited by restrictions. Restaurant closures also forced the Vo wine cooperative to reduce 2020 production. The local dance hall has never reopened.

Things might have been different, Martini believes.

"The virus in Vo arrived in Vo and died in Vo," the mayor said of the first cases a year ago. The failure to repeat the model: "Ruinous," he said.

Biden repudiates Trump on Iran, ready for talks on nuke deal

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration says it's ready to join talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the 2015 nuclear deal, in a sharp repudiation of former President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure campaign" that sought to isolate the Islamic Republic.

The administration also took two steps at the United Nations aimed at restoring policy to what it was before Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018. The combined actions were immediately criticized by Iran hawks and drew concern from Israel, which said it was committed to keeping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Besides signaling Thursday a willingness to talk with Iran, the administration also reversed Trump's determination that all U.N. sanctions against Iran had been restored. And, it eased stringent restrictions on the domestic travel of Iranian diplomats posted to the United Nations.

The State Department announced the moves following discussions between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his British, French and German counterparts and as Biden prepares to participate, albeit virtually, in his first major international events with world leaders.

The announcement came a day before Biden is to speak to leaders of the Group of Seven industrialized democracies and later in the day address the annual Munich Security Conference. At both Friday, Biden is expected to discuss his commitment to multilateral diplomacy and his desire to undo damage that Trump's positions may have caused over the previous four years. He's expected to address the U.S. stance on the 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear deal, the war in Afghanistan and the economic and national security challenges posed by Russia and China.

In a statement, State Department spokesman Ned Price said the U.S. would accept an invitation from the European Union to attend a meeting of the participants — the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany, along with Iran — in the original nuclear agreement.

"The United States would accept an invitation from the European Union High Representative to attend a meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran's nuclear program," he said. The U.S. has not participated in a meeting of those participants since Trump withdrew from the deal and began steadily ramping up sanctions on Iran.

Such an invitation has not yet been issued but one is expected shortly, following Blinken's talks with the British, French and German foreign ministers.

In Iran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Friday the Biden administration action meant that the U.S. had acknowledged moves made under Trump "had no legal validity."

"We agree," he added, urging the Biden administration to lift U.S. sanctions "imposed, reimposed or re-labeled by Trump. We will then immediately reverse all remedial measures."

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office expressed worry, saying it believes that "going back to the old agreement will pave Iran's path to a nuclear arsenal." It said in a statement on Friday that it remains "committed to preventing Iran from getting nuclear weapons" and was in close contact with

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the United States on the matter.

Meanwhile, at the United Nations, the Biden administration notified the Security Council that it had withdrawn Trump's September 2020 invocation of the so-called snapback mechanism under which it maintained that all U.N. sanctions against Iran had been reimposed. Those sanctions included a conventional arms embargo against Iran that had been set to expire.

Trump's determination had been vigorously disputed by nearly all other U.N. members and had left the U.S. isolated at the world body. Thus, the reversal is unlikely to have any immediate practical effect other than to bring the U.S. back into line with the position of the vast majority of U.N. members, including some of its closest allies.

Acting U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Mills sent a letter to the Security Council saying the United States "hereby withdraws" three letters from the Trump administration that culminated in its Sept. 19 announcement that the United States had re-imposed U.N. sanctions on Tehran due to its "significant non-performance" with its obligations.

Trump's move had been ignored by the rest of the Security Council and the world, and the overwhelming majority of members in the 15-nation council had called the action illegal because the U.S. was no longer a member of the nuclear deal.

At the same time, officials said the administration has eased extremely strict limits on the travel of Iranian diplomats accredited to the United Nations. The Trump administration had imposed the severe restrictions, which essentially confined them to their U.N. mission and the U.N. headquarters building in New York.

The top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, quickly denounced the steps. "It is concerning the Biden Administration is already making concessions in an apparent attempt to re-enter the flawed Iran deal," he said. "The Trump Administration created leverage for President Biden on Iran — we should not squander that progress."

Earlier Thursday, Blinken and his European counterparts had urged Iran to allow continued United Nations nuclear inspections and stop nuclear activities that have no credible civilian use. They warned that Iran's actions could threaten delicate efforts to bring the U.S. back into the 2015 deal and end sanctions damaging Iran's economy.

Iran is "playing with fire," said German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who took part in the talks Thursday in Paris with his British and French counterparts. Blinken had joined via videoconference.

Iran has said it will stop part of International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of its nuclear facilities next week if the West doesn't implement its own commitments under the 2015 deal. The accord has been unraveling since Trump pulled the U.S. out of the agreement.

Blinken reiterated that "if Iran comes back into strict compliance with its commitments ... the United States will do the same," according to a joint statement after Thursday's meeting that reflected closer trans-Atlantic positions on Iran since President Joe Biden took office.

The diplomats noted "the dangerous nature of a decision to limit IAEA access, and urge Iran to consider the consequences of such grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity."

They said Iran's decision to produce uranium enriched up to 20% and uranium metal has "no credible" civilian use.

The 2015 accord is aimed at preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Tehran denies it is seeking such an arsenal.

"We are the ones who have kept this agreement alive in recent years, and now it's about supporting the United States in taking the road back into the agreement," Maas told reporters in Paris.

"The measures that have been taken in Tehran and may be taken in the coming days are anything but helpful. They endanger the Americans' path back into this agreement. The more pressure that is exerted, the more politically difficult it will be to find a solution," he said.

Iran's threats are "very worrying," British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said, stressing the need "to re-engage diplomatically in order to restrain Iran, but also bring it back into compliance."

The diplomats also expressed concern about human rights violations in Iran and its ballistic missile

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program.

In Iran, President Hassan Rouhani expressed hope Thursday that the Biden administration will rejoin the accord and lift the U.S. sanctions that Washington re-imposed under Trump, according to state television.

Tehran has been using its violations of the nuclear deal to put pressure on the remaining signatories — France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China — to provide more incentives to Iran to offset the crippling sanctions.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the president of the European Council spoke with Rouhani this week to try to end the diplomatic standoff. The head of the IAEA is scheduled to travel to Iran this week-end to find a solution that allows the agency to continue inspections.

Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations, Geir Moulson in Berlin and Angela Charlton and Masha Macpherson in Paris contributed.

Africa reaches 100,000 known COVID-19 deaths as danger grows

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Africa has surpassed 100,000 confirmed deaths from COVID-19 as the continent praised for its early response to the pandemic now struggles with a dangerous resurgence and medical oxygen often runs desperately short.

"We are more vulnerable than we thought," the director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, John Nkengasong, told The Associated Press in an interview reflecting on the pandemic and a milestone he called "remarkably painful."

He worried that "we are beginning to normalize deaths," while health workers are overwhelmed.

The 54-nation continent of some 1.3 billion people has barely seen the arrival of large-scale supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, but a variant of the virus dominant in South Africa is already posing a challenge to vaccination efforts. Still, if doses are available, the continent should be able to vaccinate 35% to 40% of its population before the end of 2021 and 60% by the end of 2022, Nkengasong said.

In a significant development on Friday, an African Union-created task force said Russia has offered 300 million doses of the country's Sputnik V vaccine, to be available in May. The AU previously secured 270 million doses from AstraZeneca, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson.

Health officials who breathed a sigh of relief last year when African countries did not see a huge number of COVID-19 deaths are now reporting a jump in fatalities. The Africa CDC on Friday said overall deaths are at 100,294.

Deaths from COVID-19 increased by 40% in Africa in the past month compared to the previous month, the World Health Organization's Africa chief, Matshidiso Moeti, told reporters last week. That's more than 22,000 people dying in the past four weeks.

The increase is a "tragic warning that health workers and health systems in many countries in Africa are dangerously overstretched," she said, and preventing severe cases and hospitalizations is crucial.

But the latest trend shows a slowdown. In the week ending on Sunday, the continent saw a 28% decrease in deaths, the Africa CDC said Thursday.

Africa has reached 100,000 confirmed deaths shortly after marking a year since the first coronavirus infection was confirmed on the continent, in Egypt on Feb. 14, 2020.

But many more people across Africa have died of COVID-19, even though they are not included in the official toll.

South Africa, the hardest-hit country on the continent, saw over 125,000 excess deaths from natural causes between May 3 and Jan. 23. While it is not clear how many were from the virus, there was a "close correspondence of the time of the excess deaths with the increases in confirmed COVID-19 cases in each province," the South African Medical Research Council said.

Since most countries in Africa lack the means to track mortality data, it is not clear how many excess deaths have occurred across the continent since the pandemic began.

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"We are definitely not counting all the deaths, especially in the second wave," the Africa CDC's Nkengasong told reporters last week.

While the continent is not seeing a "massive" number of deaths, he asserted that most people in Africa now know someone who has died of COVID-19. "People are dying because of a lack of basic care," he said, citing medical oxygen as a critical need.

