

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 1 of 81

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [1- Today on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [2- National Drought Summary for February 23, 2021](#)
- [3- Bowling Scores](#)
- [3- Kindergarten Roundup](#)
- [3- Singing Bridge on Highway 1806 West of Mo-bridge Now Open to Vehicular Traffic](#)
- [4- No. 8 Northern State Advances Following OT Thriller versus Augustana](#)
- [5- SD News Watch: Health concerns rise as dental patients in S.D. put off care during pandemic](#)
- [9- State Wrestling Results](#)
- [10- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [13- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [20- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [21- Weather Pages](#)
- [24- Daily Devotional](#)
- [25- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [26- News from the Associated Press](#)

## Upcoming Schedule

**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

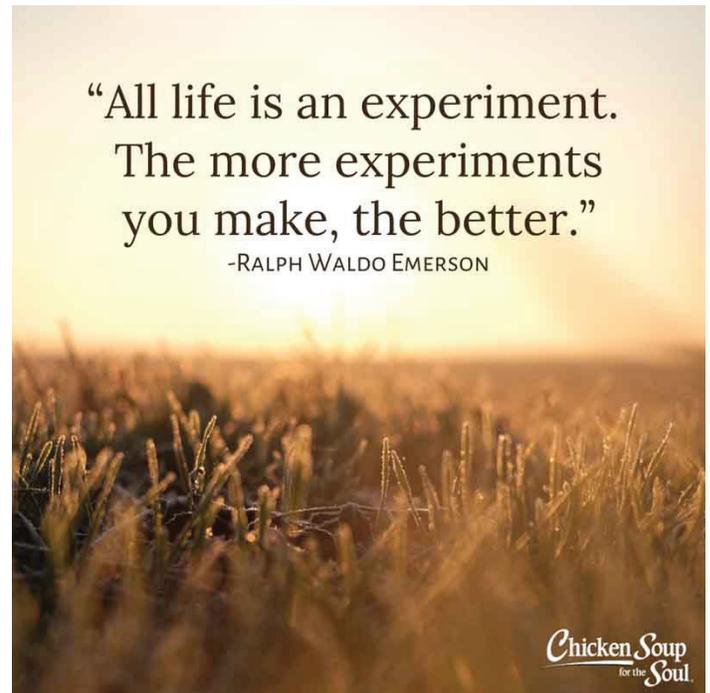
**Thursday, March 4:** GBB SoDAK 16

**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.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 2 of 81

## National Drought Summary for February 23, 2021

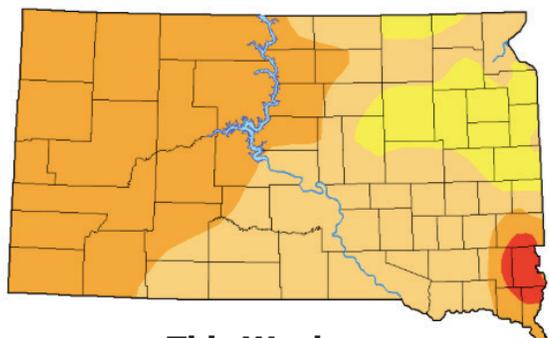
### Summary

After a frigid start to the period, especially throughout the middle third of the Nation where daily temperature anomalies were 30 to 40 degrees F below normal and readings dropped below -40 degrees F in Minnesota and 0 degrees F as far south as central Texas, temperatures finally moderated by week's end. By Monday, highs had risen into the 40s & 50s degrees F in the Dakotas and 70s and 80s degrees F in Texas. Frequent Pacific storms battered the Northwest, and then tracked southeastward across the Northern and Central Rockies, dropping plentiful moisture on Washington, Oregon, northern California, Idaho, & western Montana, but missing most of the Southwest yet again. Storms also dropped widespread precipitation on much of the Southeast, mid-Atlantic, and coastal New England while most of the Midwest saw light frozen (snow, sleet, freezing rain) precipitation. Dry weather was observed across much of the Plains except in south-central Texas. Weekly temperatures averaged below to much-below normal throughout the lower 48 States except for central and southern Florida. Readings in Alaska remained below-normal except in the southwest and Aleutians, and significant precipitation was limited to along the southwest, southern, and southeastern coasts. Meanwhile, Hawaii experienced increased shower activity, especially on Kauai where some flash flooding occurred. In Puerto Rico, light showers persisted across eastern sections while the northwest remained mostly dry, and dryness/drought increased.

The ensuing 5 days (March 2-6) expects favorable odds for above normal precipitation across much of Alaska and in the Tennessee Valley and Carolinas. Subnormal precipitation should prevail across the North-Central States (northern halves of the Rockies and Plains and Great Lakes region) and along the western Gulf Coast, with Equal Chances (EC) elsewhere in the lower 48 States. Subnormal temperatures are likely in Alaska and the Far West, with above normal readings anticipated for the eastern two-thirds of the Nation (except EC for New England).

### High Plains

After several weeks of light to moderate snow events in the Central Plains, drier (but still frigid conditions, although moderating by week's end) weather returned to the region. With the recent improvements in the Central Plains and subnormal temperatures, no changes were made there. Farther north, however, even though precipitation is normally low during the fall and winter seasons, it has been extremely dry during the past 3-4 months (less than 25% of normal), leading to a lack of any snow cover in eastern Montana, western North Dakota, and north-central South Dakota. Short-term indices (1-, 2-, 3-, 4-, and 6-months) were at D3 and D4 levels, thus D2 was expanded southward across south-central North Dakota and central South Dakota, and D1 added in north-central South Dakota. In contrast, additional precipitation in Wyoming and Colorado boosted mountain snow water equivalent (SWE) as of Feb. 23 at or closer to normal, thus some improvements were made across southern and southeastern Wyoming and in parts of north-central and south-central Colorado. A few areas in Wyoming had missed out on the recent snows, so some slight degrading was made to those areas.

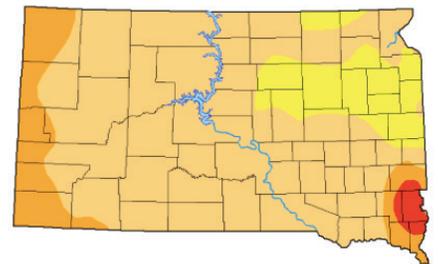


**This Week**

Data valid: February 23, 2021 at 7 a.m. EST

#### Intensity:

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data



**Last Week**

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 3 of 81

## Groton Prairie Mixed

**Team Standings:** Jackelopes 11, Shih Tzus 10, Cheetahs 10, Chipmunks 9

**Men's High Games:** Doug Jorgensen 211, Brad Waage 193, Brody Sombke 187

**Women's High Games:** Sue Stanley 161, Karen Spanier 159, Brenda Waage 154

**Men's High Series:** Brad Waage 536, Doug Jorgensen 515, Brody Sombke 498

**Women's High Series:** Sue Stanley 448, Karen Spanier 420, Hayley Merkel 404

## Conde National League

**Team Standings:** Giants 29, Mets 27, Cubs 24, Braves 23 1/2, Pirates 21 1/2, Tigers 7

**Men's High Games:** Collin Cady 198, 191; Austin Schulke 188; John Lowery 187

**Men's High Series:** John Lowery 526, Collin Cady 503, Austin Schulke 487

**Women's High Games:** Sam Bahr 199, Tanah Messevou 192, Vickie Kramp 177

**Women's High Series:** Tanah Messevou 523, Vickie Kramp 479, Mary Larson 448

## Singing Bridge on Highway 1806 West of Mobridge Now Open to Vehicular Traffic

MOBRIDGE, S.D. –The Highway 1806 bridge, known as the "singing bridge", west of Mobridge and north of Highway 12 over the Grand River, is now open to vehicular traffic.

On Feb. 20, 2021, the Department of Transportation closed the bridge as a safety precaution due to observed distress reported on the bridge.

Preliminary indications were that due to the recent extreme cold temperatures, the bridge girders contracted and caused damage to the concrete support system at one bridge pier cap. The bridge was inspected and no additional damage was identified.

The SDDOT designed and completed a temporary solution. A 20 ton weight restriction and 35 mph speed restriction are in place until a permanent fix is completed at a later date. Signage is on site to alert drivers to these restrictions.

For more information on this and other road conditions, visit <https://sd511.org> or call 5-1-1.



2021 Groton Area Elementary Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning 5 on or before September 1, 2021

**Friday, March 12, 2021**

If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary school, please DISREGARD this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.

Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2021-2022 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet by the end of this week.



## No. 8 Northern State Advances Following OT Thriller versus Augustana

Sioux Falls, S.D. – The No. 8 Northern State University men’s basketball team made things interesting Thursday afternoon from the Sanford Pentagon with an overtime win in the quarterfinals of the NSIC/Sanford Health Basketball Tournament. A back and forth battled with the Augustana Vikings, Northern nearly sealed the win in regulation on a Mason Stark dart, however AU forced the overtime period. Ultimately the Wolves out-scored the Vikings 20-17 in the final five minutes of play.

### THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 87, AU 84

Records: NSU 16-1, AU 9-7

Attendance: 73

### HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern State got off to a slow start as Augustana led 34-28 at the halftime
- The Wolves rallied back gaining the lead in the second, however the Vikings were always within reach, tying the game three times
- NSU rallied back with 39 points in the second half, including Stark’s long range bucket with just nine seconds on the clock
- Augustana kept their postseason hopes alive tying the game with under five seconds to play and forcing the overtime period
- Northern was efficient in the final five minutes, hitting 4-of-6 from the floor, including 3-of-3 from beyond the arc
- In total the Wolves shot 48.4% from the field, 40.0% from the 3-point line, and 63.0% from the foul line in the win
- NSU forced 16 turnovers resulting in 14 points and added 40 points in the paint, 15 points off the bench, 12 second chance points, and nine fast break scores
- They recorded 33 rebounds, 16 assists, ten made 3-pointers, nine blocks, and seven steals
- Defensively, the Wolves held the Vikings to 31-of-73 from the floor

### NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Mason Stark: 19 points, 54.5 FG%, 2 rebounds, 2 assists, 2, steals
- Andrew Kallman: 16 points, 55.6 FG%, 6 assists, 5 rebounds, 1 steal
- Tommy Chatman: 14 points, 3 rebounds, 3 assists
- Parker Fox: 13 points, 10 rebounds, 6 blocks, 2 assists, 1 steal

### UP NEXT

Northern State heads to the semifinal round of the NSIC/Sanford Health Basketball Tournament. The Wolves will tip-off against the winner of Upper Iowa and Minot State at 4 p.m. on Saturday. Live video, stat, and audio links are available on the men’s basketball schedule on [nsuwolves.com](http://nsuwolves.com).

## Health concerns rise as dental patients in S.D. put off care during pandemic

Mark Andersen  
South Dakota News Watch



**The St. Francis Mission Dental Clinic on the Rosebud Indian Reservation welcomed a group of student volunteers from Creighton University in March 2020, but has not treated patients since then due to the COVID-19 pandemic.** Photo: Courtesy St.

Francis Mission

diabetes, mental health issues and other serious problems. About 40 percent of American adults over age 30 have periodontitis, which is advanced gum disease that enables bacteria to build up in pockets around the teeth and which can then spread to the bloodstream, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Experts say those hit hardest by delaying needed dental care include those who have the most difficulty accessing dental care and those most vulnerable to future complications – children, the elderly, minorities and people with disabilities.

About one in five South Dakota residents currently admits they will delay dental treatment if they are not in pain, according to research by NextSmileDental.com. The website, which provides resources on dentures, recently conducted a survey of 4,500 patients. Parents who were surveyed also reported their children were eating more sugary treats. Children are especially vulnerable to tooth decay and other problems from delayed care.

Data collected by the South Dakota Dental Association has found that 15 percent of the state population will not return to a dental office until they have been vaccinated against COVID or until the pandemic

Many South Dakotans have put off needed dental care during the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the risk of gum disease, tooth and bone loss or other serious health issues related to poor dental care, which can include heart attacks and diabetes.

Patients with acute dental problems and those who undergo routine dental care have stayed away from dental offices due to concerns they may be susceptible to COVID-19 during office visits.

Members of the state dental industry, who have taken a financial hit due to lack of appointments, say they may need a full year to overcome the backlog of delayed care resulting from COVID-19.

"The 'COVID hangover,' that's going to go on for a while," said Paul Knecht, director of the South Dakota Dental Association. "We are finding ourselves needing to do a lot of extra work there."

Research links poor dental health – especially periodontal gum disease – to heart attacks,

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 6 of 81

**"The 'COVID hangover,' that's going to go on for a while ... we are finding ourselves needing to do a lot of extra work there."**

-- Paul Knecht, director of the South Dakota Dental Association



**Paul Knecht**

subsidies.

"There's no social distancing in dentistry," said Dr. Rick Fuchs, an orthodontist who serves patients in Mitchell and Huron. "You're working 18 inches from an open mouth."

Modern general dentistry relies on high-speed drills cooled by water, which raises splatter issues and COVID-19 concerns, Fuchs said.

South Dakota dentists are now operating at 70 to 80 percent of normal appointment schedules. For the year, they're down 20 percent, although the pace of business has fluctuated greatly.

For dentists, as for everyone else, the COVID crisis brought a worry and constantly evolving guidelines and shifting priorities.

"I've been doing this for 22 years now," Knecht said, "and I've never had a period of time like we did last spring.

"Every day, we would see the shift of what was on people's minds."

At St. Francis Mission Dental Clinic, on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in south-central South Dakota, the pandemic prompted the clinic to cancel all health events starting in March 2020, said manager and dental hygienist Marty Jones. Most of the patients served at the clinic are Native Americans. Jones said people often stop her in town to ask when services will return.

Her first dental health clinic will take place in March 2021, and Jones is unsure if she is fully prepared for an onslaught of patients.

"I'm scared to even put it on the radio that they can call for an appointment," she said. "We're going to be overrun."

Mitchell dental hygienist Patricia Aylward said residents at a nursing home she serves have received no dental care beyond emergency services for the past year.

"All of these people are elderly and have more dental needs than most," she said, "and they have not been able to leave for dental treatment." Dentists have also not been able to visit them.

## **A difficult, demanding year**

Beginning in March 2020, every week brought another hurdle. Challenges included shutting offices down, reopening them safely, vaccinating staff, obtaining scarce personal protective equipment, and applying for federal aid.

"Initially, we knew so little about the virus itself," Knecht said. At one point, dentists fiercely debated why masks were required but not eye protection. And then two weeks later national guidelines changed, requiring eye shields.

At all times, Knecht said, dentists have followed CDC and American Dental Association guidance.

In mid-March, the American Dental Association advised all practices to shut down until early April. It later extended the shutdown. Exceptions were made for emergency cases, which mostly included cases involving serious pain.

The shutdown challenged communities in various ways. It differed for rural versus urban, for privately insured patients and those on Medicaid, and for offices serving the young or the elderly.