Twenty-one countries in Africa now have case fatality rates that are higher than the global average, Nkengasong said, including Sudan, Egypt, Liberia, Mali and Zimbabwe. The case fatality rate continent-wide remains higher than the global average at 2.6%.

"The second wave came with full might, partly because of this new variant (in South Africa), partly because we created superspreading opportunities" such as holiday parties, said Salim Abdool Karim, the top COVID-19 advisor to South Africa's government. "The virus adapts and gets better with time because it's mutating progressively to be better adapted."

In the unusual case of Tanzania, no one knows how many deaths, or even infections, have occurred since the country of some 60 million people stopped updating its number of cases in April.

But while populist President John Magufuli claims that COVID-19 has been defeated in Tanzania and questions the new vaccines without offering evidence, social media in recent days has seen a worrying increase in death notices by families saying loved ones died while struggling to breathe. Some had otherwise been healthy.

"He complained of fast-diminishing air in his respiratory system," one death notice in Dar es Salaam said this month.

Tanzania is now one of eight African countries with the more infectious variant of the virus that was first found in South Africa, according to the WHO, citing travelers from Tanzania who were discovered to have the variant overseas.

Nkengasong told the AP that Tanzania's influential first president Julius Nyerere, once declared that if Africa is not united, it's doomed.

"If we cannot exercise unity in this period of critical threat of COVID-19, then I don't know what else unity means for the continent," Nkengasong said.

Another place where COVID-19 deaths are going uncounted is Ethiopia's Tigray region, where a conflict between Ethiopian and Tigray forces has entered a fourth month and the health system has collapsed amid looting and artillery attacks. The United Nations has warned of "massive community transmission" of the virus.

Gerald Imray in Cape Town, South Africa, contributed.

Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>.

The lighter days of CNN's Cuomo Brothers show are long gone

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Some television shows age much better than others.

For CNN, last spring's prime-time banter between Chris Cuomo and his older brother, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, looks worse in hindsight as the governor's administration is questioned about its role in failing to disclose the true number of COVID-19 nursing home deaths.

CNN is covering that story, but not on Chris Cuomo's show. The network said it had reinstated a prohibition on Cuomo interviewing or doing stories about his brother that it had temporarily lifted last spring.

The brothers were both in the spotlight last March. Chris Cuomo caught COVID-19 and continued anchoring his show from his basement, while the governor dealt with New York's hellish days as the nation's early coronavirus epicenter. Andrew Cuomo's near-daily briefing was widely televised and, to some viewers, embraced as a counterpoint to those held by former President Donald Trump.

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Nine times between March 19 and June 24, 2020, the governor appeared on his brother's show. The trash-talking and brotherly love between the two Italians from Queens was fun if occasionally cheesy, like when Chris Cuomo mocked his brother's big nose with a giant cotton swab he said would be necessary to give him a COVID-19 test.

"I found these interviews to be very entertaining, and perhaps Chris could ask questions of his brother that other people can't," said Roy Gutterman, a media law professor at Syracuse University. "But from the very beginning, I thought it was wildly inappropriate.

"It's Journalism 101," he said. "We tell our students you shouldn't interview your family and friends."

The policy avoids a conflict of interest — can one brother really be expected to ask tough questions of another? — or at the very least the appearance of one.

Through a spokeswoman, CNN said that the early months of the pandemic were an extraordinary time.

"We felt that Chris speaking with his brother about the challenges of what millions of American families were struggling with was of significant human interest," CNN said. "As a result, we made an exception to a rule that we have had in place since 2013 which prevents Chris from interviewing his brother, and that rule remains in place today."

Largely bubbling below the radar for months, questions about Andrew Cuomo have come to the forefront in the past few weeks. New York's attorney general issued a report that said the administration minimized the number of nursing home residents who died of COVID-19 by excluding those who died elsewhere, usually a hospital.

This was significant because of a Cuomo administration directive in March that nursing homes should not deny admission or readmission to a patient because they had COVID-19. The policy was rescinded two months later.

Keeping the true number of nursing home residents who died hidden would theoretically deflect any blame for a bad policy choice. The governor has blamed staff entering nursing homes for spreading the virus to the vulnerable population, not patients brought in with COVID-19. He has said it would be discriminatory not to let those patients into nursing homes.

Last week, it was revealed that an Andrew Cuomo aide told New York legislators that the true picture of nursing home deaths wasn't revealed for fear it would be used against the governor during an investigation launched by Trump's Justice Department.

The last time the governor appeared on his brother's show, in June, Chris Cuomo asked him: "Nursing homes. People died there. They didn't have to. It was mismanaged. And the operators have been given immunity. What do you have to say about that?"

The governor replied that some of what his brother said was incorrect. "But that's OK," he said. "It's your show. You say whatever you want to say."

He went on to say that it was a tragic situation "and we have to figure out how to do it better next time."

CNN has covered the most recent developments several times outside of Chris Cuomo's show, including at least 24 times last week alone. Two notable instances were a thorough report by Brianna Keilar on Jan. 29 and Jake Tapper on "State of the Union" Sunday. Both anchors said they had asked Andrew Cuomo to appear on their show and been turned down — dozens of times, in Tapper's case.

The governor "made a bad decision that may have cost lives and then his administration hid that data from the public," Tapper said.

Although Chris Cuomo, following his network's policy, hasn't addressed the latest stories, the byplay with his brother did come up just before the election last October in a heated exchange on his show with Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh.

Murtaugh criticized Cuomo for asking "self-righteous questions" about whether the Trump administration took COVID-19 seriously, and referenced the giant swab.

"Does this look like a couple of guys who were taking it seriously?" he said. "You had your brother on for the Cuomo Brothers Comedy Hour."

"Yes, I did," Chris Cuomo replied. "It was funny as hell."

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Associated Press correspondent Marina Villeneuve in Albany, N.Y. and researcher Rhonda Shafner in New York contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: A trickier NCAA bracket in this unusual season

By STEVE MEGARGEE AP Sports Writer

There's no need to worry about geography in this year's NCAA Tournament.

Get ready for plenty of talk about the so-called "S curve" instead. And don't worry — it's not that complicated.

With the entire tournament taking place in or near Indianapolis, there is no reason for the four geographic regions that have been a part of past NCAA brackets. The NCAA doesn't have to ensure the best teams play closer to home.

The NCAA instead is trying to use the "S curve" in which a team's placement is more dependent on its strength than its location. The No. 1 overall seed ideally would have the No. 8 overall seed as the second-best team in its region, the top No. 2 seed in the same section with the No. 7 overall seed and the same approach for 3 vs. 6 and 4 vs. 5.

Whether that happens isn't a sure thing: Rules prevent conference rivals from facing off early in the tournament and the S curve — the NCAA helpfully put out a specific explanation of this term — often gets broken up.

"The likelihood of being able to be a perfect S curve is probably unlikely," said Kentucky athletic director Mitch Barnhart, who chairs the NCAA Division I men's basketball committee. "There's going to have to be modifications."

It is creating plenty of uncertainty for teams competing for bids — as well as the people filling out the bracket.

"This is just an unprecedented tournament, an unprecedented time," Wisconsin coach Greg Gard said. "Hopefully it's only a one-off and we're only going to have to do this and navigate this one time this way."

THOSE CONFERENCE MATCHUPS

Teams from the same conference can't meet before the regional final if they've already played each other at least three times in a season. If they've faced off twice, league foes can't meet until the regional semifinals.

Some of this is already being played out. For instance, when the committee revealed last week which schools would earn the top 16 seeds if the bracket were being announced that day, No. 4 overall seed Ohio State was included in a region with No. 14 seed Texas Tech, rather than No. 13 seed Iowa. Ohio State and Iowa already met once, are scheduled to face off again Feb. 28 and could battle each other a third time in the Big Ten Tournament.

No. 8 overall seed Houston was in a region with No. 3 overall seed Michigan rather than No. 1 overall seed Gonzaga. Plenty of other pairings also didn't quite match what a true S curve would have reflected.

LACK OF NONCONFERENCE GAMES

Division I teams played fewer than half as many nonconference games as usual this year. That makes it tougher than ever to compare the credentials of teams from various leagues.

It also could make it particularly challenging for teams from outside the major conferences to land large bids. Typically, contenders from those leagues build their resumes by beating schools from bigger leagues. Those schools didn't get nearly enough of those opportunities this year.

Barnhart said the biggest challenge is the fact that pandemic-related pauses have caused some teams to play fewer games than others through no fault of their own. There's also the dilemma of how to rate a team that might lose a game or two due to the rust factor after a long layoff.

"There is no hard-and-fast rule," Barnhart said. "I think the thing we've got to understand is, we're going to play the ball as it lies. The resumes are the resumes."

HOW LOW IS TOO LOW?

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Up to now, no team has ever earned an at-large bid with a worse record than the 16-14 mark that Villanova had in 1991 and Georgia had in 2001.

That could change this season, because the pandemic limited the number of so-called guarantee games that allow major conference teams to boost their records.