State dentists, Knecht said, worked through a variety of questions: Do you open the office to see one emergency? Or do you bundle emergencies until two days from now? Or do you send them to your col-



**South Dakota dentists took extra safety precautions, including the use of face masks and shields, to safely treat patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.** Photo: Stock image

league down the block?

Each practice was left to use its best judgment on what constituted an emergency, and many patients found themselves dealing with some level of pain for longer periods than usual.

As the shutdown dragged on, worries about COVID intensified, but delaying care caused some dental issues to progress to the point they needed additional treatment.

"We were doing a disservice to the public by delaying that care," Knecht said.

Recognizing the potential for harm to patients, dentists scrambled in May to reopen safely. Dentists worked out ways of decontaminating surfaces and eliminating aerosolized particulates. Barriers to isolate airflow were erected, or

schedules were changed to allow particulates to settle.

"It's amazing all of the things some offices were able to do," Knecht said.

Dentists were following all safety precautions, he said, but they were as aggressive as possible at serving patients.

By early summer, state dental offices had ramped up past normal workloads and were setting monthly records in productivity, based on insurance billing records.

The number of COVID-19 cases in South Dakota began rising in September and peaked in October and November, and patient numbers plummeted. Through early December, Knecht said, office schedules fell to around 60 to 70 percent of normal.

## Future challenges remain

In January, office schedules began returning to what they had been in July and August, Knecht said, although it varied by practice makeup and location.

Karisa Hart, office manager of Hart Dental in Mitchell, said delayed maintenance for periodontal patients can be especially detrimental. Periodontal treatment requires a large initial investment.

"If you don't maintain it," she said, "you're back to square one."

The pandemic made it harder for many dental patients to stay on track in the sometimes elongated process of managing dental problems.

"They take the big step to get healthy and get fully on board," Hart said, only to find themselves back where they started.

Hart said business at her office began ramping up again in November. Even though state COVID numbers remained high, she said, "people were not all that afraid."

The increase in patients could have been attributed to a rise in younger patients or among people who already had COVID-19 and had recovered.

Most recently, the rollout of vaccines has slowed office schedules again. For some patients, Hart said,

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 8 of 81

the attitude has been, "I'm just going to wait," until they get one or two vaccine shots.

Not all offices dealing in oral care have experienced the same pattern. State orthodontic offices have seen little to no fluctuation throughout the year. Orthodontists work primarily to fit braces and straighten teeth, generally on youth.

"Once you begin the process, you're forced to continue," said Fuchs, the orthodontist.

Fuchs said he witnessed no change in desire or demand among children needing braces, although the pandemic brought changes to his practice. Office staff became more aware of taking all proper precautions, Fuchs said.

Orthodontics, fortunately, presents less risk for spreading the virus.

Financial issues arise for patients and providers

Across the state, the office closures and slowed schedules created concerns over dental practice finances as well as for patient safety. Federal COVID-19 emergency assistance helped, Knecht said, but it will be harder to get full compensation for the year's overall decrease in productivity. The effects could become apparent during the second quarter of this year, he said.

Even where patient demand remained high, office efficiency slowed for decontamination and other necessary precautions. Sometimes it was as simple as a dentist working with someone other than their usual assistant.

"We kept all of our key members employed," said Hart. "We made a plan at the start of it."

Staff cut back hours, used slow times to do team development, office upkeep, and completed continuing education requirements.

Hart expects demand will eventually make up for the financial losses and slow periods. Dental needs don't disappear, Hart said.

"We do anticipate at some point we will be busier," she said. "We've put the groundwork in place to be able to rock and roll when it's time. The team is mentally prepared for it. Overall, we want to help people."

Addressing the backlog among low-income patients presents additional challenges.

Dental offices must contend with lost dental insurance among regular patients who lost jobs due to the pandemic. Hart said a patient in her office struggles to eat because of a broken bridge.

"They're now living on one income," Hart said. "There are things like that we probably aren't even aware are happening."

On the other hand, she added, some people have used stimulus funds to address longtime problems. "Some come in ready to do major work," Hart said.

There will be no quick return to normal at St. Francis Mission clinic, which receives assistance from benefactors and grants but also relies on patient reimbursement.

"We've had no income at all coming in" since March 2020, Jones said.

To reopen safely amid the pandemic, the clinic had to construct a new entrance and purchase a washer and dryer to handle laundry on site. Jones hopes to create partitions for dressing rooms and install lockers for the visiting providers.

Finances also will be an issue for dentists who serve Medicaid patients. In South Dakota, the state and federally funded program for the impoverished caps dental care at \$1,000 per year, Knecht said. Dentists can appeal to have the cap lifted in certain circumstances, and dentists are appealing to raise that cap for everyone for the remainder of this year, because delayed care has resulted in greater needs.

One dentist involved with Special Olympics told Knecht it will require a lot of work to catch up among that population. The same will likely be true for children served by Head Start or other advocacy groups.

But not every Medicaid provider faces the same financial struggles.

Jayne Tubandt is a hygienist at Falls Community Health & Dental in Sioux Falls. As a federally qualified health center, Falls receives cost-based funding to better serve the poor.

Under federal purview, the clinic never struggled to access personal protective equipment or N95 masks.

The clinic was already using advanced infection control practices prior to COVID-19, Tubandt said. It laundered uniforms at the facility. Staff wore Level 3 surgical masks. Masks were changed between pa-

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 9 of 81

tients, and staff wore long sleeves. Only a few adjustments were necessary to reopen.

For 13 weeks, Tubandt said, the clinic treated only those with severe pain or swelling, and it eventually reopened for routine care.

Falls has remained busy since August. It never experienced the autumn slowing seen by other practices. She speculates it may result from the increasing numbers of patients served by Medicaid.

"We're having some people come in that we haven't seen for two or three years," Tubandt said.

Going forward, scheduling issues will be a major problem for nearly every dental office in South Dakota. Even if COVID-19 were to disappear tomorrow, offices would still have to work through the gaps and clusters caused by the wild fluctuations.

Dentistry typically works on a six-month schedule, and for most patients, those routines have been set aside.

Many patients have skipped one or even two checkups, and reestablishing a routine will be problematic.

"Our offices are working on that recall schedule right now," Knecht said. "How to reappoint all of those folks in a timely way and get that back into their routine."



## ABOUT

### Mark Anderson

Mark Andersen of Rapid City, a freelance correspondent for South Dakota News Watch, is a graduate of the Uni-

versity of South Dakota and veteran news reporter who has worked at the Lincoln Journal Star and at the Rapid City Journal.

## State Wrestling Results

### **B-113: Dragr Monson (37-0) scored 4.0 team points.**

Champ. Round 1 - Dragr Monson (Groton Area) 37-0 won by fall over Brady Unser (Ipswich/Leola/Bowdle) 21-13 (Fall 2:41)

### **B-126: Christian Ehresmann (33-7)**

Champ. Round 1 - Porter Neugebauer (Parkston) 30-10 won by decision over Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 33-7 (Dec 9-2)

### **B-160: Cole Bisbee (19-20)**

Champ. Round 1 - Dylan Whitley (Redfield Area) 31-3 won by fall over Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 19-20 (Fall 0:37)

### **B-195: Lane Krueger (23-8)**

Champ. Round 1 - Charlie Patten (Parker) 41-5 won by fall over Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 23-8 (Fall 1:43)

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 10 of 81

**#368 in a series**

## **Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller**

Not much change: The deaths number looks worse, but there's a reason. We're up to 28,423,800 reported in the US so far in this pandemic, 0.3% higher than yesterday. There were 75,700 new cases reported today. While this looks good compared to where we've been, I think it's important to note that last summer this was a horrifying number. We still have a ways to go, but things are improving overall. Hospitalizations stay on a downward trend at 54,118. Deaths are up to 507,811, which is 0.6% higher than yesterday. There were 3149 new deaths reported today, but this is the number that requires a sort of disclaimer: There are 806 new deaths reported out of Los Angeles County in California that are not exactly new deaths; they're reclassified or previously-unreported or something deaths from earlier in the pandemic. I am not yet entirely sure what led to the problem, but the vast majority of these occurred well before today. Nonetheless, this pushes California over 50,000 deaths, a number which represents just about 10 percent of the total US deaths for the pandemic; they passed New York for the state with the most deaths a while back. This looks terrible, and it is; but we should note that California, our most populous state, has about 12 percent of the US population.

The rollout of military-staffed vaccination centers is proceeding apace. A team of 222 military personnel is vaccinating 6000 people a day at the first such site in Los Angeles County, and vaccinations started yesterday at sites in Texas (222 personnel in Houston, 139 at each of two sites in Dallas) and New York (139 in Queens and 139 in Brooklyn). The larger sites have a goal of 6000 injections per day, the smaller ones of 3000 per day. Four more centers in Florida (139-member teams in Miami, Tampa, Orlando, and Jacksonville) and one in Philadelphia (222-member team) open next week. Three 24-member teams have been sent to New Jersey, and one has been sent to the US Virgin Islands. Twenty-five teams have been approved so far, 11 have started or will start next week, and the plan is for as many as 100 such sites to be operational before this is over. We're talking 19,000 service members, all dedicated to getting vaccines into people as quickly and efficiently as possible. Future sites will open as the vaccine supply increases, states request help, and locations can be nailed down. It is important to recognize that, except under the most unusual (at least, until recently) of circumstances, active-duty military cannot be deployed in a state without the state's approval, so the state's request is essential. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, toured the Los Angeles center yesterday where he explained the military has already been developing more efficient procedures as they learn from the earliest efforts. One particular success he mentioned was mobile vaccination teams; he indicated an interest in expanding those. I see these as important ways to get into underserved neighborhoods and populations across the country.

Under the heading of further good news, there's something promising happening—or not happening—in nursing homes. What's not happening is that people are not dying at anything like the rates seen earlier in this pandemic. While long-term care facilities account for more than a third of deaths since last spring, deaths in these facilities have fallen off rapidly since vaccines rolled out and these homes were prioritized for doses. Cases have decreased more than 80 percent and deaths have decreased by more than 65 percent, according to analysis by the New York Times. This is remarkable. And if you had any lingering doubts about whether these vaccines would be particularly beneficial to elderly whose immune systems are typically not as robust as those in the young, this should lay those to rest. This is real-world evidence.

We talked a few days ago about Moderna's new booster plan and the new vaccine adaptation which is redesigned to cover emerging viral variants. Pfizer/BioNTech has gotten into the act too: They'll be testing a third booster dose of the original vaccine administered six to 12 months after the initial series; they believe that will beef up protection enough to provide good coverage against variants. Nonetheless, they are also in discussion with regulators about testing a vaccine adaptation specifically designed to cover B.1.351 (South Africa). I doubt a new vaccine formulation from either company is imminent; one thing we know is that we need to study and gather data on each new variant before getting all excited and distributing new vaccines. Not all of the variants will be particularly threatening, and if you have good coverage, it's not necessary to do a bunch of new things. It is, however, wise to be prepared. Dr. Gregory

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 11 of 81

Poland, director of the Vaccine Research Group at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, told the New York Times, "A variant can change in days and a completely different one can take over. You've got to have good epidemiological evidence and good real-world effectiveness data to know is a variant vaccine worthwhile, and in whom."

So, according to Pfizer vice president and chief scientific officer of viral vaccines, Dr. Phil Dormitzer, this can be viewed as sort of a test run—figuring out how to adapt rapidly should it become necessary. "The thought behind the test is not that we think we need to change the vaccine right now—we think we probably do not." He said that what they learn from these upcoming tests will be useful "if we find ourselves in a situation in the future where we really had to move fast because a new strain started circulating that was not covered by the vaccine."

It is important to recognize that there is no evidence the current vaccines do not still provide sufficient protection against even B.1.351. The statement from Dr. Albert Bourla, chief executive of Pfizer, made that clear when he said, "We are taking multiple steps to act decisively and be ready in case a strain becomes resistant to the protection afforded by the vaccine." I'm just going to say it's damned nice to be playing offense for once.

A new large-scale study from Israel posted today in the New England Journal of Medicine, this one looking at the real-world effectiveness of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Israel is a good place for such a study because they have vaccinated such a large proportion of their population at this point—more than half have received a first dose and more than a third have received both doses. We should note here that clinical trial data don't generally translate exactly into actual widespread use in a population; additional variables pop up to interfere, and so we don't usually expect vaccines to perform quite as well in the messy real world as they did in clinical trials. After all, in the real world, you don't exclude from your study people whose chronic conditions are not well-controlled, you sometimes have a suboptimal vaccination schedule—a few extra days between doses, and despite your best efforts, vaccines might not be handled perfectly.

Well, wrong again: With a matched-samples study of close to 1.2 million people, almost 600,000 of whom had been vaccinated, the vaccine reduced symptomatic illness by 94 percent a week after dose 2; this is so close to the clinical trial result of 95 percent as to be not worth mention. For the record, a matched-samples design takes a sample of people (596,618 of them in this case) who received vaccine and matches each one with an unvaccinated person on factors that play into their risk. In this study, those factors were probability of exposure to infection, age, sex, sector (as to religion), neighborhood of residence, history of influenza vaccination, pregnancy, and total number of preexisting conditions identified as risk factors for severe Covid-19. This means that, for every vaccinated person, you have an unvaccinated one whose risk of exposure, serious disease, and death is as close to the same as you can make it. Statistically, this is one of the strongest study designs for proving an association (called correlation by the statisticians) between two things—in this case, vaccination and reduced risk of illness. And this vaccine came through with flying colors. I know I've overused the word lately, but this is just remarkable.

We have another home-grown variant; this one, B.1.526, popped up in New York City. It, like B.1.351 (South Africa), carries a mutation suspected of weakening the effectiveness of vaccines. There are papers (not yet peer-reviewed) from Caltech and Columbia University going up on preprint servers, but I haven't been able to see either of them yet. I am working from summaries at the moment; I'll update if something else shows up when I read them. This variant first showed up in samples collected in November, and by a week or so ago, accounted for about a quarter of samples sequenced in the city. It does not appear to be linked to a single outbreak, but rather is more widespread. Where this one lands in the constellation of bad actors we're seeing float around has yet to be determined; one expert indicated he finds it more worrisome than B.1.427/B.1.429 (California). Before you become too despondent—someone mentioned in the comment stream for a recent Update that they felt like Charlie Brown when Lucy keeps pulling away the football—let's note that Andrew Read, evolutionary microbiologist at Penn State University, told the New York Times that we're going to have to keep adjusting vaccines as the virus evolves, "but in the scheme of things, those aren't huge worries compared to not having a vaccine. I'd say the glass is three-quarters full, compared to where we were last year."