Jerry Palm, who forecasts the NCAA brackets for CBS Sports, said a team could make it this year while being only one or two games above .500 as a possibility. Joe Lunardi, who predicts the bracket for ESPN, believes even a team with a losing record could get an at-large bid.

Finding a team that fits that profile is tricky. Maryland (13-10) was an obvious candidate before the Terrapins won three straight games to pull above .500.

The highest-rated team with a losing record in the NET rankings is Penn State (7-10). The Nittany Lions dealt their NCAA hopes a severe blow by falling to Michigan State and Nebraska in their last two games. They lost to Ohio State 92-83 on Thursday night, but an upcoming matchup with Iowa - ranked 11th in the AP Top 25 - give them a chance to raise their stock.

MEASURING ROAD WINS

One dilemma facing the committee is how to determine the value of a road win during a pandemic, when teams are playing in front of no fans or much smaller crowds than usual.

"It diminishes the effect of the home-court advantage, so to speak," Barnhart said. "But I never want to lose sight of the fact the team has to test to get on the bus or play, they've got to travel, they've got to stay in a hotel, they're out of their element, they're playing in an area they aren't used to, all those things."

Through Sunday, home teams had won 65.9% of Division I games, not far off last season's pace of 68.4%.

Follow Steve Megargee at <https://twitter.com/stevemegargee>

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Doctors race to find, vaccinate vulnerable homebound people

By TOM MURPHY AP Health Writer

A group of health care workers hurried out of a Boston hospital on a recent weekday morning, clutching small red coolers filled with COVID-19 vaccines.

Their challenge: Beat traffic, a looming snowstorm and the clock. They had to get shots in the arms of their homebound patients before the vaccines expired in a few hours.

"That clock is in the back of my mind the whole time," said Dr. Won Lee, a home care specialist at Boston Medical Center.

Millions of U.S. residents will need COVID-19 vaccines brought to them because they rarely or never leave home. Doctors and nurses who specialize in home care are leading this push and starting to get help from state and local governments around the country.

But they face several challenges. Researchers say many homebound people don't receive regular medical care, which makes it hard to identify everyone who needs a vaccine.

Supplies also are limited, and both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines expire a few hours after syringes pull the vaccine from vials.

That makes it tough for one doctor to see many patients when they must also stay in someone's home for at least 15 minutes after the shot in case an allergic reaction develops.

"They don't live next door to each other," said Dr. David Moen of Prospero Health Partners, which delivers care to patients in several states. "It's challenging to go to multiple locations."

Even so, health care providers report progress. Lee figures she can deliver five or six doses during an average day. That will be her main focus the next several weeks.

One of her recent stops was at the second-floor apartment of a regular patient, 106-year-old Domingas Pina, who hasn't left home in about a year.

Lee sat with Pina at her dining room table, swabbed the patient's shoulder and then swiftly administered

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the shot as Pina looked away.

The patient then smiled beneath her surgical mask and flashed a thumbs up. Pina, who speaks mostly Portuguese Creole, will get her second dose of the vaccine next month, right around her 107th birthday.

"She misses all her grandchildren and her friends that used to come all the time," daughter Maria Lopes said. "We don't want to lose her."

After giving Pina the shot, Lee asked how she was doing and about her blood pressure medication. She then slipped off Pina's Darth Vader slippers to exam her feet.

Before long, the doctor had left for her next patient.

Lee's office sets up the appointments and explains the vaccine in advance. That helps the visit go smoothly, and Lee tries to see patients who live near each other to conserve time.

She also tells them she can't stay too long after the shots "because I have to make sure I get these vaccines to all the patients that need them today."

Dr. Karen Abrashkin hopes to take a similar approach. She will use mapping software to plan stops among clusters of patients who live near each other in the New York City area.

But the director of Northwell Health's House Calls program is still waiting for the vaccine.

"We get many questions each day about when we're going to have vaccines to give in the home," she said. "The supply just isn't there yet."

One of her patients, 103-year-old Ida Sobel, has no plans to leave her apartment building until she gets vaccinated.

While she waits, Sobel, who is legally blind and lives with a home health aide, has food delivered. She walks the hallway outside her front door for exercise and opens a window when she wants fresh air.

"I am in a very crowded area," the Floral Park, New York, resident said. "People are not conscious enough to avoid you and stay far away, so I avoid them."

Harvard Medical School professor Dr. Christine Ritchie estimates that about 2 million U.S. residents are homebound. Another 5 million have trouble leaving home or need help doing so. Many of them may need vaccines brought to them as well.

This population generally includes older people with lower-than-average income levels and serious medical problems like dementia, advanced heart conditions or arthritis.

Ritchie noted that homebound people draw less attention from public health officials than those who live in group settings like nursing homes, which are receiving vaccines from major drugstore chains.

Homebound people, Ritchie said, "tend to be sort of invisible to society."

On Staten Island, James De Silva has grown frustrated because he has no good vaccine options for his 96-year-old mother, but people much younger than her can get shots if they leave home. Mary Stella De Silva is mostly bedbound and receives around-the-clock home care.

That care doesn't include the vaccine, and De Silva will need to arrange an ambulance or special transportation to take her to an appointment, if he lands one.

"I think the homebound should be given a little bit more priority than someone who is just 65 and might not have an underlying illness," he said. "It's not being given the attention it deserves, frankly."

That appears to be changing. Fire departments around the country have started delivering vaccines.

In the Gulf Coast city of Corpus Christi, Texas, the fire department has used a list of Meals on Wheels recipients to deliver more than 2,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine since late January. Chief Robert Rocha said they've also set up a hotline for anyone who still needs a vaccination.

Last week, New York City Mayor Bill DeBlasio said his city would start sending medical personnel to the apartments of homebound people as soon as a one-shot vaccine made by Johnson & Johnson is available. Federal regulators may approve that vaccine in a few weeks.

Deliveries like that can't start soon enough for De Silva and his mother.

"If she was in a nursing home or a long-term care facility, she would have been vaccinated by now," he said. "She's really in the same situation, but she's at home."

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Associated Press video journalist Rodrique Ngowi contributed to this report.

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10 years after Christchurch quake, survivors share stories

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand (AP) — One woman channeled her anger to ensure buildings are safer. Others have found peace after heartbreaking losses. Ten years after an earthquake killed 185 people and devastated Christchurch, New Zealand, some of those profoundly affected are sharing their journeys.

'NOT THE STORY OF MY LIFE'

Ann Brower was taking a bus from the seaside suburb of Sumner into the central city when the magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck. Bricks rained down as a building facade collapsed, crushing the roof of the bus and killing all 12 others on board, as well as four more people nearby. Brower was in excruciating pain, pinned under the collapsed roof. The pressure kept building until her pelvis snapped and she passed out.

Originally from North Carolina, Brower, an associate professor of environmental science, had been shaken awake years earlier by the 1994 Los Angeles quake when she was living in Claremont, California. In Christchurch, she awoke on the bus, realizing she was trapped and alone.

"I thought, this is not an acceptable situation. This is not the story of my life," she said. "And so I did what any rational person would do, and I screamed at the top of my lungs."

A man with bright blue eyes appeared. Others came, digging through the rubble, pulling up the roof with their bare hands, talking to her about fishing, asking her about her hopes and dreams, anything to take her mind off what was happening.

Strangers took her in the back of a truck to a hospital, where she would stay for two months. After surgeries and rehabilitation, she was finally able to walk again without crutches.

Brower sometimes wonders why she survived when all those around her died. A visit from the Dalai Lama to her and a half-dozen other survivors four months after the quake helped her put things in perspective.

"You all have something to give," Brower recalls the Dalai Lama saying. "You just need to let go of the shoulda-woulda-coulda, and figure out what that something is."

In Brower's case, part of the answer lay in making buildings safer. She was furious to learn the city council had inspected the building after a previous earthquake five months earlier and found the facade was unsafe, but hadn't enforced a fix.

"Anger can be constructive," Brower said. "When Parliament started thinking about changing the Building Act, I said, 'Right. OK. This is something that I can participate in. I have a few things to say about this.'"

Brower also remains concerned after touring the U.S. that cities from Seattle to Charleston, South Carolina, face similar problems with their older buildings, which can lend character to cities but also danger.

In New Zealand, Brower wanted older buildings to be covered by building codes and for regulators to prioritize fixing those parts that would fall off first in a quake, like parapets and unreinforced masonry. But she ran into resistance. She wrote opinion pieces, did radio and TV interviews but it seemed lawmakers wouldn't budge.

She finally got a five-minute meeting with the minister in charge at the time, Nick Smith, and he ended up agreeing a higher priority was needed for unsafe facades. In what lawmakers called the "Brower Amendment," New Zealand cut in half the time owners had to get dangerous buildings fixed. Smith called Brower a true New Zealand hero.

"I didn't get everything I wanted, but I got pretty close," Brower said. "And you've got to celebrate that."

A KINDER CITY

After the earthquake, Prue Taylor wasn't unduly worried at first when she didn't hear from her husband

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Brian. She knew he had a lunchtime meeting in town and loved to linger and chat. She thought he would be busy helping people after the quake.

But it turned out Brian had left the meeting promptly that day to see off a group of Japanese students at the CTV building where he worked as director of the English language school King's Education. The building collapsed, killing 115 people, including Brian.

When Prue Taylor arrived at the building it was a surreal sight, a huge pile of rubble with smoke rising and an elevator shaft still standing. She stayed there with her son Hamish for hours as rescuers searched for survivors.

"It was hard to leave the place, not having found him or knowing whether he was alive or dead or anything about him," Taylor said.

Brian and Prue met as undergraduates and had been married more than 40 years. Prue was principal of Christchurch Girls' High School but she and Brian had been talking about retiring, about traveling more.

After Brian died, Prue focused on work.

"I keep thinking, what would Brian have done if it was me who died?" Taylor said. "And I think we both would have felt the same, that there were things we could do with our communities. In my case, my school community."

Taylor remains angry about the construction of the CTV building, after an investigation found its design was fundamentally flawed and should never have been approved.

"Cheap and shoddy really is the way to describe it," she says.

She unexpectedly lost a grandson a year after the quake, which caused the family additional grief.

"You just start to think, this is life," she said. "It made me more aware of what people have in their lives, the tragedies that people endure."

She says the sense of communal mourning in Christchurch after the quake helped her get through. People became kinder and friendlier to one another, she says, greeting neighbors they'd never met, bringing over baking, empathizing over those they had lost.

THE LONG JOURNEY OF GRIEF

Jonathan Manning had been keeping vigil near the collapsed CTV building with his children Kent, who was 15 at the time, and Liz, 18, when a police officer told them she had horrible news.

Until then, the kids had held out hope that Donna Manning was somehow still alive: "My mum is super-woman," Liz had told a reporter moments earlier. But the officer told them there was no more hope of finding survivors.

"That's the moment when it really sunk in for all three of us," said Jonathan Manning. "The kids fell apart. I did, too."

Jonathan and Donna, a television presenter and producer, had separated nine years earlier. Now Jonathan felt the responsibility of helping guide his children through their grief. He wished he could shield them from it but knew he couldn't.

He rented a place so they could all live together, something Liz initially opposed but eventually accepted. He said the next two years were tough, as Kent finished high school and Liz ventured into paid work.

"They very much struggled in a fog, in a malaise," Manning said. "And then over time, slowly, things just began to move forward and pick up. Grief is a very personal journey, a long journey, and recovery takes time."

Manning, who works with bequests at the Salvation Army, said he's incredibly proud of the adults his children have become. Liz is now living in Western Australia, studying to be a counselor, and engaged to be married. Kent is an apprentice joiner in Christchurch and has just bought his first home with his partner.

Manning says he's grateful to his family and friends, and Donna's siblings, who have helped them since the quake, and to people from around the world who contributed to a trust fund which helped the kids get started in their adult lives.

"I think their grief never leaves them, but their life gets bigger around it," Manning said. "They still miss

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their mother.”

He thinks his children have become more empathetic since the tragedy. Each anniversary brings up emotions, he says, but these days they are all feeling more at peace.

‘Obviously a mistake’: Cruz returns from Cancun after uproar

By STEVE PEOPLES and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said his family vacation to Mexico was “obviously a mistake” as he returned stateside Thursday following an uproar over his disappearance during a deadly winter storm.

The Republican senator said he began second-guessing the trip since the moment he first got on the plane Wednesday. “In hindsight, I wouldn’t have done it,” he told reporters.

The Associated Press and other media outlets reported that he had traveled out of the country with his family as hundreds of thousands of Texans were still grappling with the fallout of a winter storm that crippled the state’s power grid. The trip drew criticism from leaders in both parties and was seen as potentially damaging to his future political ambitions.

Cruz said in an earlier statement Thursday that he accompanied his family to Cancun a day earlier after his daughters asked to go on a trip with friends, given that school was canceled for the week.

“Wanting to be a good dad, I flew down with them last night and am flying back this afternoon,” Cruz wrote.

“My staff and I are in constant communication with state and local leaders to get to the bottom of what happened in Texas,” he continued. “We want our power back, our water on, and our homes warm.”

Cruz told reporters Thursday night that he returned to the U.S. because he realized he needed to be in Texas. He said he had originally been scheduled to stay in Mexico through the weekend.

“I didn’t want all the screaming and yelling about this trip to distract even one moment from the real issues that I think Texans care about, which is keeping all of our families safe,” Cruz said.

“It was obviously a mistake, and in hindsight, I wouldn’t have done it,” he said.

The fierce political backlash comes as Cruz eyes a second presidential run in 2024. He was already one of the most villainized Republicans in Congress, having created adversaries across the political spectrum in a career defined by far-right policies and fights with the establishment.

More recently, he emerged as a leader in former President Donald Trump’s push to overturn the results of the November election. Billboards calling for his resignation stood along Texas highways earlier in the month.

Even the state Republican Party chair declined to come to Cruz’s defense on Thursday.

“That’s something that he has to answer to his constituents about,” Texas GOP Chair Allen West said when asked whether Cruz’s travel was appropriate while Texans are without power and water.

“I’m here trying to take care of my family and look after my friends and others that are still without power,” West said. “That’s my focus.”

Hundreds of thousands of people in Texas woke up Thursday to a fourth day without power, and a water crisis was unfolding after winter storms wreaked havoc on the state’s power grid and utilities.

Texas officials ordered 7 million people — one-quarter of the population of the nation’s second-largest state — to boil tap water before drinking the water, after days of record low temperatures that damaged infrastructure and froze pipes.

In Austin, some hospitals faced a loss in water pressure and, in some cases, heat.

News of Cruz’s absence quickly rippled across the state.

Livia Trevino, a 24-year-old whose Austin home was still without water Thursday, said she felt abandoned by government leaders.

“They are taking vacations and leaving the country, so they don’t have to deal with this, and we are freezing to death. We don’t have water and we don’t have food,” she said.

In his statement, Cruz said that his family had lost heat and power as well.

“This has been an infuriating week for Texans,” he said.

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While the situation will not help Cruz's political future, the two-term senator is not in any immediate political danger. His current term expires in early 2025, and the unofficial beginning of the next Republican presidential primary election is two years away.

Still, Democrats across Washington were eager to talk about the controversy.

One of Cruz's most aggressive critics on the left, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, encouraged her supporters on Thursday to volunteer for a "welfare check phone bank" to help Texans affected by the storm.

"So many elected leaders in Texas have failed their constituents," the New York Democrat wrote in an email. "Instead of focusing on relief, they've chosen to go on Fox News to spread lies or to board a plane to Cancun."

Earlier in the day, White House press secretary Jen Psaki leaned into a question about Cruz's "whereabouts."

"I don't have any updates on the exact location of Sen. Ted Cruz nor does anyone at the White House," Psaki said, adding that President Joe Biden's administration is focused on "working directly with leadership in Texas and surrounding states on addressing the winter storm and the crisis at hand."

Cruz's office declined to answer specific questions about the family vacation, but his staff reached out to the Houston Police Department on Wednesday afternoon to say the senator would be arriving at the airport, according to department spokesperson Jodi Silva. She said officers "monitored his movements" while Cruz was at the airport.

Silva could not say whether such requests are typical for Cruz's travel or whether his staff had made a similar request for his return flight.

U.S. Capitol Police officials and the Senate sergeant-at-arms have encouraged lawmakers and their staff to be conscious of potential threats and to consider advising law enforcement about their travel at airports and other transportation hubs.

Cruz's office did not immediately say whether the senator would self-quarantine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises people who have traveled during the pandemic to get a coronavirus test three to five days after their return and to quarantine for a full week, regardless of the test results.

Cruz checked in for his return flight Thursday afternoon in Cancun and walked briskly through the terminal pulling a roller bag to security. He wore a golf shirt, jeans and a face mask in the style of the Texas state flag.

The senator was accompanied by a Spanish-speaking man wearing a black polo shirt with the name and logo of The Ritz-Carlton hotel chain.

Cruz told reporters that he planned to "go home and keep working to get the grid reopened, to get power restored, to get the water back on."

"A lot of Texans are hurting and this crisis is frustrating. It's frustrating for millions of Texans. It shouldn't happen," he said.

Peoples reported from New York. Associated Press writers Dan Christian Rojas in Cancun, Mexico, Darlene Superville in Washington and Acacia Coronado in Austin, Texas, contributed to this report.

Texas crisis has governor facing big backer: energy industry

By PAUL J. WEBER and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — As frozen Texas reels under one of the worst electricity outages in U.S. history, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has blamed grid operators and iced-over wind turbines but gone easier on another culprit: an oil and gas industry that is the state's dominant business and his biggest political contributor.