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 12 of 81

We talked last night about the difficulty many people have experienced getting appointments to be vaccinated; this is more challenging in some places than others. Texas, for example, has had a particularly slow rollout, leaving many people with serious risks waiting. Christy Lewis is one who struggled to get scheduled despite the fact that her health condition qualified her for the vaccine. But it finally happened, and she was all set to go in last month. Emily Johnson wasn't so lucky: She's 68 and needs open-heart surgery; her cardiologist says she can't wait long. The procedure was scheduled, but because it required her to fly to Cleveland and stay two weeks, her doctor did not want her to go unless she'd been vaccinated first: The risks were just too high for someone with a heart condition. She called the public health lines; she spent hours on the Web; she had nothing. Time was running out.

She got desperate enough to post on Nextdoor, describing her situation and asking for advice from anyone who might have a tip or trick. She wrote, "My doctors here in Austin have no access to the vaccine, so I have been spending up to an hour each morning, putting my name on lists and making dozens of phone calls. Has anyone out there heard anything or have a suggestion to make?" She got plenty of sympathy, but all of the suggestions were things she'd already tried. No help there.

Until the next morning when she picked up a private message from Lewis. "I am scheduled for the vaccine this morning at 10:45 am. You need this much more than I do. If you can make this appointment, it's yours. Please call me to arrange." She left her number. The two women were strangers—had never met.

Who does this? Lewis told the Washington Post, "She needed it, and I wanted to give it to her. I just knew that if I could be helpful to her, I wanted to be. . . . I have a son who is quadriplegic, and we've been the recipients of numerous acts of generosity from other people. It's a good feeling to be able to pay it forward."

Nothing about this was easy. When Lewis called the clinic to make arrangements for a substitution, they told her she could not "give" her appointment to someone else. She pushed, and they weren't budging. So she formulated a plan: She arranged to meet Johnson at the clinic for the appointment, figuring it would be easier to "get a 'yes'" if she was actually standing there in the clinic with Johnson. It was touch-and-go for a bit—had to make their appeal to a supervisor, but in the end, they got it done. Johnson received both doses in time to develop a response before her surgery, set for next month.

For the record, Lewis managed to get rescheduled too, but then came the winter storm in Texas, and that was canceled. She has hope she will receive a vaccination soon. I hope so too; she's earned it.

Take care. We'll talk again.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 13 of 81

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	453	431	856	15	Minimal	0.0%
Beadle	2712	2592	5763	39	Substantial	18.3%
Bennett	382	368	1169	9	Minimal	2.6%
Bon Homme	1504	1476	2039	25	Minimal	0.0%
Brookings	3575	3480	11727	37	Substantial	2.6%
Brown	5110	4963	12534	88	Moderate	3.8%
Brule	690	675	1858	9	Moderate	9.1%
Buffalo	420	406	889	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	973	940	3185	20	Moderate	7.7%
Campbell	129	125	256	4	Minimal	0.0%
Charles Mix	1279	1213	3864	21	Substantial	9.4%
Clark	368	353	937	5	Moderate	12.5%
Clay	1786	1751	5149	15	Moderate	2.1%
Codington	3970	3784	9519	77	Substantial	13.5%
Corson	467	451	995	12	Minimal	21.1%
Custer	748	725	2672	12	Moderate	9.5%
Davison	2945	2861	6422	60	Moderate	9.8%
Day	662	610	1742	28	Substantial	17.6%
Deuel	472	457	1120	8	Moderate	10.3%
Dewey	1410	1371	3778	23	Moderate	13.5%
Douglas	433	410	892	9	Moderate	16.7%
Edmunds	481	457	1028	12	Moderate	8.3%
Fall River	525	501	2561	15	Moderate	6.0%
Faulk	359	336	686	13	Moderate	4.5%
Grant	965	901	2200	37	Substantial	9.5%
Gregory	537	492	1245	27	Moderate	12.5%
Haakon	249	236	529	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	707	644	1753	38	Substantial	23.3%
Hand	335	318	799	6	Minimal	4.8%
Hanson	356	344	700	4	Moderate	22.2%
Harding	91	90	181	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2293	2207	6478	34	Substantial	1.9%
Hutchinson	787	744	2316	24	Moderate	19.6%

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 14 of 81

Hyde	137	134	402	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	279	260	902	14	Minimal	9.1%
Jerauld	271	249	548	16	None	0.0%
Jones	84	83	216	0	Minimal	0.0%
Kingsbury	637	604	1647	14	Substantial	11.9%
Lake	1184	1137	3237	17	Moderate	4.2%
Lawrence	2817	2739	8391	45	Moderate	5.2%
Lincoln	7710	7503	19911	77	Substantial	9.4%
Lyman	598	583	1851	10	Minimal	0.0%
Marshall	310	290	1166	5	Moderate	2.8%
McCook	739	707	1610	24	Moderate	12.5%
McPherson	238	231	543	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2577	2492	7551	31	Substantial	12.0%
Mellette	247	240	721	2	Minimal	16.7%
Miner	271	252	564	9	Minimal	16.7%
Minnehaha	27884	27113	76807	329	Substantial	6.9%
Moody	614	590	1734	16	Moderate	9.5%
Oglala Lakota	2056	1983	6584	49	Moderate	6.3%
Pennington	12860	12421	38675	185	Substantial	9.6%
Perkins	345	326	799	13	Minimal	11.8%
Potter	369	355	820	4	Moderate	0.0%
Roberts	1170	1097	4079	36	Substantial	12.7%
Sanborn	328	321	672	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	798	764	2092	25	Moderate	11.1%
Stanley	329	320	912	2	Minimal	0.0%
Sully	137	132	305	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1218	1188	4087	28	Minimal	1.5%
Tripp	694	661	1461	16	Substantial	21.3%
Turner	1065	996	2673	53	Moderate	3.4%
Union	1972	1906	6128	39	Substantial	9.6%
Walworth	721	694	1808	15	Moderate	3.6%
Yankton	2796	2734	9186	28	Moderate	6.6%
Ziebach	336	327	860	9	Minimal	8.3%
Unassigned	0	0	1817	0		

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 15 of 81

## South Dakota



### AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4475	0
10-19 years	12577	0
20-29 years	19926	5
30-39 years	18410	17
40-49 years	15992	35
50-59 years	15782	109
60-69 years	12833	248
70-79 years	6860	425
80+ years	5109	1033

### SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	58349	883
Male	53615	989

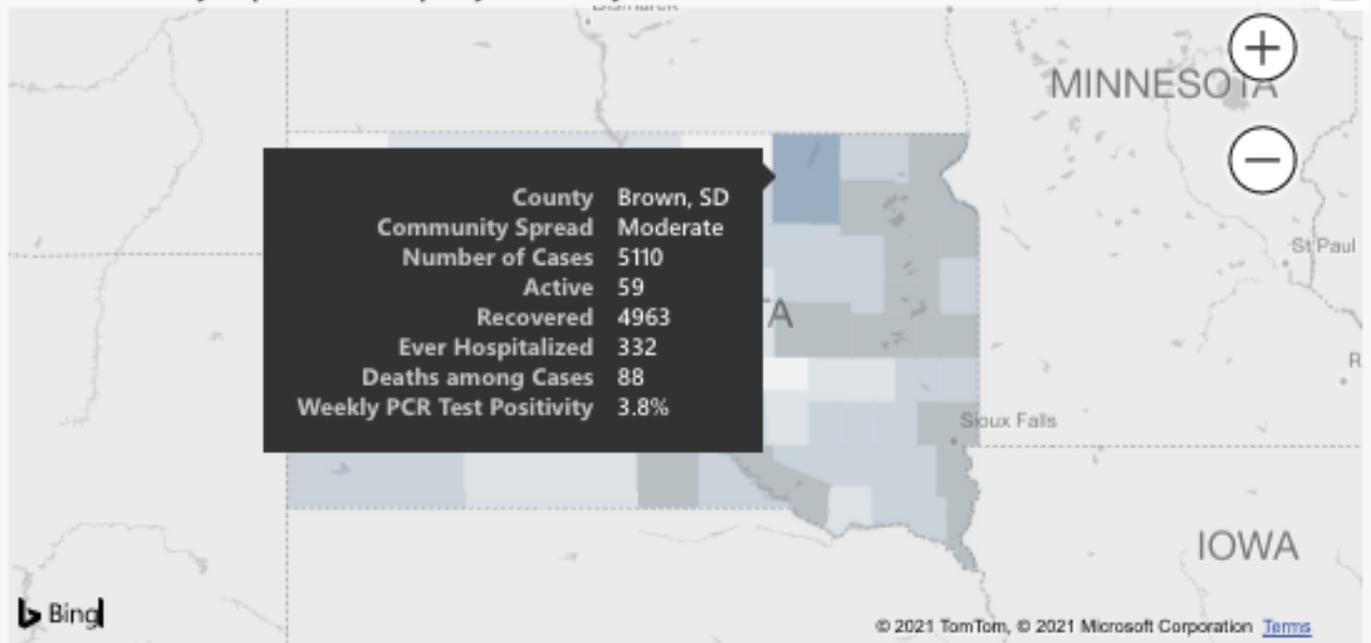
# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 16 of 81

## Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● None ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



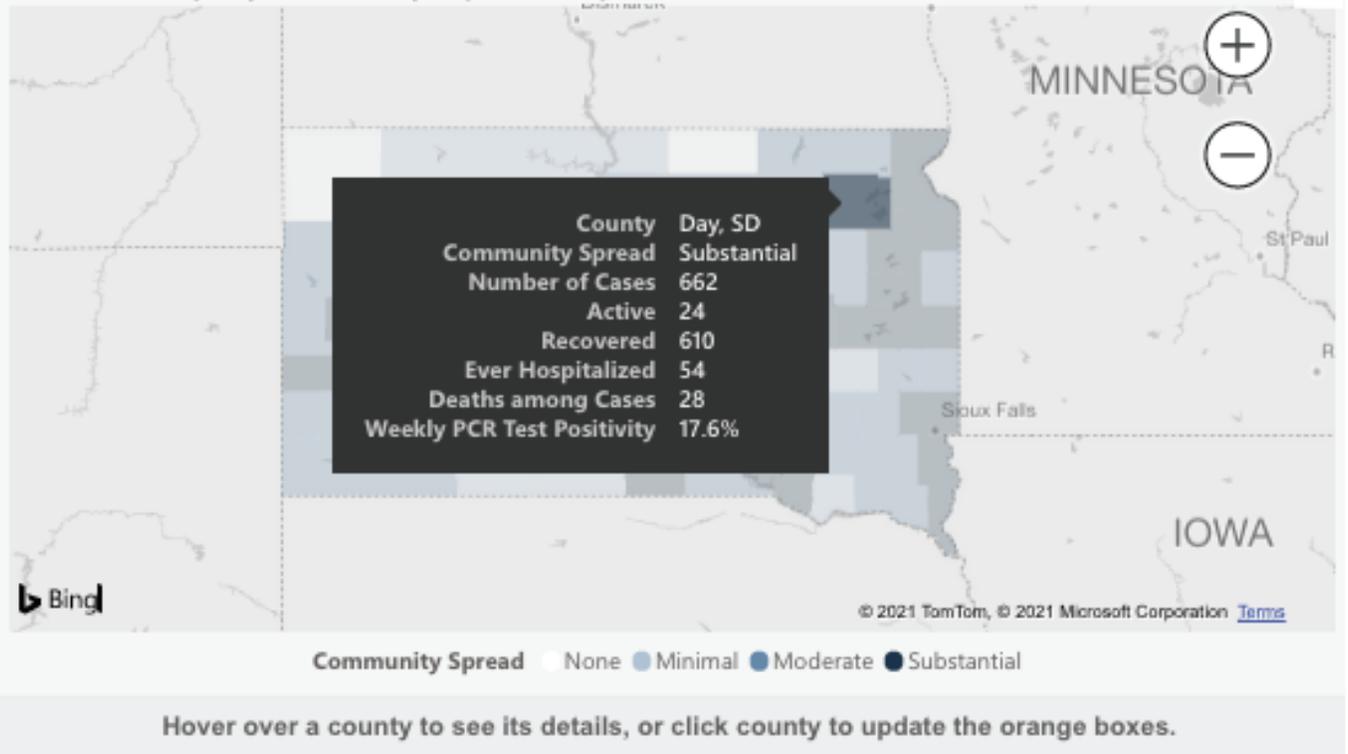
# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 17 of 81

## Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 18 of 81

## Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

197,050

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

130,148

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

23%

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	101,745
Pfizer	95,305

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	33,855
Moderna - Series Complete	33,945
Pfizer - 1 dose	29,391
Pfizer - Series Complete	32,957

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	23.16%
Series Complete	11.74%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16+ years. Includes

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	472	246	113	359
Beadle	3801	1,791	1,005	2,796
Bennett*	351	81	135	216
Bon Homme*	2131	1,061	535	1,596
Brookings	4910	1,670	1,620	3,290
Brown	9268	3,010	3,129	6,139
Brule*	1216	432	392	824
Buffalo*	103	75	14	89
Butte	1219	517	351	868
Campbell	741	287	227	514
Charles Mix*	1897	863	517	1,380
Clark	727	269	229	498
Clay	3080	986	1,047	2,033
Codington*	6171	2,303	1,934	4,237
Corson*	172	68	52	120
Custer*	1710	718	496	1,214
Davison	4695	1,665	1,515	3,180
Day*	1544	580	482	1,062
Deuel	870	354	258	612
Dewey*	294	56	119	175
Douglas*	780	264	258	522
Edmunds	788	306	241	547
Fall River*	1594	648	473	1,121
Faulk	672	250	211	461
Grant*	1378	504	437	941
Gregory*	1087	427	330	757
Haakon*	372	120	126	246