And as the toll deepened Thursday from a week of historic winter storms, which have killed more than 20 people in Texas, the dogpiling on a power grid that is proudly isolated from the rest of the country ignores warnings known by the state's GOP leaders for years.

"It's almost like a murder suspect blaming their right hand for committing the crime," said Democratic

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state Rep. James Talarico. His suburban Austin home lost power for 40 hours and had no working faucets Thursday, when roughly 1 in 4 people in Texas woke up under instructions to boil water.

Like most of the state's 30 million residents, Talarico's power is controlled by grid managers at the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, which Abbott again laid into Thursday after more than 4 million people at one point were enduring outages in subfreezing temperatures.

But that is not where the responsibility ends, as power plants that feed the grid were knocked offline by the extreme cold, and natural gas producers didn't protect wellheads from freezing. "ERCOT is a convenient whipping boy," Talarico said.

The crisis has put the fossil fuel industry that lavishes the Texas Capitol with money in the crosshairs in ways that Abbott has not had to navigate when steering America's second-largest state through other disasters, including hurricanes and the ongoing pandemic. For the first time Thursday, Abbott called on Texas to mandate that power plants be winterized.

Oil and gas built and enriched Texas, and with that its politicians, including those who became president. But none has reaped campaign contributions on the scale of Abbott, who in six years in office has raised more than \$150 million from donors, more than any governor in U.S. history.

Texas' energy interests are the biggest backers of his political rise, and he has not ruled out a White House run in 2024. More than \$26 million of his contributions have come from the oil and gas industry, more than any other economic sector, according to an analysis by the National Institute on Money in Politics.

As Texas' grid first began buckling early Monday, Abbott drew overnight backlash after going on Fox News and laying fault on solar and wind producers, at a time when natural gas, coal and nuclear energy systems were responsible for nearly twice as many outages.

Pressed on those comments later, Abbott took a softer tone and acknowledged every source of power had been compromised. But he accused ERCOT of misleading the public with messages that the grid was ready for the storm.

"It's especially unacceptable when you realize what ERCOT told the state of Texas," Abbott said.

ERCOT is overseen by the Texas Public Utility Commission, whose three members are appointed by Abbott. While ERCOT manages most of Texas' power grid, the commission and the Texas Legislature make key policy decisions that have factored into the ongoing crisis.

After the state's last major freeze, during the 2011 Super Bowl held in Arlington, Texas, a federal analysis found that energy producers' procedures for winterizing their equipment "were either inadequate or were not adequately followed" in many cases. The report repeatedly cites another Texas freeze, in 1989, as a clear warning.

Girding power generators against fierce winter weather is essential in colder climates. In Iowa, where wind farms supply 40% of the state's electricity, windmills have been turning all week despite temperatures that dropped to minus 17 degrees in Des Moines. In Texas, grid officials say they can't speak for why power generators here don't do the same.

A decade ago, the report on the last Texas failure lists a number of ways to winterize an oil well or a natural gas device and the estimated costs: installing a cold-weather production unit (\$23,000), collecting gas vented from an injection pump to supply a heater (\$675), or building a fiberglass hut to enclose the production equipment (\$1,500).

Winterizing 50,000 wells — just under a third of the number of total natural gas wells active in Texas — was estimated in 2011 to cost as much as \$1.75 billion, a figure that would almost certainly be higher today due to inflation. By comparison, the Texas oil and natural gas industry paid \$13.9 billion in taxes and royalties last year alone, according to figures from the Texas Oil & Gas Association.

Republican Ryan Sitton, the former commissioner of the peculiarly named Texas Railroad Commission that regulates the state's oil and gas industry, said an issue with bolstering power plants is the cost passed on to electric customers. Of Abbott's focus on ERCOT, Sitton said, "Calling for an investigation is easy. Actually performing a good investigation and taking ownership of the results is where the rubber meets the road."

He said oil and gas interests, which generously funded his own political campaigns, don't hold the sway

the public imagines.

"They make donations, sure. But unless the entire energy industry is speaking with a unified voice, which almost never happens, there's not that much influence," Sitton said.

Merchant reported from Houston. Associated Press writer Scott McFetridge in Des Moines, Iowa, contributed to this report.

Democrats consider piecemeal approach to immigration reform

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — After decades of failed attempts to pass comprehensive immigration legislation, congressional Democrats and President Joe Biden are signaling openness to a piece-by-piece approach.

They unveiled a broad bill Thursday that would provide an eight-year pathway to citizenship for 11 million people living in the country without legal status. There are other provisions, too, but the Democrats are not talking all-or-nothing.

"Even though I support full, comprehensive immigration reform, I'm ready to move on piecemeal, because I don't want to end up with good intentions on my hands and not have anything," said Texas Rep. Henry Cuellar. "I'd rather have progress."

The pragmatic approach is a clear recognition of the past failures to deliver on a large-scale immigration overhaul — and how success could be even more difficult in a highly polarized, closely divided Congress.

The Democrats' legislation reflects the broad priorities for immigration changes that Biden laid out on his first day in office, including an increase in visas, more money to process asylum applications, new technology at the southern border and funding for economic development in Latin American countries.

But advocates for expansive immigration say they could pursue smaller bills focused on citizenship for groups such as young immigrants brought to the U.S. by their parents as children, for agricultural workers and other essential labor.

"I know what it's like to lose on big bills and small bills. The fear that people have experienced in the last four years deserves every single opportunity, every single bill to remedy," said Greisa Martinez Rosas, executive director for United We Dream, an immigration advocacy group.

"The biggest thing here is that we're going to get something across the finish line, because not doing so is not an option."

The broad legislation — which includes a pathway to citizenship, but not much in the way of the enhanced border security that's typically offered to win Republican votes — faces long odds with Democrats holding only a slender majority in Congress.

Even before the new bill was unveiled, Democrats were reining in expectations for their final result. Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Dick Durbin has said that any final Senate bill likely "will not reach the same levels" as Biden's proposal.

Indeed, comprehensive bills negotiated by bipartisan teams of lawmakers failed multiple times during Republican George W. Bush's administration and again in 2013 during Democrat Barack Obama's.

Republican Donald Trump signed legislation that increased border security, and took executive action to restrict legal immigration to the U.S. and remove some protections for immigrants living in the country set by Obama. Biden has signed a number of executive orders rolling back some of the Trump restrictions, but he promised throughout his campaign and transition that immigration overhaul would be a top priority.

The White House insisted Thursday there have been no decisions on strategy. But multiple immigration organizations said administration officials had signaled in recent conversations that they were open to a multilevel approach in which lawmakers would press forward on the comprehensive bill while also pursuing individual pieces.

Cuellar, who was in office for most of those early, failed attempts, said many in the Congressional Hispanic Caucus are still committed to a comprehensive overhaul. He said the White House reached out to him and

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he advised them to start with a broad bill, but he added that "reality is going to hit people, hopefully," and more lawmakers will get on board with a more incremental approach.

Indeed, Biden himself suggested in a CNN town hall Tuesday night that "there's things I would deal by myself." One of the lead sponsors of the bill, New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez, seemed to suggest Thursday he was open to a less expansive approach.

"If we can get certain elements of this standing up and passed individually both in the House and the Senate, that's great," he said.

Tom Jawetz, vice president for immigration policy at the Center for American Progress, said that Biden's decades of experience in the Senate have given him a realistic view of what's possible.

"He also knows how to count votes, and he knows what it takes to get legislation across the line," he said. "And so I think there is real energy behind pressing forward on all fronts and seeing what shakes out."

Democrats have a third option: using a parliamentary maneuver to attach some immigration items to a budget bill, which would then require just 51 votes to pass. Advocates have been pressing the new administration to consider attaching a pathway to citizenship for some to an economic stimulus package that they're expected to introduce after they've passed the COVID-19 bill. That approach would almost certainly face a strong procedural challenge.

"The ultimate goal is to make sure that 2022 doesn't come around, and we have done nothing on immigration for another Congress," said Jawetz.

Democrats have expressed optimism that this time will be different not just because of the shift in strategy, but also because they say the politics of the issue have changed. They point to support from business groups for reform, and they note that Latinos are not a monolithic Democratic voting bloc, given that Trump improved his showing with Latino voters in the 2020 election.

Martinez Rosas said that if Congress fails to take action on reform, it will "absolutely" be a problem for Democrats in elections in 2022 and beyond.

"This will be the fight, the defining fight," she said. "The difference between now and in 2013, is that the progressive movement is unified around the acknowledgment that immigration is a must-fix issue."

AP writer Alan Fram contributed reporting.

Biden repudiates Trump on Iran, ready for talks on nuke deal

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration said Thursday it's ready to join talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the 2015 nuclear deal, in a sharp repudiation of former President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure campaign" that sought to isolate the Islamic Republic.

The administration also took two steps at the United Nations aimed at restoring policy to what it was before Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018. The combined actions were immediately criticized by Iran hawks and are likely to draw concern from Israel and Gulf Arab states.

In addition to signaling a willingness to talk with Iran, the administration also reversed Trump's determination that all U.N. sanctions against Iran had been restored. And, it eased stringent restrictions on the domestic travel of Iranian diplomats posted to the United Nations.

The State Department announced the moves following discussions between Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his British, French and German counterparts, and as Biden prepares to participate, albeit virtually, in his first major international events with world leaders.

The announcement came a day before Biden is to speak to leaders of the Group of Seven industrialized democracies and later in the day address the annual Munich Security Conference. At both, Biden is expected to discuss his commitment to multilateral diplomacy and his desire to undo damage that Trump's positions may have caused over the previous four years.

In a statement, State Department spokesman Ned Price said the U.S. would accept an invitation from

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the European Union to attend a meeting of the participants — the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany, along with Iran — in the original nuclear agreement.

“The United States would accept an invitation from the European Union High Representative to attend a meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran’s nuclear program,” he said. The U.S. has not participated in a meeting of those participants since Trump withdrew from the deal and began steadily ramping up sanctions on Iran.

Such an invitation has not yet been issued but one is expected shortly, following Blinken’s talks with the British, French and German foreign ministers.

Meanwhile, at the United Nations, the administration notified the Security Council that it had withdrawn Trump’s September 2020 invocation of the so-called “snapback” mechanism under which it maintained that all U.N sanctions against Iran had been re-imposed. Those sanctions included a conventional arms embargo against Iran that had been set to expire.

Trump’s determination had been vigorously disputed by nearly all other U.N. members and had left the U.S. isolated at the world body. Thus, the reversal is unlikely to have any immediate practical effect other than to bring the U.S. back into line with the position of the vast majority of U.N. members, including some of its closest allies.

Acting U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Mills sent a letter to the Security Council saying the United States “hereby withdraws” three letters from the Trump administration that culminated in its Sept. 19 announcement that the United States had re-imposed U.N. sanctions on Tehran due to its “significant non-performance” with its obligations.

Trump’s move had been ignored by the rest of the Security Council and the world, and the overwhelming majority of members in the 15-nation council had called the action illegal because the U.S. was no longer a member of the nuclear deal.

At the same time, officials said the administration has eased extremely strict limits on the travel of Iranian diplomats accredited to the United Nations. The Trump administration had imposed the severe restrictions, which essentially confined them to their U.N. mission and the U.N. headquarters building in New York.

The top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, quickly denounced the steps. “It is concerning the Biden Administration is already making concessions in an apparent attempt to re-enter the flawed Iran deal,” he said. “The Trump Administration created leverage for President Biden on Iran — we should not squander that progress.”

Earlier Thursday, Blinken and his European counterparts had urged Iran to allow continued United Nations nuclear inspections and stop nuclear activities that have no credible civilian use. They warned that Iran’s actions could threaten delicate efforts to bring the U.S. back into the 2015 deal and end sanctions damaging Iran’s economy.

Iran is “playing with fire,” said German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who took part in the talks Thursday in Paris with his British and French counterparts. Blinken had joined via videoconference.

Iran has said it will stop part of International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of its nuclear facilities next week if the West doesn’t implement its own commitments under the 2015 deal. The accord has been unraveling since Trump pulled the U.S. out of the agreement.

Blinken reiterated that “if Iran comes back into strict compliance with its commitments ... the United States will do the same,” according to a joint statement after Thursday’s meeting that reflected closer trans-Atlantic positions on Iran since President Joe Biden took office.

The diplomats noted “the dangerous nature of a decision to limit IAEA access, and urge Iran to consider the consequences of such grave action, particularly at this time of renewed diplomatic opportunity.”

They said Iran’s decision to produce uranium enriched up to 20% and uranium metal has “no credible” civilian use.

The 2015 accord is aimed at preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Tehran denies it is seeking such an arsenal.

“We are the ones who have kept this agreement alive in recent years, and now it’s about supporting the

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United States in taking the road back into the agreement," Maas told reporters in Paris.

"The measures that have been taken in Tehran and may be taken in the coming days are anything but helpful. They endanger the Americans' path back into this agreement. The more pressure that is exerted, the more politically difficult it will be to find a solution," he said.

Iran's threats are "very worrying," British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said, stressing the need "to re-engage diplomatically in order to restrain Iran, but also bring it back into compliance."

The diplomats also expressed concern about human rights violations in Iran and its ballistic missile program.

In Iran, President Hassan Rouhani expressed hope Thursday that the Biden administration will rejoin the accord and lift the U.S. sanctions that Washington re-imposed under Trump, according to state television.

Tehran has been using its violations of the nuclear deal to put pressure on the remaining signatories — France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China — to provide more incentives to Iran to offset the crippling sanctions.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the president of the European Council spoke with Rouhani this week to try to end the diplomatic standoff. The head of the IAEA is scheduled to travel to Iran this week-end to find a solution that allows the agency to continue inspections.

Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations, Geir Moulson in Berlin and Angela Charlton and Masha Macpherson in Paris contributed.

NASA rover lands on Mars to look for signs of ancient life

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A NASA rover streaked through the orange Martian sky and landed on the planet Thursday, accomplishing the riskiest step yet in an epic quest to bring back rocks that could answer whether life ever existed on Mars.

Ground controllers at the space agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, leaped to their feet, thrust their arms in the air and cheered in both triumph and relief on receiving confirmation that the six-wheeled Perseverance had touched down on the red planet, long a deathtrap for incoming spacecraft.

"Now the amazing science starts," a jubilant Thomas Zurbuchen, NASA's science mission chief, said at a news conference, where he theatrically ripped up the contingency plan in the event of a failure and threw the document over his shoulders.

The landing marks the third visit to Mars in just over a week. Two spacecraft from the United Arab Emirates and China swung into orbit around Mars on successive days last week. All three missions lifted off in July to take advantage of the close alignment of Earth and Mars, journeying some 300 million miles in nearly seven months.

Perseverance, the biggest, most advanced rover ever sent by NASA, became the ninth spacecraft since the 1970s to successfully land on Mars, every one of them from the U.S.

The car-size, plutonium-powered vehicle arrived at Jezero Crater, hitting NASA's smallest and trickiest target yet: a 5-by-4-mile strip on an ancient river delta full of pits, cliffs and rocks. Scientists believe that if life ever flourished on Mars, it would have happened 3 billion to 4 billion years ago, when water still flowed on the planet.

Over the next two years, Percy, as it is nicknamed, will use its 7-foot (2-meter) arm to drill down and collect rock samples containing possible signs of bygone microscopic life. Three to four dozen chalk-size samples will be sealed in tubes and set aside to be retrieved eventually by another rover and brought homeward by another rocket ship.

The goal is to get them back to Earth as early as 2031.

Scientists hope to answer one of the central questions of theology, philosophy and space exploration.

"Are we alone in this sort of vast cosmic desert, just flying through space, or is life much more com-

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mon? Does it just emerge whenever and wherever the conditions are ripe?" said deputy project scientist Ken Williford. "We're really on the verge of being able to potentially answer these enormous questions."

China's spacecraft includes a smaller rover that will also seek evidence of life, if it makes it safely down from orbit in May or June. Two older NASA landers are still humming along on Mars: 2012's Curiosity rover and 2018's InSight.

Perseverance was on its own during its descent, a maneuver often described by NASA as "seven minutes of terror."

Flight controllers waited helplessly as the preprogrammed spacecraft hit the thin Martian atmosphere at 12,100 mph (19,500 kph), or 16 times the speed of sound, slowing as it plummeted. It released its 70-foot (21-meter) parachute and then used a rocket-steered platform known as a sky crane to lower the rover the final 60 or so feet (18 meters) to the surface.

It took a nail-biting 11 1/2 minutes for the signal confirming the landing to reach Earth, setting off back-slapping and fist-bumping among flight controllers wearing masks against the coronavirus.

Perseverance promptly sent back two grainy, black-and-white photos of Mars' pockmarked, pimply-looking surface, the rover's shadow visible in the frame of one picture.

"Take that, Jezero!" a controller called out.

NASA said that the descent was flawless and that the rover came down in a "parking lot" — a relatively flat spot amid hazardous rocks. Hours after the landing, Matt Wallace, NASA deputy project manager, reported that the spacecraft was in great shape.

Mars has proved a treacherous place for the world's spacefaring nations, the U.S. included. In the span of less than three months in 1999, a U.S. spacecraft was destroyed upon entering orbit because engineers had mixed up metric and English units, and an American lander crashed on the surface after its engines cut out prematurely.

President Joe Biden tweeted congratulations over the landing, saying: "Today proved once again that with the power of science and American ingenuity, nothing is beyond the realm of possibility."

NASA is teaming up with the European Space Agency to bring the rocks home. Perseverance's mission alone costs nearly \$3 billion.

The only way to confirm — or rule out — signs of past life is to analyze the samples in the world's best labs. Instruments small enough to be sent to Mars wouldn't have the necessary precision.