# Groton Daily Independent

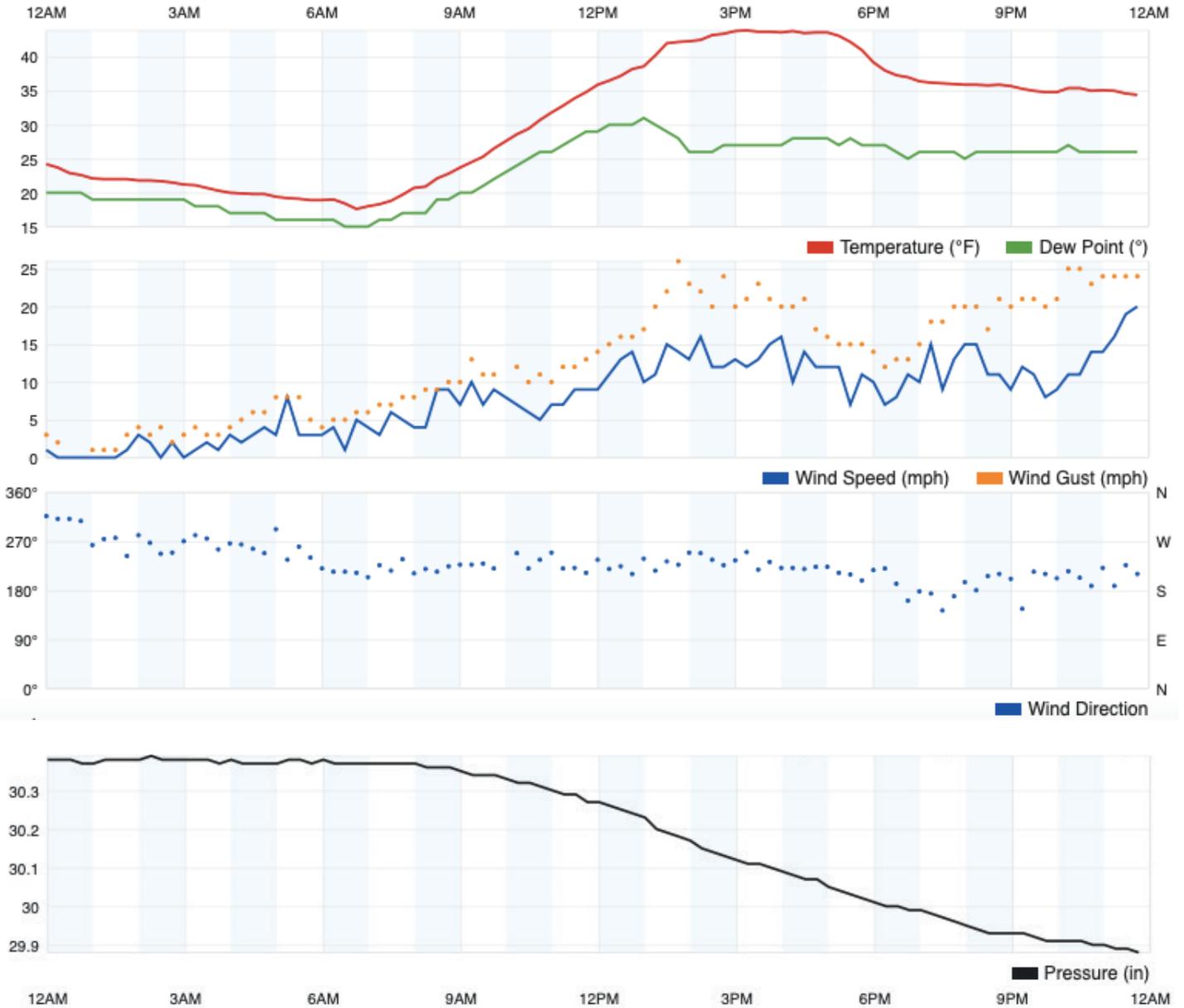
Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 19 of 81

Hamlin	1105	489	308	797
Hand	873	365	254	619
Hanson	273	131	71	202
Harding	42	28	7	35
Hughes*	5032	1,608	1,712	3,320
Hutchinson*	2224	830	697	1,527
Hyde*	359	143	108	251
Jackson*	273	87	93	180
Jerauld	522	284	119	403
Jones*	398	132	133	265
Kingsbury	1302	568	367	935
Lake	2362	1,024	669	1,693
Lawrence	4761	1,963	1,399	3,362
Lincoln	17199	4,297	6,451	10,748
Lyman*	473	195	139	334
Marshall*	975	417	279	696
McCook	1280	476	402	878
McPherson	148	66	41	107
Meade*	3692	1,486	1,103	2,589
Mellette*	30	12	9	21
Miner	517	199	159	358
Minnehaha*	51985	14,327	18,829	33,156
Moody*	987	373	307	680
Oglala Lakota*	114	44	35	79
Pennington*	23967	6,787	8,590	15,377
Perkins*	332	162	85	247
Potter	468	202	133	335
Roberts*	2781	1,197	792	1,989
Sanborn	602	244	179	423
Spink	1908	672	618	1,290
Stanley*	753	271	241	512
Sully	216	90	63	153
Todd*	102	38	32	70
Tripp*	1349	479	435	914
Turner	2186	612	787	1,399
Union	1718	874	422	1,296
Walworth*	1321	395	463	858
Yankton	6246	1,346	2,450	3,796
Ziebach*	43	13	15	28
Other	4089	769	1,660	2,429

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 20 of 81

## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 21 of 81

Today



Sunny

High: 46 °F

Tonight



Increasing  
Clouds and  
Breezy

Low: 31 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 48 °F

Friday  
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 21 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 34 °F



While winds across the east will diminish by early afternoon, a breezy, mild and dry afternoon will set the stage for increased fire danger this afternoon across central SD. Highs will climb into the upper 40s to mid 50s today before a cool down this weekend.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 22 of 81

## Today in Weather History

February 26, 1995: Heavy snow fell on the 26th and the 27th in western and central South Dakota near the northern border of the state. McLaughlin received 14 inches, Eureka 12 inches, and McIntosh 11 inches. Snowfall amounts dropped off to two to four inches about 20 miles south of the northern border.

February 26, 1998: A strong area of low pressure moved across central and northeast South Dakota from the morning of the 26th to the morning of the 27th. As the low moved northeast, cold north winds of 25 to 35 mph gusting to 45 mph caused widespread rain to change over to snow. Many roads became icy and poor visibilities in snow and blowing snow, and low wind chills developed. Four to 8 inches of snow fell across the counties bordering the Missouri River and in far western McPherson and far western Edmunds counties. Many area schools were dismissed early or canceled. Some residents, especially West River, lost power during the storm. Many McIntosh residents were without power for over 24 hours. Numerous activities and sports events were canceled. Some car accidents did not result in injury. A semi rolled onto its side northwest of Gettysburg on the 26th. Ranchers also experienced some calving problems as a result of the winter storm. Some snowfall amounts included, 4 inches at Selby, Herreid, and Mobridge, 5 inches at Isabel, 6 inches at Gettysburg, 7 inches about 11 miles east of Hosmer, and 8 inches at McIntosh. Some large drifts also developed, especially West River, as a result of the heavy snow and strong winds.

February 26, 2009: A vigorous, but relatively fast-moving winter storm system tracked across South Dakota Wednesday night and Thursday. Even with the reasonably quick movement of the system, storm total snowfall amounts were quite impressive. In fact, during the peak of the snowstorm, snowfall rates of 1" to 2" per hour were observed!

1910: Parts of Washington State were in the midst of a storm that produced 129 inches of snow at Laconia between the 24th and the 26th, a single storm record for the state. A series of storms, which began on the 23rd, led to a deadly avalanche on the first of March. By late on the 28th, the snow had changed to rain, setting the stage for disaster.

1972: The Buffalo Creek disaster occurred in the Buffalo Creek Hollow of Logan County in West Virginia. A coal slag dam on the Middle Fork of Buffalo Creek burst, sending a fifty-foot wall of water down a narrow valley killing 125 persons and causing 51 million dollars damage. Three days of rain atop a six-inch snow cover caused the dam to break.

2011: The tallest tree in Wales falls after a wind storm. Located on the Lake Vyrnwy Estate, this 124-year-old Douglas fir stood at 63.7 m (208.9 feet). The tree reportedly was leaning over and had two substantial cracks in the main trunk. This tree would be carved into a giant hand.

1987 - A slow moving storm in the southwestern U.S. spread heavy snow from the southern and central Rockies into the Central High Plains Region. Totals in Colorado ranged up to 62 inches at Purgatory. Colorado Springs CO reported a February record of 14.8 inches of snow in 24 hours. Lander WY received four inches in one hour, 13 inches in seven hours, and a record storm total of 26 inches. High winds created near blizzard conditions at Colorado Springs. Fairplay CO reported 43 inches of snow, with drifts ten feet high. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Eight cities in the central and western U.S. reported new record high temperatures for the date, including Lamoni IA with a reading of 67 degrees. Temperatures in North Dakota were as warm as those in Florida. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - An upper level weather disturbance brought snow to parts of the central U.S. which just one day earlier were enjoying temperatures in the 60s. Snowfall totals in Missouri ranged up to nine inches at Rolla. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Unseasonably cold weather followed in the wake of the winter storm in the northeastern U.S. Ten cities reported record low temperatures for the date, including Syracuse NY with a reading of 10 degrees below zero. Freezing temperatures in southeastern Virginia caused considerable damage to plants and fruit trees. The barometric pressure reading of 30.88 inches at Wilmington NC was February record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

# Groton Daily Independent

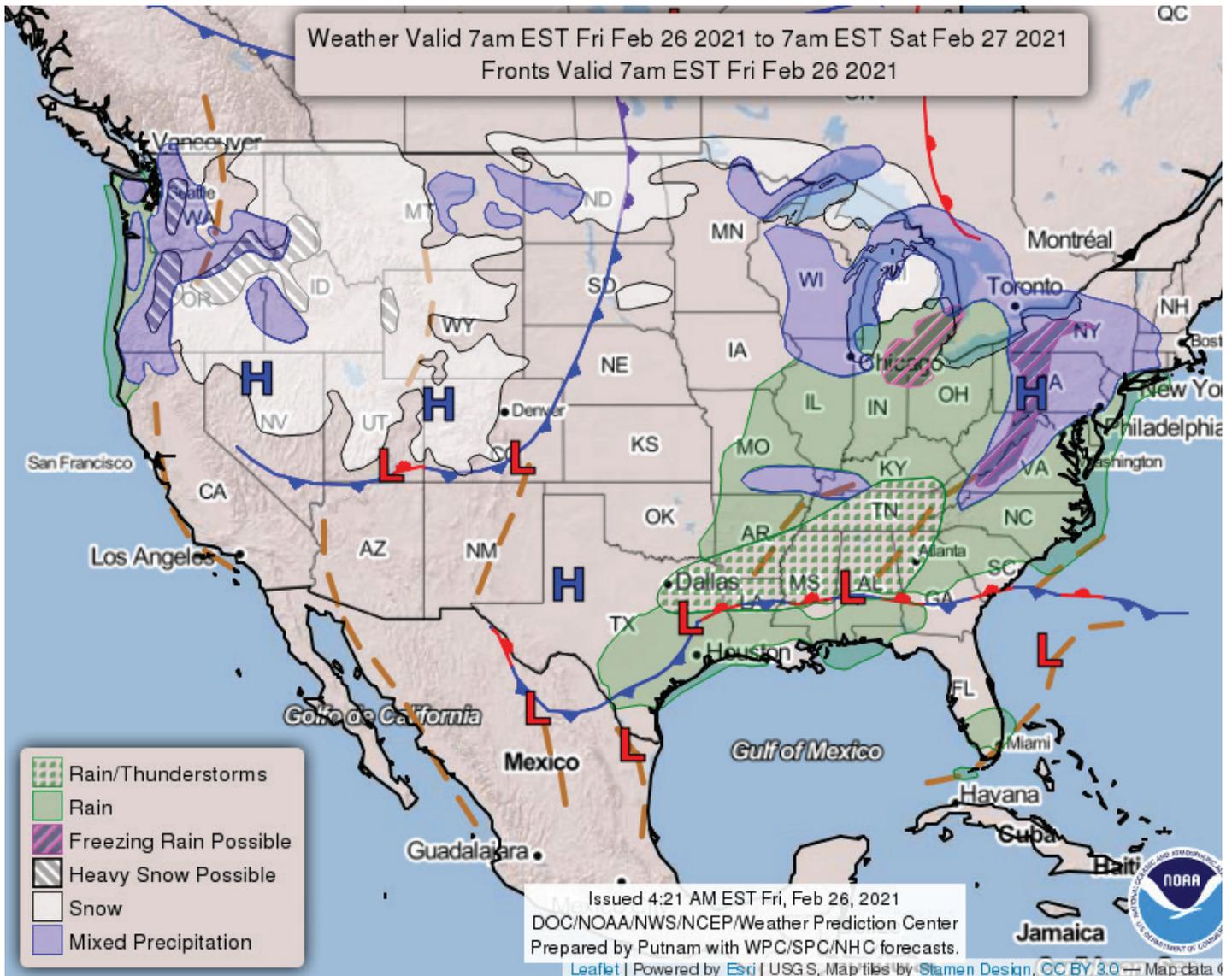
Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 23 of 81

## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 44 °F at 3:18 PM**  
**Low Temp: 18 °F at 6:45 AM**  
**Wind: 27 mph at 11:33 PM**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 65° in 1896**  
**Record Low: -20° in 1897, 1962**  
**Average High: 32°F**  
**Average Low: 12°F**  
**Average Precip in Feb.: 0.47**  
**Precip to date in Feb.: 0.18**  
**Average Precip to date: 0.94**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.18**  
**Sunset Tonight: 6:17 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:15 a.m.**



# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 24 of 81



## WHO OWNS ALL THIS LAND, ANYHOW?

A tourist from New York stopped at a service station to purchase gas after he visited the Grand Canyon. As he was walking inside to buy a soft drink, he noticed a farmer sitting near the door, slowly rocking back and forth observing the visitors.

"Wow," said the tourist, "that Grand Canyon is the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. It's so big it leaves me breathless. What do you think of it, sir?" he asked.

"It'd be a horrible place to lose a cow," he said slowly.

We live among God's great gifts every day. Sadly, we rarely pause to admire them, or even stop to thank Him for them. We are surrounded by the marvel of God's handiwork yet are rarely aware of it. Not David. He was continually in awe of God and His creation. On one occasion, overwhelmed at the sight before him, he exclaimed, "The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all who dwell in it."

Looking at the way David's thought unfolds, he is calling our attention to the fact that whatever we think we own or possess or have at our disposal, is not ours - it is God's, and He has entrusted us to be His managers of everything. Everything! We own nothing!

Wherever we look and whatever we see is God's. We may have a deed to a home or a title to a car or a large portfolio of stocks or an unreasonable amount of cash in a bank. But, we have no control over any of our possessions. With the tick of a clock or the beat of a heart, everything could be gone. "The earth and everything in it are the Lords!"

Prayer: Help us, Father, to accept the fact that everything we think we own, we don't. It's entrusted to us to invest to bring honor and glory to You. For Jesus' sake, Amen!