"It's really the most extraordinary, mind-boggingly complicated and will-be history-making exploration campaign," said David Parker, the European agency's director of human and robotic exploration.

Former astronaut and one-time NASA science chief John Grunsfeld tweeted that Perseverance's landing was "exactly the good news and inspiration we need right now."

"Reminds us all that we will persevere COVID and political turmoil and that the best is yet to come," he said.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

'Mercenary' donor gets 12 years in campaign finance scheme

By BRIAN MELLEY, ALAN SUDERMAN and JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A once high-flying political fundraiser who prosecutors said gave illegal campaign contributions to Joe Biden, Lindsey Graham and a host of other U.S. politicians was sentenced Thursday to 12 years behind bars.

Imaad Zuberi, who was accused of ingratiating himself with politicians in both major parties and peddling the resulting influence to foreign governments, pleaded guilty to charges of tax evasion, campaign finance violations and failing to register as a foreign agent.

He also was ordered to pay nearly \$16 million in restitution and a nearly \$2 million fine. Federal pros-

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ecutors described Zuberi, who reports to prison May 25, as a "mercenary" political donor who gave to anyone he thought could help him. Pay to play, he explained to clients, was just "how America work(s)."

Prosecutors asked U.S. District Judge Virginia Phillips for a stiff sentence, calling the scope of Zuberi's scheme unprecedented. The Los Angeles businessman's crimes included unregistered lobbying for governments with spotty human rights records like Sri Lanka and Turkey as well as a Ukrainian oligarch close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, prosecutors said.

Phillips noted the sophistication of Zuberi's straw donor scheme and also spoke of the role such campaign finance investigations play in preserving the integrity of American elections.

The sentence comes after former President Donald Trump recently pardoned others who had been convicted or pleaded guilty to similar foreign-influence-related crimes, including his former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, and Elliott Broidy, a major Trump fundraiser.

Zuberi's hefty sentence "sent a loud message that we have to stop such conduct to restore the public faith in our institutions," Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel J. O'Brien told The Associated Press.

"This case shows that foreign influence extends well beyond what has been frequently discussed in public discourse," he added.

Zuberi, 50, maintained that his wrongdoing had been limited and asked to be credited for years of cooperation with federal and local law enforcement. His attorneys noted he already has paid more than \$10 million in restitution.

"I'm deeply sorry and, of course, humiliated," Zuberi told the judge. "I have no excuse for what I've done."

Some of Zuberi's cooperation remains under seal. Phillips, citing national security interests, closed the courtroom for part of Thursday's proceedings to discuss classified information Zuberi filed in an effort to reduce his sentence. Zuberi's attorneys asked Phillips to credit him for a list of law enforcement leads and intelligence he provided to the federal government, according to people familiar with the court filings.

Zuberi, a Pakistani-American who has extensive business dealings overseas, was in frequent contact with a CIA officer over the years and bragged to associates of his ties to the intelligence community, the AP reported last year.

The sentencing came just days after hundreds of pages of previously sealed court filings in the case were made public at the behest of the AP and other media organizations.

The trove of court documents offered new details about how prosecutors unraveled Zuberi's scheme and also include photographs of him rubbing shoulders with then-Vice President Biden and other prominent officeholders.

Zuberi had been planning to assist federal authorities in a corruption investigation of an unnamed mayor in California, his attorneys wrote in a newly unsealed memo. He was even "preparing at an FBI office for a recorded conversation" when that effort was called off after news broke that federal prosecutors in New York were investigating the \$900,000 contribution Zuberi made to Trump's inaugural committee, the records say. Zuberi has admitted obstructing that federal investigation.

Portions of the newly unsealed documents were redacted, in part, because of ongoing criminal investigations. Prosecutors revealed last year that there is an investigation into Zuberi's ties to Qatar. Zuberi secretly lobbied the Trump White House and Congress on behalf of the small gas-rich monarchy, which has paid him \$9.8 million, prosecutors have alleged in court papers.

The documents also demonstrate how Zuberi built a widespread network of contacts, thanks in part to his prodigious political giving. That included six-figure donations to the Obama-Biden ticket in 2012 and Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign in 2016.

No one who accepted tainted money from Zuberi has been accused of wrongdoing, and Biden, through a spokesman, has said he had no knowledge of Zuberi's illegal acts when they met, mostly at donor roundtables when Biden was vice president.

The new records show that Zuberi donated to or hired several Washington advocacy groups, lobbying shops and public relations firms. He also had well-connected people on his payroll for various business projects, including former NATO supreme commander Gen. Wesley Clark.

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Emails obtained by the AP show Zuberi sought Clark's help for work related to a company owned by Dmitry Firtash, a Putin-friendly oligarch fighting extradition to the United States on federal bribery and racketeering charges. Prosecutors say Zuberi made \$1 million doing unregistered lobbying work for Firtash. Zuberi has said the money was for legitimate business transactions.

Clark did not respond to requests for comment.

The AP previously reported that Zuberi used a straw donor scheme in which he paid for others' donations with his credit cards and used cutouts that included a dead person and names of people prosecutors say he made up. The AP's investigation found several instances where Zuberi-linked donations to members of Congress occurred within a few weeks or even days of him receiving something he sought in return.

For example, Zuberi gave \$5,200 to U.S. Rep. Tony Cardenas around the time his office sent an official letter in late 2013 to the National Archives expressing support for a Zuberi associate seeking to do business there, according to emails obtained by the AP.

"This is why you are getting the letter," Zuberi wrote to his associate. "Just want to make sure you realize it."

Cardenas, a California Democrat, declined to comment.

Suderman reported from Richmond, Virginia, and Mustian from New York.

Texas prices for lodging, necessities skyrocket amid storm

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

Hotel rooms for \$1,000 a night. Gasoline prices spiking. Even bottled water prices doubling or tripling overnight.

Officials in Texas say the winter storm that knocked out power and water to millions of residents is providing an opportunity for some unscrupulous merchants to take advantage of the situation by charging exorbitant prices for essential supplies.

A system set up Wednesday in Houston for residents to report incidents of price gouging received more than 450 complaints in less than 20 hours, said Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee, the chief civil attorney for Texas' largest county.

"The main types of things we're seeing is hotels setting prices at ridiculous rates," Menefee said. "We've seen allegations of packs of water being sold for two to three times the normal price, or packs of water being divvied up and the individual bottles being sold at excessive prices."

Dashawn Walker, 33, searched for a hotel room Tuesday night to avoid the cold of his powerless Dallas apartment. After finding all the rooms in Dallas booked, he ended up driving to an extended stay hotel in the suburb of Lewisville only to pay \$474 for a one-night stay.

"It's crazy," he said. "I mean why would y'all go up on the hotels in the middle of a crisis? Like, dude, come on now. Everyone is just trying to make it and they're capitalizing off a crisis, and that's so unfair to people who really can't afford it."

Such price spikes are illegal under Texas law, which prohibits selling fuel, food, medicine, lodging, building materials or other necessities "at an exorbitant or excessive price" during a state or federal disaster declaration.

The Texas Attorney General's Office urged residents who suspect they are victims of price gouging to file a complaint with their office. Violators may be required to reimburse consumers and can face civil penalties of up to \$10,000 per violation. Additional penalties of up to \$250,000 can be imposed if the victims are elderly.

Dallas hotelier Larry Hamilton said that while there may be legitimate complaints of price gouging, he also wondered if some complaints lacked merit. He said prices at his 193-room Aloft Hotel in downtown Dallas are averaging \$94 per night, and that a customer became irate when he was quoted a price of \$109.

"He called my general manager and was threatening to report us for gouging," Hamilton said. "Moreover, and this is Economics 101, price is what creates equilibrium between supply and demand, and it's

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an important regulator. Price is something that fluctuates, and it should.”

The hospitality business has taken a financial beating in the last year, in large part because of government-mandated closures and the hesitancy of people to travel during a pandemic. Hamilton, who had to close another boutique hotel in Dallas because of power outages, said hotels in the area have been running at less than 10% occupancy during the pandemic.

“It’s been a bloodbath,” he said.

In Missouri, Gov. Mike Parson said he’s asked the attorney general there to investigate complaints of price gouging related to natural gas, which has spiked amid supply problems and the extreme cold snap that’s enveloped a wide swathe of central and southern U.S.

“I realize the shortages of whether it’s fuel, whether it’s natural gas or whatever it might be, but I don’t want anybody taking advantage of that either,” Parson said, adding he found it frustrating that prices are “skyrocketing” after just a few days of bitter cold temperatures.

“I can’t imagine what it’s going to be like for sticker shock when a lot of people get their bills. It’s going to be a tough environment,” Parson said.

In Houston, Menefee encouraged businesses to take a neighborly approach and that “we should be looking out for each other.” If not, a visit from a state or local investigator to a company accused of price gouging is usually all it takes for prices to return to normal.