Scripture For Today: The earth is the Lord's and everything in it; the world and all who dwell in it. Psalm 24:1

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 25 of 81

## 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

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 26 of 81

News from the  Associated Press

## Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Brandon Valley 67, Rapid City Central 46

Ethan 48, Colman-Egan 43

Rapid City Stevens 78, Sturgis Brown 31

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 69, Sioux Falls Washington 61

Stanley County 56, North Central Co-Op 43

Watertown 66, Huron 45

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Brandon Valley 56, Rapid City Central 45, OT

Harrisburg 53, Sioux Falls Lincoln 25

Sioux Falls Washington 57, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 53, OT

Watertown 46, Huron 45

SoDak Qualifier=

Class A=

Region 5=

Parkston 50, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 42

Region 1=

Aberdeen Roncalli 54, Sisseton 25

Redfield 59, Milbank 24

Region 2=

Flandreau 52, Florence/Henry 46

Hamlin 63, Sioux Valley 36

Region 3=

Tri-Valley 57, West Central 52

Region 4=

Dakota Valley 61, Lennox 60

Tea Area 58, Elk Point-Jefferson 35

Region 5=

McCook Central/Montrose 62, Wagner 60

Region 6=

Miller 51, Chamberlain 50

Mobridge-Pollock 59, Stanley County 29

Regions 7&8=

Hill City 50, Lakota Tech 41

St. Thomas More 2, Hot Springs 0

Winner 69, Custer 34

Class B=

Region 1=

Aberdeen Christian 43, Waubay/Summit 34

Waverly-South Shore 47, Warner 40

Region 2=

Faulkton 52, Highmore-Harrold 45

Herreid/Selby Area 65, Lower Brule 42

Region 3=

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 27 of 81

Castlewood 73, James Valley Christian 40  
DeSmet 37, Arlington 29  
Region 4=  
Ethan 48, Colman-Egan 43  
Hanson 51, Dell Rapids St. Mary 38  
Region 5=  
Menno 48, Scotland 37  
Viborg-Hurley 52, Bridgewater-Emery 38  
Region 6=  
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 47, Kimball/White Lake 40  
Corsica/Stickney 48, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 28  
Region 7=  
New Underwood 39, Wall 21  
White River 75, Philip 42  
Region 8=  
Faith 59, Lemmon 53  
Timber Lake 47, Newell 41

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

## Judge stops Noem from releasing records in AG's fatal crash

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota judge on Thursday blocked Gov. Kristi Noem from releasing documents and video in the investigation of the state's attorney general for striking and killing a man with his car.

Defense attorneys for Jason Ravensborg, the state's top law enforcement agent, argued that the release of video of his interviews with investigators and other documents violated his right to a fair trial. Ravensborg is facing three misdemeanor charges, as well as the governor calling for his resignation, after he acknowledged in a statement shortly after the crash that he struck and killed a man walking on the shoulder of a rural highway on Sept. 12. He said he thought he had hit a deer until he returned to the accident scene the next day and found the body.

A circuit court judge in the county where the crash occurred ordered Noem and the Department of Public Safety late Thursday to halt the governor's plan to release more documents from the crash investigation, the Argus Leader reported. The judge also ordered the Department of Public Safety to remove two videos from its website it had released Tuesday that showed investigators interviewing Ravensborg.

Noem, a Republican, had tried to ratchet up pressure on the attorney general to resign earlier Thursday, promising to release the investigation documents and enlisting a senior cabinet member to join the chorus calling for his removal from office.

Speaking at a news conference, Noem said she decided to publicly call for Ravensborg to resign after taking a day to review the investigation, including videos of his interviews with law enforcement. She cast the decision to release the documents and video as providing transparency to the investigation.

Ravnsborg, also a Republican, has indicated he will not step down and insists he can continue performing the duties of his office despite facing the traffic charges and impeachment in the Legislature.

But Craig Price, Noem's secretary of public safety, pushed for Ravensborg's impeachment. Joining Noem at the news conference, Price said "maintaining public trust is critical" for law enforcement officers, referencing his 20-year career as a police officer that culminated with overseeing the state's Highway Patrol.

Price had said the Department of Public Safety was within the bounds of state law in releasing the documents.

Noem said she spent 10 hours going through details of the crash investigation on Monday, a day before she called for him to step down.

"I had not seen anything prior to that, but that is one of the reasons that we moved forward on Tuesday and why I put forward my personal opinion that he should resign," she said.

The governor said she had not communicated directly with Ravensborg since the accident.

Noem also made the extraordinary move of releasing videos of Ravensborg's interviews with detectives investigating the crash that occurred as he was driving home from a Republican fundraiser. The videos have since been removed from the Department of Public Safety's website.

In the interviews, Ravensborg appears unsure of how his Ford Taurus veered onto the highway shoulder, where it struck 55-year-old Joseph Boever. Though he initially told investigators he didn't use his cellphone while driving that night, he admitted that he had been checking email and news websites after investigators confronted him with his phone records.

Prosecutors have charged him with a misdemeanor for using his phone while driving, though his phone records show the device was locked about a minute before the crash.

Meanwhile, lawmakers readied to move forward with impeachment proceedings next week. House Speaker Spencer Gosch has proposed forming a special committee to investigate Ravensborg's conduct in the fatal crash.

## South Dakota lawmakers snub marijuana backers on 2 bills

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Members of the South Dakota House and Senate took turns deflating marijuana supporters on Thursday, one body approving a plan to delay implementation of medical cannabis and the other killing a bill that would have decriminalized the drug.

The House pushed forward on Gov. Kristi Noem's idea to give the Department of Health additional time to work on a medical marijuana strategy and create a working group of lawmakers to help lay out the program. Noem wanted a year delay. The House settled on six months.

Republican Speaker of the House Spencer Gosch, who's carrying the bill for Noem, adjusted the bill down to half a year in the spirit of compromise, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

Opponents of the delay have said tinkering of the voter-approved ballot measure only erodes public confidence in their state government. Some have doubts that the health department's request for more time is genuine and that delay efforts aren't a ploy to buy time for the governor and her allies to work on repealing the measure.

The Senate on Thursday defeated a bill that would have changed existing statute so people who possess small amounts of cannabis are no longer arrested in South Dakota.

## Democratic lawmaker asks AG to investigate Noem's plane use

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota Democratic lawmaker has formally requested the state's attorney general determine whether Gov. Kristi Noem's use of the state airplane to attend events hosted by political organizations violated state law.

Democratic Sen. Reynold Nesiba asked Attorney General Jason Ravensborg, who is tasked with issuing legal opinions to lawmakers, to open an investigation into whether Noem used state-owned airplanes for "personal use, out-of-state political campaigning, and attending partisan political events," in a letter dated Wednesday. A voter-passed state law, spearheaded by Nesiba in 2006 before he was a legislator, stipulates that state-owned aircraft can only be used for state business.

"It does look like there's been personal use, as well as political use," Nesiba said of the Republican governor's flights.

The request came amid the attorney general's own political crisis as he faces calls from the governor for his resignation and moves to impeach him for his conduct during a fatal car crash last year.

The attorney general's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the request.

But Nesiba said the attorney general is the only officer who can enforce state laws on airplane use, pointing out that this is an opportunity for Ravensborg to prove his assertion that he can continue to do

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 29 of 81

his job despite his political problems.

Noem flew in state planes to 2019 events hosted by political organizations like the National Rifle Association, the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce Women, Turning Point USA, and the Republican Jewish Coalition. She also used a state plane to fly to New York City with her family, where a float from the Department of Tourism appeared in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. But she has defended those trips as part of her job as "an ambassador for the state."

"Whenever the state airplane is used, it has always been used according to the law," the governor said last week, adding that the scrutiny on her travel was a political attack.

However, Democrats have cast their efforts to examine the use of state planes as a nonpartisan issue that should concern taxpayers. The news website Raw Story first reported on Noem's use of state aircraft.

"If you're mixing it with pleasure, I think you should have to take a commercial flight like everybody else does," Nesiba said, pointing to how Noem's family members had joined her on the 2019 trip to New York.

Noem posted a photo of her family in New York City and described how they had spent Thanksgiving "cheering on" the state's Mount Rushmore float and sightseeing around the city.

She also posted that the trip, made on the 10th anniversary of South Dakota's float appearing in the parade, made her proud "of the relationships built between this partnership and opportunities ahead."

Last year, Noem's profile among conservatives grew as she flew around the country for campaigns, political events and fundraisers. But she did not use state aircraft to fly to those events, according to flight logs of the state planes.

Noem made just two out-of-state flights on state planes last year — one to Minneapolis to catch a flight to Washington, D.C. to attend the signing of former President Donald Trump's trade deal with China, and another to Virginia to attend meetings of the National Governor's Association and Republican Governor's Association.

However, her request this year for \$5 million to purchase a new state plane has drawn efforts for greater scrutiny by lawmakers. The House moved Thursday to require the Legislature's sign-off on the final purchasing decision. Though that effort failed, lawmakers will continue to negotiate the budget for the next two weeks.

Noem has distanced herself from the decision to buy the plane, saying the Department of Transportation would make the decision on what meets the state's needs. She has also argued that the state's current fleet of three planes needs repairs, and the best plan would be to sell two of them to add to the pot of money for a new plane. The state is slated to spend \$ 1 million over the next three years in maintaining the planes it currently owns.

Noem said the plan would "make the entire process in transportation much more efficient and accountable to taxpayers."

## **\$15 million restitution ordered in organic seed fraud case**

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Restitution of more than \$15 million has been ordered in South Dakota for the man who defrauded wholesale seed distributors by passing off non-organic products as more expensive organic goods.

An earlier sentencing document had not listed the amount of restitution for Kent Duane Anderson, of Bradenton, Florida. Restitution has been set at \$15,311,927, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Anderson was sentenced Monday to 51 months in prison after earlier pleading guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and money laundering as part of an agreement with prosecutors. He was initially indicted on more than 40 charges.

Anderson was accused of reselling thousands of tons of non-organic seeds at a marked-up organic price through his businesses, Bar Two Bar Ranch and Green Leaf Resources and several Green Leaf spinoffs.

Products that Anderson bought from suppliers were primarily shipped to a storage and loading facility he owned in Tappen, North Dakota, according to court documents.

An indictment says that between October 2012 and December 2017, Anderson bought about \$46 million

worth of non-organic seed, sold it as organic for about \$71 million and used the profits to buy a yacht, Florida home, jewelry, expensive vehicles and land in South Dakota, among other things.

The indictment says Anderson listed a relative and a college friend as "figurehead" executives who were certified with the Department of Agriculture as authorized organic handlers. Those certifications were used as a cover to pass off the non-organic products as organic.

## **Victim of doctor's sexual abuse receives settlement**

GREAT FALLS, Mont. (AP) — A person who accused a former Indian Health Services pediatrician of sexual abuse has accepted a six-figure settlement with the federal government, the law firm representing the victim announced.

Stanley Patrick Weber had been convicted in Montana and South Dakota for sexually abusing young boys three decades ago on the Blackfeet and Pine Ridge Indian Reservations, the Great Falls Tribune reported Wednesday.

The Law Offices of David P. Sheldon had filed a claim in 2019 on behalf of a member of the Blackfeet Tribe who accused Weber of sexual abuse during the 1990s.

The claim alleged that the Indian Health Services and the U.S. Public Health Service were negligent in their supervision of Weber and knew or should have known about the doctor's sexual abuses.

David P. Sheldon said his client, a minor when he was abused by Weber, is relieved that the case is now settled.

"This settlement goes a long way to begin to right the wrongs caused by Dr. Weber, but so many other young men who lived on both the Blackfeet Reservation and the Pine (Ridge) Reservation were victimized," Sheldon said. "This really only begins to address the wrongs committed against many other young men who were victimized by Dr. Weber."

Weber is currently in federal prison. He appealed both of his criminal cases and lost his Montana appeal in 2020. His South Dakota appeal was also rejected this month.

## **House passes transgender female athletics legislation**

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House has passed legislation that prohibits transgender girls from participating in female sports at public schools.

The bill's prime sponsor, Republican Rep. Rhonda Milstead, argued that transgender girls have an unfair advantage in female sports. The bill means female sports would only be available to participants who are female based on their biological gender at birth.

Opponents of the bill include the American Civil Liberties Union which said the bill is unconstitutional.

"House Bill 1217 is not about protecting fairness in women's sports. If it were, then it would tackle the actual threats to women's sports, such as severe underfunding, lack of media coverage, sexist ideologies that suggest that women and girls are weak, and pay equity for coaches," said Jett Jonelis, ACLU of South Dakota advocacy manager.

Each school year, before students can participate in team sports, they would need to submit statements verifying their age, biological sex and that they haven't taken any steroids in the 12 months preceding competition, the Argus Leader reported. The statement must be signed by a parent if they are under 18.

The bill passed the House Wednesday on a 50-17 vote and was sent to a Senate committee.

## **Amnesty report describes Axum massacre in Ethiopia's Tigray**

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Soldiers from Eritrea systematically killed "many hundreds" of people, the large majority men, in a massacre in late November in the Ethiopian city of Axum, Amnesty International says in a new report, echoing the findings of an Associated Press story last week and citing more than 40 witnesses.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 31 of 81

Crucially, the head of the government-established Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, Daniel Bekele, says the Amnesty findings "should be taken very seriously." The commission's own preliminary findings "indicate the killing of an as yet unknown number of civilians by Eritrean soldiers" in Axum, its statement said.

The Amnesty report on what might be the deadliest massacre of Ethiopia's Tigray conflict describes the soldiers gunning down civilians as they fled, lining up men and shooting them in the back, rounding up "hundreds, if not thousands" of men for beatings and refusing to allow those grieving to bury the dead.

Over a period of about 24 hours, "Eritrean soldiers deliberately shot civilians on the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches, extrajudicially executing men and boys," the report released early Friday says. "The massacre was carried out in retaliation for an earlier attack by a small number of local militiamen, joined by local residents armed with sticks and stones."

The "mass execution" of Axum civilians by Eritrean troops may amount to crimes against humanity, the report says, and it calls for a United Nations-led international investigation and full access to Tigray for human rights groups, journalists and humanitarian workers. The region has been largely cut off since fighting began in early November.

Ethiopia's federal government has denied the presence of soldiers from neighboring Eritrea, long an enemy of the Tigray region's now-fugitive leaders, and Eritrea's government dismissed the AP story on the Axum massacre as "outrageous lies." Eritrea's information minister, Yemane Gebremeskel, on Friday said his country "is outraged and categorically rejects the preposterous accusations" in the Amnesty report.

But even senior members of the Ethiopia-appointed interim government in Tigray have acknowledged the Eritrean soldiers' presence and allegations of widespread looting and killing.

On Thursday, Ethiopia's government acknowledged that the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission was investigating "allegations relating to incidents in the city of Axum" in collaboration with unnamed international experts.

But Ethiopia's ambassador to Belgium, Hirut Zemene, told a webinar on Thursday that the alleged massacre in November was a "very highly unlikely scenario" and "we suspect it's a very, very crazy idea."

No one knows how many thousands of civilians have been killed in the conflict between Ethiopian and allied forces and those of the Tigray regional government, which had long dominated Ethiopia's government before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018. Humanitarian officials have warned that a growing number of people might be starving to death as access, while improving, remains restricted.

The presence of Eritrean soldiers has brought some alarm. The United States has repeatedly urged Eritrea to withdraw its soldiers and cited credible reports of "grave" human rights abuses. On Wednesday it asked, "Does the Eritrean military have sufficient control over its troops to prevent them from committing human rights abuses?"

Witnesses of the massacre in Axum told Amnesty International that Ethiopian and Eritrean soldiers jointly took control of the city but the Eritreans carried out the killings and then conducted house-to-house raids for men and teenage boys.

Bodies were left strewn in the streets after the events of Nov. 28 and 29, witnesses said.

"The next day, they did not allow us to pick the dead. The Eritrean soldiers said you cannot bury the dead before our dead soldiers are buried," one woman told Amnesty International. With hospitals looted or health workers having fled, some witnesses said a number of people died from their wounds because of lack of care.

"Gathering the bodies and carrying out the funerals took days. Most of the dead appear to have been buried on 30 November, but witnesses said that people found many additional bodies in the days that followed," the new report says.

After obtaining permission from Ethiopian soldiers to bury the dead, witnesses said they feared the killings would resume any moment, even as they piled bodies onto horse-drawn carts and took them to churches for burial, at times in mass graves.

The AP spoke with a deacon at one church, the Church of St. Mary of Zion, who said he helped count the bodies, gathered victims' identity cards and assisted with burials. He believes some 800 people were

killed that weekend around the city.

After being left exposed for a day or more, the bodies had begun to rot, further traumatizing families and those who gathered to help.

The new report says satellite imagery shows newly "disturbed soil" beside churches.

## House to vote on virus bill; arbiter says wage hike a no-go

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democrats are ready to shove a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package through the House on Friday, despite a setback that means a minimum wage boost is unlikely to be in the final version that reaches President Joe Biden.

A near party-line vote seemed certain on the measure, Biden's first crack at his initial legislative goal of acting decisively against the pandemic. In the year since the coronavirus has taken hold, it has stalled much of the economy, killed half a million Americans and reshaped the daily lives of virtually everyone.

The relief bill would provide millions of people with \$1,400 direct payments. It contains billions of dollars for vaccines and COVID-19 testing, schools, state and local governments, the ailing restaurant and airline industries and emergency jobless benefits while providing tax breaks to lower earners and families with children.

Republicans oppose the sweeping measure, saying it's too expensive, not targeted enough at the people and businesses that most need it and a grab bag of gifts for Democratic allies. Not one has publicly said they will support the legislation, an ominous sign that the partisan gulf that has enveloped Washington for decades shows no sign of closing.

The House bill would also hoist the federal minimum wage to \$15 hourly by 2025, more than doubling the current \$7.25 floor that's been in effect since 2019.

But that proposal seemed highly likely to die in the Senate after that chamber's parliamentarian said Thursday that the cherished progressive goal must be dropped from the relief legislation, Senate Democratic aides said.

The finding by Elizabeth MacDonough, the chamber's nonpartisan arbiter of its rules, means Democrats face an overwhelmingly uphill battle to boost the minimum wage this year in the face of solid Republican opposition.

Biden, a supporter of the \$15 increase, was "disappointed" in the outcome but respected the parliamentarian's ruling, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. The Senate has a long tradition of heeding the parliamentarian's decisions with few exceptions, a history that is revered by traditionalists like Biden, a 36-year Senate veteran.

"He will work with leaders in Congress to determine the best path forward because no one in this country should work full time and live in poverty," Psaki said.

Democrats are pushing the massive coronavirus relief measure through Congress under special rules that will let them avoid a Senate filibuster by Republicans, a tactic that Democrats would need an unattainable 60 votes to defeat.

But those same Senate rules prohibit provisions with only an "incidental" impact on the federal budget because they are chiefly driven by other policy purposes. MacDonough said the minimum wage provision didn't pass that test, according to aides who described her decision on condition of anonymity because it hadn't been released.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said the minimum wage plan would remain in that chamber's legislation anyway, saying, "House Democrats believe that the minimum wage hike is necessary."

She probably had little choice — many House Democrats are progressives who are insistent that the party fight for the wage boost. Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., a leading sponsor of the minimum wage increase, said Democrats shouldn't be bowed by "the advisory opinion of the parliamentarian and Republican obstructionism."

Democrats can afford little dissension over the minimum wage or anything else in the COVID-19 relief

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 33 of 81

bill. They have just a 10-vote edge in the House and no votes to spare in the 50-50 Senate.

Despite their paper-thin congressional majorities, Democratic leaders were hoping that House approval of the package would be followed by passage in the Senate, where changes seem likely. Democrats are aiming to get the legislation to Biden's desk by mid-March.

Republicans oppose the \$15 minimum wage target as an expense that would hurt businesses and cost jobs.

MacDonough's decision might actually make passage of the overall relief bill easier because efforts to find a minimum wage compromise between progressives and moderate Democrats who'd prefer a more measured approach could have been contentious.

Democrats have said they could still pursue a minimum wage boost in free-standing legislation or attach it to legislation expected later this year that is to be aimed at a massive infrastructure program. But they'd still face the challenge of garnering 60 Senate votes, a hurdle that has upended Democratic attempts to boost the minimum wage for over a decade.

In a study that's been cited by both sides in the clash, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the \$15 minimum wage would increase pay for 27 million workers and lift 900,000 people out of poverty by 2025, but also kill 1.4 million jobs.

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have state minimum wages that exceed the federal \$7.25 hourly floor, with only the District of Columbia currently requiring a \$15 minimum.

Seven states have laws putting their minimums on a pathway to \$15 in a future year, according to the nonpartisan National Conference of State Legislatures.

This story has been corrected to show the bill would raise the minimum wage by 2025, not by 2015.

## At pivotal moment in Afghanistan war, Biden weighs a dilemma

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's longest war is approaching a crossroads.

President Joe Biden's choices in Afghanistan boil down to this: withdraw all troops by May, as promised by his predecessor, and risk a resurgence of extremist dangers, or stay and possibly prolong the war in hopes of compelling the Taliban to make peace with a weak and fractured government.

The second option may be the most likely, but officials say no decision has been made.

Afghanistan presents one of the new administration's toughest and more urgent decisions. The U.S. public is weary of a war nearly 20 years old, but pulling out now could be seen as giving the Taliban too much leverage and casting a shadow over the sacrifices made by U.S. and coalition troops and Afghan civilians.

Biden has not commented in detail on Afghanistan since taking office, but he has a long history with the war. In 2009 as vice president, he lost an internal administration debate at a crucial juncture in the war; he argued for reducing the U.S. military commitment to focus mainly on countering extremist groups, but President Barack Obama decided instead to vastly increase troop numbers to 100,000.

The Obama strategy failed to force the Taliban to seek peace, and by the time Donald Trump entered the White House in January 2017 Obama had dropped the troop total to about 8,500. Trump increased it by several thousand later that year, and after his administration reached a conditional peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, he began a withdrawal, including a reduction last month to the current total of 2,500.

Biden said during the 2020 campaign that he might keep a counterterrorism force in Afghanistan but also would "end the war responsibly" to ensure U.S. forces never have to return.

"I would bring American combat troops in Afghanistan home during my first term," he wrote last summer in response to written questions from the Council on Foreign Relations, although the U.S. mission there already shifted some years ago from combat to advising Afghan security forces. "Any residual U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would be focused only on counterterrorism operations."

The administration says it is studying the February 2020 so-called Doha deal in which the Taliban agreed

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 34 of 81

to stop attacking U.S. and coalition forces and to start peace talks with the Kabul government, among other things, in exchange for a complete withdrawal of foreign troops by May 1, 2021.

Senior U.S. officials have asserted for months that the Taliban has fallen short of its Doha commitments, and although the administration's review is ongoing, arguments for extending a troop presence beyond May 1 are considerable.

U.S. allies in NATO have not disputed the U.S. complaint that the Taliban has not fulfilled its Doha commitments, nor have they called for an early troop withdrawal. Some appear to be preparing for a U.S. decision to stay beyond May 1.

The deadline, barely two months away, is itself a factor, since it will soon be too late to get all 10,000 U.S. and NATO troops out in an orderly way by May 1. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said last week that he has assured U.S. allies and partners in Afghanistan there will be no "hasty" pullout, and that Washington's focus is on diplomacy.

"Clearly, the violence is too high right now, and more progress needs to be made in the Afghan-led negotiations, and so I urge all parties to choose the path towards peace," he told reporters.

A further hint of the administration's thinking may be its repeated reference to reviewing "compliance" with the Doha agreement, suggesting the possibility that the administration ultimately will argue that Taliban noncompliance makes the May 1 deadline void, or at least moveable.

That was the central argument offered in a Feb. 3 report by the congressionally authorized Afghanistan Study Group, whose members included Joseph Dunford, the retired Marine general and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who once led U.S. forces in Afghanistan. It called for an immediate diplomatic push to extend the May 1 withdrawal deadline.

"The Study Group believes that further U.S. troop withdrawals should be conditioned on the Taliban's demonstrated willingness and capacity to contain terrorist groups, on a reduction in the Taliban's violence against the Afghan people, and on real progress toward a compromise political settlement," the report said.

A complete U.S. troop withdrawal not tied to progress in peace negotiations would likely lead to an end to most U.S. financial aid to Afghanistan and a closing of the American embassy, it argued.

"This would be a highly risky, and even dangerous, approach that could foment more conflict than it resolves and create the sort of threats that imperil U.S. security. It would most likely result in a new chapter of civil war, not unlike the one that erupted in the 1990s and led to 9/11," it said, referring to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the United States that prompted a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan a month later.

Stephen Biddle, a Columbia University professor who previously advised U.S. military officials on the war, says it probably was a mistake for the Trump administration to promise a full withdrawal by a specific date.

"If it's important enough to be there at all, to be spending money at all, to be risking lives at all, then the point of being there is to get a negotiated agreement, and for that you need leverage," Biddle said. What's left of American leverage at this point, he said, rests with the U.S. military presence and the prospect of financial aid once a peace deal is done.

"We need to husband our leverage, and that means not unilaterally withdrawing without a deal," he added. "If you're serious about a deal and are willing to do what it takes to get one, then that implies patience beyond April, probably."

## Once the mainstream model, Michigan GOP embraces right wing

By THOMAS BEAUMONT and DAVID EGGERT Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Josh Venable, a longtime Michigan GOP operative and chief of staff to former U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, can trace the arc of the state's Republican Party clearly.

"This was the state where to be Republican was defined by Gerald Ford and George Romney," Venable said, referring to the moderate former president and former governor.

Now, he said, it's defined by Mike Shirkey, the state Senate majority leader who was overheard calling the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol riot a "hoax"; Meshawn Maddock, the new co-chair of the state party who backed

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 35 of 81

former President Donald Trump's false claims of voter fraud; and the Proud Boys.

While the state has swung back to Democrats since Trump's narrow 2016 win, choosing President Joe Biden by more than 150,000 votes, Michigan's Republican Party has taken a hard right turn.

Its own Capitol in Lansing was the rallying point in April for armed Michigan Liberty Militia protesting pandemic restrictions, including some members who were later charged with plotting to kidnap Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

The rightward lurch has altered the GOP's image to one unrecognizable to its pragmatic 20th century standard-bearers, and the direction of the state party here could be an exemplar of other Midwestern battleground states.

The move to more hard-line, extreme views in Michigan came into clearer view Wednesday when it became known that Trump devotees, no longer content with the GOP as their political home, had filed a petition with the state elections board to form a new Patriot Party.

Decades in the making, and punctuated loudly by Trump's 2016 win, Michigan's drift from the GOP's center has prompted departures from traditional conservatives and retribution against moderates.

It's ominous for a party that suffered defeat statewide in 2018 and 2020 and where some Republicans worry it has cost the party credibility in a place long viewed as a bulwark of Midwestern common sense.

The shift is rooted in a combination of economic dislocation caused by staggering job losses in the manufacturing sector and a cultural shift further to the right on issues like guns and abortion.

The state's economy was suffering even before the Great Recession, which only fomented working class discontent.

From 2000 to 2010, Michigan had shed more than a million jobs, more than any state, most of them in manufacturing. Many were in the automotive industry in larger metro areas. But single-factory small towns to the north also were flattened, as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the globalization it represented sparked losses that ballooned with the 2008 economic crash.

"All these things were a catalyst," said Ken Sikkema, a former Michigan GOP Senate leader whose Grand Rapids district lost 5,000 jobs with three plant closures just before the 2008 crash.

"This building resentment that people just didn't agree economically or culturally with the direction percolated and exploded," Sikkema said.

Traditional conservatives like Paul Mitchell and others were casualties. Mitchell, who retired from the U.S. House after two terms representing working-class eastern Michigan, later quit the GOP and assigned responsibility for the Jan. 6 riot to Trump, for whom he voted twice.

Michigan's two Republican congressional moderates, Fred Upton and Peter Meijer, have been censured by county party committees for voting to impeach Trump.

On Tuesday, the GOP committee in Cass County, Upton's home, sided with Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia over Upton, who voted with Democrats this month to strip Greene of her committee assignments for suggesting, among other debunked theories, that mass school shootings were false flags.

"In their resolution, they stated that 'her comments have not been out of line with anyone else's comments,'" Upton, a 34-year incumbent, posted on Twitter on Wednesday about the Cass County GOP. "Really?"

Meijer, elected last year, said the party will continue to lose supporters if they celebrate and encourage its hard-right elements.

"If we're strictly a litmus test party, we're going to drum out some of the people we need to be able to win competitive elections," Meijer said.

Though the ascendance of the right in the party became starkly clear in the last year, there have been other signs of the direction Republicans were heading.

In 2012, outspoken social conservative state Rep. David Agema surprised party regulars by ousting longtime establishment Republican Saul Anuzis as national committeeman.

Former Gov. Rick Snyder, Gateway Inc.'s former CEO, fit the change theme of 2010, but his moves to tax pensions, expand Medicaid under the 2010 federal health care law and spend \$617 million to bring Detroit out of bankruptcy drew a backlash.

Snyder, who campaigned against partisanship, all but ignored the political spadework of building the party

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 36 of 81

as his predecessors had done. The resulting vacuum provided a stage for figures such as Maddock to seize. "Forces of nature take over at that point, and those forces were definitely tilting right, extreme far-right," said Venable, who was state Republican Party chief of staff in 2010.

The void ceded space to right-wing extremism and allowed a relationship with Republican leaders and Michigan's long-active militia to develop.

Maddock was a Trump delegate to the 2016 national GOP convention but took on a more prominent role in 2020 with the national Women for Trump Committee.

She helped organize the April protest in Lansing, where militia brandished rifles in the Capitol, and she later posted images from the event of Whitmer altered to resemble Adolf Hitler.

Maddock also helped organized Michigan's 19-bus delegation to Washington last month to protest the 2020 election results. Though Maddock spoke at the "Stop the Steal" rally on Jan. 5, she said she was absent from the deadly U.S. Capitol siege that followed Trump's speech on Jan. 6.

Nodding to the emerging right wing, Michigan GOP fundraiser Ron Weiser invited Maddock to share the ticket for his bid to become state party chair. Weiser was elected chair, and Maddock his No. 2, on Feb. 5.

All the while, Michigan's GOP leadership has for the first time in memory bestowed legitimacy on its state's militia, long relegated to the shadows.

Weeks after the April demonstration in Lansing, Shirkey, the state Senate majority leader, accepted an invitation to meet with militia leaders after they sought him out for calling some of the Capitol protesters "jackasses."

Days later, Shirkey pressed a crowd of militia in Grand Rapids to remain vigilant.

"We need you now more than ever to continue to train," he told the group in Grand Rapids, urging them "to stand up and test that assertion of authority by government."