“If you’re raising prices, you may end up on our list,” he said. “If you’re raising them at a level that really raises eyebrows, you can count on one of our investigators knocking on your front door.”

Murphy reported from Oklahoma City. Associated Press reporters Jake Bleiberg in Dallas and Jim Salter in St. Louis contributed to this report.

Spain arrests 80 in 3 nights of riots over rapper’s jailing

By RENATA BRITO and HERNÁN MUÑOZ Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — Protests over the imprisonment of a rapper convicted of insulting the Spanish monarchy and praising terrorist violence were marred by rioting for the third night in a row Thursday.

The plight of Pablo Hasél, who began this week to serve a 9-month sentence in a northeastern prison, has triggered a heated debate over the limits of free speech in Spain and a political storm over the use of violence by both the rapper’s supporters and the police.

The ruling coalition’s junior partner, the far-left United We Can (Unidas Podemos) party, on Thursday filed a petition for a “total pardon” for Hasél and another rapper, Valtònyc, who fled to Belgium in 2018 to avoid trial on charges of “glorifying” terrorism.

But potentially deepening the tension, court authorities in the northeastern Catalonia region announced that Hasél lost a recent appeal and is looking at an additional prison sentence of 2 1/2 years for obstructing justice and assault in 2017. The sentence can be appealed again before the country’s Supreme Court.

Like the two previous nights, the protests began Thursday with large gatherings in several cities that were, at first, mostly peaceful.

In Catalonia’s regional capital, Barcelona, hundreds sang songs, rapped and shouted “Pablo Hasél, freedom!” and “Spanish media, manipulators!” at a central square before dozens broke off the main group to set alight a barricade of trash containers and a construction skip that blocked a main city artery, hurling stones, bottles and other objects at riot police.

There were moments of tension as flames threatened to extend to nearby buildings before firefighters arrived.

In the eastern coastal city of Valencia, police used batons to disperse protesters and arrested at least eight people, according to the Spanish government’s regional delegation.

Nearly 80 people have been arrested and more than 100 injured since Hasél was taken away from a university where he had sought refuge after refusing to show up at prison voluntarily.

The facades of several political parties’ headquarters have been graffitied, a police station in the town

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of Vic was battered and protesters significantly damaged shop fronts and bank offices in several cities, including the capital, Madrid.

The Catalan regional police has also launched an internal investigation to establish whether one of their foam bullets hit a youth who lost an eye in the protests.

The rapper and his supporters say Hasél's nine-month sentence for writing a critical song about former King Juan Carlos I, and for dozens of tweets that judges said glorified some of Spain's defunct terrorist groups, violates free speech rights.

Besides that case, the rapper has previously faced other charges or has pending trials for assault, praising armed extremist groups, breaking into private premises and insulting the monarchy.

His legal situation has drawn considerable public attention because it comes after a string of other artists and social media personalities have been put on trial for violating Spain's 2015 Public Security Law, which was enacted by a previous conservative-led government and criticized by human rights organizations.

One of them was Valtònc, who has so far avoided extradition from Belgium.

United We Can parliamentary spokesman Jaume Asens said Thursday the party had triggered the first step to demand an "urgent" and "total" pardon of both rappers. Pardons are a bureaucratic process and need the final approval from the Spanish government, which is currently in the hands of a left-wing coalition led by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez and Asens' party.

And although both parties have agreed to amend the criminal code to eliminate prison terms for offenses involving freedom of speech, the protests have also opened the latest divide in the shaky partnership after the opposition lambasted United We Can for not publicly condemning the violent protests.

Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo, a member of the center-left Socialist Party, also criticized a United We Can spokesman who expressed support for what he called "antifascist protesters fighting for freedom of expression."

Associated Press journalists Ciarán Giles and Aritz Parra in Madrid contributed to this report.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Sunday, Feb. 21, the 52nd day of 2021. There are 313 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 21, 1965, minister and civil rights activist Malcolm X, 39, was shot to death inside Harlem's Audubon Ballroom in New York by assassins identified as members of the Nation of Islam. (Three men were convicted of murder and imprisoned; all were eventually paroled.)

On this date:

In 1862, Nathaniel Gordon became the first and only American slave-trader to be executed under the U.S. Piracy Law of 1820 as he was hanged in New York.

In 1885, the Washington Monument was dedicated.

In 1916, the World War I Battle of Verdun began in France as German forces attacked; the French were able to prevail after 10 months of fighting.

In 1945, during the World War II Battle of Iwo Jima, the escort carrier USS Bismarck Sea was sunk by kamikazes with the loss of 318 men.

In 1964, the first shipment of U.S. wheat purchased by the Soviet Union arrived in the port of Odessa.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon began his historic visit to China as he and his wife, Pat, arrived in Beijing.

In 1973, Israeli fighter planes shot down Libyan Arab Airlines Flight 114 over the Sinai Desert, killing all but five of the 113 people on board.

In 1975, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former White House aides H.R. Haldeman and John D. Ehrlichman were sentenced to 2 1/2 to 8 years in prison for their roles in the Watergate cover-up

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(each ended up serving a year and a-half).

In 1995, Chicago adventurer Steve Fossett became the first person to fly solo across the Pacific Ocean by balloon, landing in Leader, Saskatchewan, Canada.

In 2005, President George W. Bush, in Belgium for a NATO summit, scolded Russia for backsliding on democracy and urged Mideast allies to take difficult steps for peace.

In 2010, a mistaken U.S. missile attack killed 23 civilians in Afghanistan. (Four American officers were later reprimanded.) The United States stunned Canada 5-3 to advance to the Olympic men's hockey quarterfinals in Vancouver. Bode (BOH'-dee) Miller finally captured his elusive gold medal, winning the super-combined for his third medal in three events.

In 2018, the Rev. Billy Graham, a confidant of presidents and the most widely heard Christian evangelist in history, died at his North Carolina home; he was 99. A week after the Florida school shooting, President Donald Trump met with teen survivors of school violence and parents of slain children; Trump promised to be "very strong on background checks" and suggested he supported letting some teachers and other school employees carry weapons.

Ten years ago: Deep cracks opened in Moammar Gadhafi's regime, with Libyan government officials at home and abroad resigning, air force pilots defecting and a major government building ablaze after clashes in the capital of Tripoli. Yemen's embattled leader, President Ali Abdullah Saleh (AH'-lee ahb-DUH'-luh sah-LEH'), rejected demands that he step down, calling demonstrations against his regime unacceptable acts of provocation and offering to begin a dialogue with protesters.

Five years ago: Bombings claimed by the Islamic State group in the Syrian cities of Damascus and Homs killed nearly 130 people. Pope Francis, speaking at the Vatican, urged Catholic leaders to show "exemplary" courage by not allowing executions "in this Holy Year of Mercy." Denny Hamlin won the Daytona 500, edging Martin Truex Jr. by inches at the finish line.

One year ago: Health officials said at least 18 Americans who'd returned home from a quarantined cruise ship in Japan were infected with the new coronavirus, bringing the total number of cases in the U.S. to at least 35. Italy reported its first coronavirus death as the number of confirmed cases in Italy more than quadrupled. A temporary truce between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan took effect, setting the stage for the two sides to sign a peace deal the following week. Greyhound, the nation's largest bus company, said it would stop allowing Border Patrol agents without a warrant to board its buses to conduct routine immigration checks. Wells Fargo agreed to pay \$3 billion to settle criminal and civil investigations into a long-running practice in which employees opened millions of unauthorized bank accounts in order to meet sales goals.

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Bob Rafelson is 88. Actor Gary Lockwood is 84. Actor-director Richard Beymer is 82. Actor Peter McEnery is 81. Film/music company executive David Geffen is 78. Actor Tyne Daly is 75. Actor Anthony Daniels is 75. Tricia Nixon Cox is 75. Former Sen. Olympia J. Snowe, R-Maine, is 74. Rock musician Jerry Harrison (The Heads) is 72. Actor Christine Ebersole is 68. Actor William Petersen is 68. Actor Kelsey Grammer is 66. Singer/guitarist Larry Campbell is 66. Country singer Mary Chapin Carpenter is 63. Actor Kim Coates is 63. Actor Jack Coleman is 63. Actor Christopher Atkins is 60. Actor William Baldwin is 58. Rock musician Michael Ward is 54. Actor Aunjanue Ellis is 52. Blues musician Corey Harris is 52. Country singer Eric Heatherly is 51. Rock musician Eric Wilson is 51. Rock musician Tad Kinchla (Blues Traveler) is 48. Singer Rhiannon Giddens (Carolina Chocolate Drops) is 44. Actor Tituss Burgess is 42. Actor Jennifer Love Hewitt is 42. Comedian-actor Jordan Peele is 42. Actor Brendan Sexton III is 41. Singer Charlotte Church is 35. Actor Ashley Greene is 34. Actor Elliot Page (formerly Ellen Page) is 34. Actor Corbin Bleu is 32. Actor Hayley Orrantia is 27. Actor Sophie Turner is 25.