The embrace of the militia reflects a jarring shift for these right-wing, paramilitary groups from the fringe to the center of the GOP power centers.

"These people had always been marginalized, but you've got leaders in the party enabling their behavior now," said Mitchell, the retired former Republican congressman. "It's a total pendulum swing."

---

Beaumont reported from Des Moines, Iowa.

## **Biden to exercise empathy skills in Texas visit after storms**

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will exercise his empathy skills Friday during a Texas visit with a dual mission: surveying damage caused by severe winter weather and encouraging people to get their coronavirus shots.

Biden and his wife, Jill, were traveling to Houston for the president's first trip to a major disaster site since he took office a little over a month ago.

Severe winter weather across the South over Valentine's Day weekend battered multiple states, with Texas bearing the brunt of unseasonably frigid conditions that caused widespread power outages and frozen pipes that burst and flooded homes. Millions of residents lost heat and running water.

At least 40 people in Texas died as a result of the storm and, although the weather has returned to more normal temperatures, more than 1 million residents were still under orders to boil water before drinking it.

Biden is expected to visit a food bank and meet with local leaders to discuss the storm, relief efforts and progress toward recovery. He is to be accompanied by Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott.

While in Houston, the Democratic president also planned to visit a mass coronavirus vaccination center run by the federal government. Biden on Thursday commemorated the 50 millionth COVID-19 vaccination since he took office, halfway toward his goal of 100 million shots by his 100th day in office. That celebration followed a moment of silence to mark the passage earlier this week of 500,000 U.S. deaths blamed on the disease.

The post-storm debate in Texas has centered on the state maintaining its own electrical grid and lack of

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 37 of 81

storm preparation, including weatherization of key infrastructure. Some state officials initially blamed the blackouts on renewable energy even though Texas is a heavy user of fossil fuels like oil and gas.

The White House said Biden's purpose in visiting would be to support, not scold.

"The president doesn't view the crisis and the millions of people who've been impacted by it as a Democratic or Republican issue," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday. "He views it as an issue where he's eager to get relief, to tap into all the resources in the federal government, to make sure the people of Texas know we're thinking about them, we're fighting for them and we're going to continue working on this as they're recovering."

Psaki said policy discussions about better weatherization and preparation could come later, "but right now, we're focused on getting relief to the people of the state."

Biden has declared a major disaster in Texas and asked federal agencies to identify additional resources to aid the recovery. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has sent emergency generators, bottled water, ready-to-eat meals and blankets.

Galveston County Judge Mark Henry said in an interview that he didn't know what more the federal government could do to help because the failures were at the state level. But Henry, a Republican who is the highest county official in the suburban Houston county, said that if Biden "thinks it's important to visit, then come on down."

Biden wanted to make the trip last week, but said at the time that he held back because he didn't want his presence and entourage to detract from the recovery effort.

Biden, whose life has been marked by personal tragedy, is known for his ability to empathize with others and their suffering. His first wife and infant daughter were killed in a car collision in 1972. His son, Beau Biden, died of brain cancer in 2015 at age 46.

No Texas lawmakers were expected to hitch a ride home aboard Air Force One due to "limitations on space" on the plane, Psaki said.

It was unclear whether Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz would join Biden in the state. Members of Congress often tag along when a president visits their state.

The state's other senator, Republican John Cornyn, planned to join Biden, a spokesman said.

Cruz, an ally of former President Donald Trump and one of a handful of GOP lawmakers who had objected to Congress certifying Biden's victory, was scheduled to address the Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida, on Friday morning, a spokesman said.

Cruz was recently criticized for taking his family to Cancun, Mexico, while millions of Texans shivered in their unheated homes during the disaster. Cruz later said the trip was a mistake. Cornyn's plans were unclear.

Coincidentally, Houston also was the destination for Trump's first presidential visit to a disaster area in 2017 after Hurricane Harvey caused catastrophic flooding that August.

Trump, who is not known for displays of empathy, did not meet with storm victims on the visit. He returned four days later and urged people who had relocated to a shelter to "have a good time."

## Vaccination 'passports' may open society, but inequity looms

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — Violet light bathed the club stage as 300 people, masked and socially distanced, erupted in gentle applause. For the first time since the pandemic began, Israeli musician Aviv Geffen stepped to his electric piano and began to play for an audience seated right in front of him.

"A miracle is happening here tonight," Geffen told the crowd.

Still, the reanimating experience Monday night above a shopping mall north of Tel Aviv night was not accessible to everyone. Only people displaying a "green passport" that proved they had been vaccinated or had recovered from COVID-19 could get in.

The highly controlled concert offered a glimpse of a future that many are longing for after months of COVID-19 restrictions. Governments say getting vaccinated and having proper documentation will smooth

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 38 of 81

the way to travel, entertainment and other social gatherings in a post-pandemic world.

But it also raises the prospect of further dividing the world along the lines of wealth and vaccine access, creating ethical and logistical issues that have alarmed decision-makers around the world.

Other governments are watching Israel churn through the world's fastest vaccination program and grapple with the ethics of using the shots as diplomatic currency and power.

Inside Israel, green passports or badges obtained through an app is the coin of the realm. The country recently reached agreements with Greece and Cyprus to recognize each other's green badges, and more such tourism-boosting accords are expected.

Anyone unwilling or unable to get the jabs that confer immunity will be "left behind," said Health Minister Yuli Edelstein.

"It's really the only way forward at the moment," Geffen said in an interview with The Associated Press.

The checks at the club's doors, which admitted only those who could prove they are fully vaccinated, allowed at least a semblance of normality.

"People can't live their lives in the new world without them," he said. "We must take the vaccines. We must."

The vaccine is not available to everyone in the world, whether due to supply or cost. And some people don't want it, for religious or other reasons. In Israel, a country of 9.3 million people, only about half the adult population has received the required two doses.

There is new pressure from the government to encourage vaccinations. Israeli lawmakers on Wednesday passed a law allowing the Health Ministry to disclose information on people who have yet to be vaccinated. Under the policy, names can be released to the ministries of education, labor, social affairs and social services, as well as local governments, "with the purpose of allowing these bodies to encourage people to get vaccinated."

The government is appealing to the emotional longing for the company of others -- in Israel's storied outdoor markets, at concerts like Geffen's, and elsewhere.

"With the Green Pass, doors just open for you. You could go out to restaurants, work out at the gym, see a show," read an announcement on Feb. 21, the day much of the economy reopened after a six-week shutdown.

Then it raised a question at the center of the global quest to conquer the pandemic that has hobbled economies and killed nearly 2.5 million people:

"How to get the pass? Go and get vaccinated right now."

It's that simple in Israel, which has enough vaccine to inoculate everyone over 16, although the government has been criticized for sharing only tiny quantities with Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said this week he intends to send excess vaccine to some of the country's allies. Israel's attorney general said Thursday night the plan has been frozen while he reviews the legalities.

Most countries don't have enough vaccine, highlighting the fraught ethical landscape of who can get it and how to lift the burden of COVID-19.

"The core human rights principle is equity and nondiscrimination," said Lawrence Gostin, a Georgetown University professor and director of the World Health Organization Collaborating Center on National and Global Health Law.

"There's a huge moral crisis in equity globally because in high income countries like Israel or the United States or the EU countries, we're likely to get to herd immunity by the end of this year," he said. "But for many low-income countries, most people won't be vaccinated for many years. Do we really want to give priority to people who already have so many privileges?"

It's a question dogging the international community as wealthier countries begin to gain traction against the coronavirus and some of its variants.

Last April, the initiative known as COVAX was formed by the WHO, with the initial goal of getting vaccines

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 39 of 81

to poor countries at roughly the same time shots were being rolled out in rich countries. It has missed that target, and 80% of the 210 million doses administered worldwide have been given in only 10 countries, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said this week.

Ghana on Wednesday became the first of 92 countries to get vaccines for free through the initiative. COVAX announced that about 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in the African nation. That's a fraction of the 2 billion shots the WHO aims to deliver this year.

As those countries begin vaccinations, wealthier nations are starting to talk about "green passport" logistics, security, privacy and policy.

The British government said it is studying the possibility of issuing some kind of "COVID status certification" that could be used by employers and organizers of large events as it prepares to ease lockdown restrictions this year.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said the policy could cause problems.

"We can't be discriminatory against people who, for whatever reason, can't have the vaccine," he said.

Many countries around Europe are scrambling to develop their own vaccine certification systems to help revive summer travel, generating a risk that different systems won't work properly across the continent's borders.

"I think there is huge potential for not working well together," said Andrew Bud, CEO of facial biometrics company iProov, which is testing its digital vaccination passport technology within the U.K.'s National Health Service.

But the technical knots around vaccine passports may be the easier ones to solve, he said.

The bigger challenges "are principally ethical, social, political and legal. How to balance the fundamental rights of citizens ... with the benefits to society."

—  
Associated Press writers Danica Kirka and Kelvin Chan in London contributed.

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

## Militia official: US strike in Syria kills 1, wounds several

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA, LOLITA C. BALDOR, and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — A U.S. airstrike in Syria targeted facilities belonging to a powerful Iranian-backed Iraqi armed group, killing one of their militiamen and wounding a number of others, an Iraqi militia official said Friday.

The Pentagon said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a U.S. service member and other coalition troops.

The Iraqi militia official told The Associated Press that the strikes against the Kataeb Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades, hit an area along the border between the Syrian site of Boukamal facing Qaim on the Iraqi side. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak of the attack. Syria war monitoring groups said the strikes hit trucks moving weapons to a base for Iranian-backed militias in Boukamal.

"I'm confident in the target that we went after, we know what we hit," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters flying with him from California to Washington, shortly after the airstrikes which were carried out Thursday evening Eastern Standard Time.

The airstrike was the first military action undertaken by the Biden administration, which in its first weeks has emphasized its intent to put more focus on the challenges posed by China, even as Mideast threats persist. Biden's decision to attack in Syria did not appear to signal an intention to widen U.S. military involvement in the region but rather to demonstrate a will to defend U.S. troops in Iraq.

The U.S. has in the past targeted facilities in Syria belonging to Kataeb Hezbollah, which it has blamed for numerous attacks targeting U.S. personnel and interests in Iraq. The Iraqi Kataeb is separate from

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 40 of 81

the Lebanese Hezbollah movement.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based group that monitors the war in Syria, said the strikes targeted a shipment of weapons that were being taken by trucks entering Syrian territories from Iraq. The group said 22 fighters from the Popular Mobilization Forces, an Iraqi umbrella group of mostly Shiite paramilitaries that includes Kataeb Hezbollah, were killed. The report could not be independently verified.

Defense Secretary Austin said he was "confident" the U.S. had hit back at the "the same Shia militants that conducted the strikes," referring to a Feb. 15 rocket attack in northern Iraq that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a U.S. service member and other coalition personnel.

Austin said he had recommended the action to President Joe Biden.

"We said a number of times that we will respond on our timeline," Austin said. "We wanted to be sure of the connectivity and we wanted to be sure that we had the right targets."

Earlier, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. action was a "proportionate military response" taken together with diplomatic measures, including consultation with coalition partners.

"The operation sends an unambiguous message: President Biden will act to protect American and coalition personnel," Kirby said.

Kirby said the U.S. airstrikes "destroyed multiple facilities at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militant groups," including Kataeb Hezbollah and Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada.

Further details were not immediately available.

Mary Ellen O'Connell, a professor at Notre Dame Law School, criticized the U.S. attack as a violation of international law.

"The United Nations Charter makes absolutely clear that the use of military force on the territory of a foreign sovereign state is lawful only in response to an armed attack on the defending state for which the target state is responsible," she said. "None of those elements is met in the Syria strike."

Biden administration officials condemned the Feb. 15 rocket attack near the city of Irbil in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish-run region, but as recently as this week officials indicated they had not determined for certain who carried it out. Officials have noted that in the past, Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups have been responsible for numerous rocket attacks that targeted U.S. personnel or facilities in Iraq.

Kirby had said Tuesday that Iraq is in charge of investigating the Feb. 15 attack. He added that U.S. officials were not then able to give a "certain attribution as to who was behind these attacks."

A little-known Shiite militant group calling itself Saraya Alwiya al-Dam, Arabic for Guardians of Blood Brigade, claimed responsibility for the Feb. 15 attack. A week later, a rocket attack in Baghdad's Green Zone appeared to target the U.S. Embassy compound, but no one was hurt.

Iran this week said it has no links to the Guardians of Blood Brigade. Iran-backed groups have splintered significantly since the U.S.-directed strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in Baghdad more than a year ago. Both were key in commanding and controlling a wide array of Iran-backed groups operating in Iraq.

Since their deaths, the militias have become increasingly unruly. Some analysts argue the armed groups have splintered as a tactic to claim attacks under different names to mask their involvement.

The frequency of attacks by Shiite militia groups against U.S. targets in Iraq diminished late last year ahead of Biden's inauguration.

The U.S. under the previous Trump administration blamed Iran-backed groups for carrying out multiple attacks in Iraq.

Trump had said the death of a U.S. contractor would be a red line and provoke U.S. escalation in Iraq. The December 2019 killing of a U.S. civilian contractor in a rocket attack in Kirkuk sparked a tit-for-tat fight on Iraqi soil that culminated in the U.S. killing of Iranian commander Soleimani and brought Iraq to the brink of a proxy war.

U.S. forces have been significantly reduced in Iraq to 2,500 personnel and no longer partake in combat missions with Iraqi forces in ongoing operations against the Islamic State group.

Baldor and Burns reported from Washington, D.C.

## Asia Today: 1st vaccines reach arms in S. Korea, Hong Kong

South Korea administered its first available shots of coronavirus vaccines to people at long-term care facilities Friday, launching a mass immunization campaign that health authorities hope will restore some level of normalcy by the end of the year.

The rollout of vaccines come at a critical time for the country, which has seen its hard-won gains against the virus get wiped out by a winter surge and is struggling to mitigate the pandemic's economic shock that decimated service sector jobs.

"I felt very anxious over the past year, but I feel more secure now after receiving the vaccine," said nursing home worker Lee Gyeong-soon, who received her shot at a public health center in northern Seoul.

Health authorities plan to complete injecting the first of two doses to some 344,000 residents and workers at long-term care settings and 55,000 frontline medical workers by the end of March.

"We have taken the historic first step toward restoring normalcy," senior Health Ministry official Son Young-rae said during a briefing.

He said the government has decided to extend current social distancing levels for at least another two weeks, clamping down on private social gatherings of five or more people and banning indoor dining after 10 p.m., to help create a safe environment for vaccinations.

Separately, doctors, nurses and other health professionals treating COVID-19 patients will begin receiving the shots developed by Pfizer and BioNTech from Saturday. The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines, which South Korea obtained through the WHO-backed COVAX program, arrived at Incheon International Airport on Friday and will be transported to five major COVID-19 treatment hospitals.

The next available vaccines are likely to go to workers at general hospitals, paramedics, quarantine workers and people over 65 years in age before broader groups of adults begin receiving shots in summer.

In other developments around the Asia-Pacific region:

— Hong Kong began administering its first COVID-19 vaccines to the public, kicking off its program offering free vaccinations to all 7.5 million residents. People age 60 and older and health care workers are among the some 2.4 million people currently prioritized to receive vaccines at community centers and outpatient clinics across Hong Kong. The government said registrations for the first two weeks of the program are full. Participants so far will be receiving the vaccine by Chinese biopharmaceutical firm Sinovac. A million doses arrived in the city last week, and Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam and other top government officials were vaccinated first in a bid to bolster confidence in the program. Hong Kong has struck deals to buy 22.5 million doses of vaccines, from Sinovac, AstraZeneca and Fosun Pharma, which will deliver the vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech.

— Sri Lanka's government has changed its policy of allowing only cremations for COVID-19 victims and will allow burials, after months of protests by Muslims and others that it is insensitive toward religious beliefs. The government issued the decree Thursday night allowing cremation and burials following stipulated health guidelines. The insistence on cremation only had cited possible groundwater contamination, despite the World Health Organization and local medical professional bodies saying such claims have no scientific basis.

— A state of emergency that was set up to curb the coronavirus in Japan will be lifted in six urban areas this weekend while staying in the Tokyo area for another week. The government minister in charge of pandemic measures told a government panel about the changes, though the official decision hasn't been announced. The state of emergency began in January and centered around asking restaurants, bars and other businesses to close at 8 p.m. Partially lifting the emergency, and just a week early, underlines Japan's eagerness to keep the economy going. Separately, Japan said coronavirus vaccine shipments will arrive at the local government offices by the end of June to inoculate the nation's 36 million elderly people. Those 65 years or older are scheduled to get vaccines after health workers. But worries had been growing about

an ample supply of the imported vaccines.

— China has approved two more COVID-19 vaccines for wider use. The vaccine from CanSino Biologics is the first developed by a Chinese company that requires only one shot. CanSino said it is 65.28% effective 28 days after the dose is given. The other newly approved vaccine is from a subsidiary of state-owned Sinopharm, the Wuhan Institute of Biologics, which said its vaccine is 72.51% effective. Vaccines from Sinovac and from Sinopharm's Beijing subsidiary were approved earlier and are in use. Sinovac and Sinopharm have both said they will be able to manufacture 1 billion shots annually by the end of this year. A military researcher told state media CanSino can produce up to 300 million doses per year, and the Wuhan Institute said it can produce up to 100 million doses per year.

## **Pandemic leaves many Romanian patients without critical care**

By NICOLAE DUMITRACHE AND STEPHEN McGRATH Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP) — Andrei, a 32-year-old Romanian man who has been HIV positive since he was a baby, began missing his regular medical check-ups when the coronavirus pandemic hit a year ago. "That was the first thing that led me to a general state of frustration and fear," said Andrei. "After that, I got used to the idea of taking the antiretroviral treatment blindly without knowing if the parameters are OK or if the therapy works."

A year ago this week, Romania reported its first case of COVID-19, prompting the country's strapped medical system to turn its focus to treating COVID-19 patients. As a result, many patients with other conditions — including cancer — have either been denied critical care or have stopped going to their regular appointments, fearful of becoming infected.

"Many of my close associates lost their battle against their diseases due to the loss of access to treatment, hospitals and specialists," Andrei, who didn't want his full name used due to the stigma surrounding his condition, told The Associated Press.

Romania's government is acknowledging the problem and has announced plans to reorganize the country's hospitals so more non-COVID-19 patients can get access to health care.

The attempts to reform the health care system come as a third virus surge looms and as a vaccine rollout is proceeding slowly across the 27-member European Union, to which Romania belongs.

"Patients who didn't have COVID-19 didn't seek medical care because they were afraid of becoming infected," Dr. Andreea Moldovan, a state secretary in the Health Ministry, told the AP.

Previously, she said, there was "a lot of pressure to have as many beds available for COVID-19 patients as possible."

With a population of over 19 million, Romania has reported 792,000 COVID-19 infections and over 20,000 deaths.

Romania's Health Ministry says its hospital reorganization scheme will aim to create separate red and green zones in hospitals so both non-COVID-19 patients and those infected with the disease can be segregated yet receive the medical care they require.

In an interview at Bucharest's Colentina Hospital, interim hospital manager Victor Cauni said health care services in the long term must adapt to life with COVID-19 and not "discriminate" against other patients.

"Whether we like it or not, we have more patients with many other illnesses compared to COVID patients," he said. "We need to open for them at least partially. We're discriminating against patients with serious conditions."

Highlighting the problem, Cauni noted that the hospital's urological ward used to perform from 400 to 500 medical interventions a month, but has barely had 50 in the past year.

"For the last year, patients did not have access to this hospital, and they were supposed to be transferred to different hospitals — but not many managed to find the required solutions," Cauni said.

"You cannot just function as a COVID-19 hospital," he said. "We have many important wards here."

The organizational changes in Romania's hospitals come amid growing concerns about new virus variants, including the variant first found in the U.K., which scientists say is both more transmissible and more deadly.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 43 of 81

Romania faces these challenges as the EU nation with the lowest health care spending relative to GDP — 5.2%, compared with almost 10% on average in the bloc.

Romania already has the highest rate of avoidable deaths of under-75s in the EU, according to EU statistics. Health Minister Vlad Voiculescu expressed his concerns in a video address last week to hospital managers and public health officials, explaining the hospital reorganization effort.

"The pandemic has not wiped out all other chronic or acute health problems," Voiculescu said. "We need to make sure that all other patients have access to the medical services they need."

Andrei, who became infected with HIV as a baby while being treated in a hospital, says he considers himself "one of the lucky ones."

He has managed to pay privately for a few medical analyses in the past year. But he worries about his longer-term prospects if he doesn't return to the close monitoring of his illness.

"The situation is critical," he said. "If I keep blindly taking my treatment without proper monthly visits and analyses to check if the treatment is working ... there is only one outcome — the loss of life."

— 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>

## Native American nominee's grilling raises questions on bias

By FELICIA FONSECA and MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — When Wyoming U.S. Sen. John Barrasso snapped at Deb Haaland during her confirmation hearing, many in Indian Country were incensed.

The exchange, coupled with descriptions of the Interior secretary nominee as "radical" — by other white, male Republicans — left some feeling Haaland is being treated differently because she is a Native American woman.

"If it was any other person, they would not be subjected to being held accountable for their ethnicity," said Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, chairwoman of the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head Aquinnah in Massachusetts.

At Wednesday's hearing, Barrasso wanted assurance that Haaland would follow the law when it comes to imperiled species. Before the congresswoman finished her response, Barrasso shouted, "I'm talking about the law!"

Barrasso, former chairman of Senate Indian Affairs Committee, said his uncharacteristic reaction was a sign of frustration over Haaland dodging questions. Among Haaland supporters across the nation who tuned in virtually, it was infuriating.

"It was horrible. It was disrespectful," said Rebecca Ortega of Santa Clara Pueblo in Haaland's home state of New Mexico. "I just feel like if it would have been a white man or a white woman, he would never have yelled like that."

The Interior Department has broad oversight of energy development, along with tribal affairs, and some Republican senators have labeled Haaland "radical" over her calls to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and address climate change. They said that could hurt rural America and major oil and gas-producing states. Louisiana Sen. John Kennedy after two days of hearings called Haaland a "neo-socialist, left-of-Lenin whack job."

Andrews-Maltais saw "radical" as a code for "you're an Indian."

But Republican Sen. Steve Daines of Montana said it's not about race. Daines frequently uses the term to describe Democrats and their policies, including President Joe Biden and Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, whom Daines defeated in November.

"As much as I would love to see a Native American be on the president's Cabinet, I have concerns about her record. ... To say otherwise is outrageous and offensive," he told The Associated Press.

Civil rights activists say Haaland's treatment fits a pattern of minority nominees encountering more political resistance than white counterparts.

The confirmation of Neera Tanden, who would be the first Indian American to head the Office of Man-

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 44 of 81

agement and Budget, was thrown into doubt when it lost support from Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia. He cited her controversial tweets attacking members of both parties.

Critics also have targeted Vanita Gupta, an Indian American and Biden's pick to be associate attorney general, and California Attorney General Xavier Becerra as Health and Human Services secretary. Conservatives launched campaigns calling Gupta "dangerous" and questioning Becerra's qualifications.

Democrats pushed back against Haaland's treatment and questioned if attempts to block her nomination are motivated by something other than her record. Former U.S. Sens. and cousins Tom Udall of New Mexico and Mark Udall of Colorado said Haaland "should be afforded the same respect and deference" as other nominees.

The hearing itself, in which Haaland was grilled on oil and gas development, national parks and tribes, represented a cultural clash in how the Democrat and many Indigenous people view the world — everything is intertwined and must exist in balance, preserving the environment for generations to come.

That was seen in Haaland's response when asked about her motivation to be Interior secretary. She recalled a story about Navajo Code Talkers in World War II who prioritized coming up with a word in their native language for "Mother Earth."

"It's difficult to not feel obligated to protect this land, and I feel that every Indigenous person in this country understands that," she said.

That broader historical context is missing from Republican talking points against Haaland that instead simplify the debate to a battle between industry and environmentalists, said Dina Gilio-Whitaker, a lecturer in American Indian studies at California State University, San Marcos.

"There's obviously a really huge conversation about how the land came to be the United States to begin with," she said. "That's the elephant in the living room nobody wants to talk about."

Andrew Werk Jr., president of the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes on Montana's Fort Belknap Reservation, said Republicans' brusque treatment of Haaland was unfair to her and to Americans.

But he doesn't see any racial bias in Daines' actions for dismissing Haaland as a "radical," only hardened partisanship.

"For all the reasons Sen. Daines opposes her, those are all the reasons we support her in Fort Belknap," Werk said. "Our land is our identity, and as tribes we want to be good stewards and protect that."

Despite Republican opposition, Haaland has enough Democratic support to become the first Native American to lead the Interior Department. The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee is expected to vote on the nomination next week before the full Senate chimes in.

Haaland, 60, weaved childhood memories, experiences on public land and tribes' rights into her answers during the hearing. She talked about carrying buckets of water for her grandmother down a dusty road at Laguna Pueblo, where she's from, careful not to spill a drop because she recognized its importance. She talked about harvesting an oryx, a type of antelope, that fed her family for a year, about her support for protecting grizzly bears indefinitely and her ancestors' sacrifices.

Frank White Clay, chairman of the Crow Tribe, which gets much of its revenue from a coal mine on its southeastern Montana reservation, said Republicans have "legitimate concerns about natural resources." But he urged them to consider the historic nature of Haaland's nomination.

"A Native woman up for confirmation — her issues are Indian Country issues," White Clay said.

Haaland pledged to carry out Biden's agenda, sidestepping specifics on what she would do if confirmed. While the vagueness rattled Republicans, her backers said it showed she's a consensus-builder.

"She did not lose her cool," said Kalyn Free, who is Choctaw and supports Haaland. "To me, that's not an indicator of her performance. ... That's because she had to put up with this crap for 60 years. This was not a new experience for her."

\_\_\_ Associated Press writer Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

## Georgia prosecutor investigating Trump call urges patience

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 45 of 81

ATLANTA (AP) — The Georgia prosecutor investigating potential efforts by Donald Trump and others to influence last year's general election has a message for people who are eager to see whether the former president will be charged: Be patient.

"I'm in no rush," Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis said this week in an interview with The Associated Press. "I think people think that I feel this immense pressure. I don't."

Willis, a Democrat elected in November, sent letters to state officials on Feb. 10 instructing them to preserve records related to the election, particularly those that may contain evidence of attempts to influence elections officials. But she said this week that she's not sure where the investigation will go or how long it will take.

Her office confirmed that the probe includes a call in which Trump urged Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to "find" enough votes to overturn Joe Biden's win in the state. Willis also said she has questions about a call U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham made to Raffensperger, the sudden departure of a top federal prosecutor and statements made before Georgia legislative committees.

The investigation is in the very early stages, Willis said. Lawyers are sifting through data — including news reports — to compile a witness list. Once they start talking to people, it will inevitably lead to other people and records they want to see. Eventually, Willis said, they'll have enough information to decide whether laws were actually broken.

Democrats and a few Republicans have condemned Trump's call to Raffensperger, with some critics saying the recording is proof of criminal election interference.

Lawyers from around the country have offered help, Willis said. While she may eventually seek outside counsel with specific expertise, she said, it will require careful vetting.

"I don't want anyone that's already got a result in mind," she said.

Willis wrote in the letters to state officials that her office had opened a criminal investigation into "potential violations of Georgia law prohibiting the solicitation of election fraud, the making of false statements to state and local government bodies, conspiracy, racketeering, violation of oath of office and any involvement in violence or threats related to the election's administration."

She wrote that her team has "no reason to believe that any Georgia official is a target of this investigation."

After a coronavirus-related pause, two grand juries are to be seated next week, which will allow prosecutors to seek subpoenas.

Following the November general election, Trump refused to accept his loss by about 12,000 votes in Georgia, long a Republican stronghold. He and his allies made unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud and hurled insults at Raffensperger, Gov. Brian Kemp and Lt. Gov. Geoff Duncan — all fellow Republicans — for not acting to overturn his loss.

State and federal officials have repeatedly said the election was secure and that there was no evidence of systemic fraud.

In a Jan. 2 telephone conversation with Raffensperger, Trump repeatedly suggested Raffensperger could change the certified results of the presidential election, an assertion the secretary of state firmly rejected.

"All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said. "Because we won the state."

When Willis' investigation became public, senior Trump adviser Jason Miller said it "is simply the Democrats' latest attempt to score political points by continuing their witch hunt against President Trump, and everybody sees through it."

During the call with Raffensperger, Trump also appeared to suggest that Byung J. "BJay" Pak, the Trump-appointed U.S. attorney in Atlanta, was a "never-Trumper" — a term often used for conservative critics of Trump. Pak abruptly announced his resignation the day after the call became public. He's never publicly explained his departure.

"I find it particularly peculiar the way that he left and when he left," Willis said of Pak. "It's something that, to do my job correctly, I have to ask questions about. That's just logical."

Prior to his call with Raffensperger, Trump tried unsuccessfully to pressure others in Georgia. While

election officials were verifying signatures on absentee ballot envelopes in one metro-Atlanta county in December, Trump told a lead investigator in a phone call to "find the fraud," saying it would make the investigator a national hero. Trump also demanded that Kemp order a special session of the state legislature to overturn Biden's victory.

Before those calls, Raffensperger said U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican, called him to ask whether the secretary of state had the power to reject certain absentee ballots, which Raffensperger interpreted as a suggestion to toss legally cast votes.

Graham has called the idea that he would suggest that legally cast ballots be discarded "ridiculous."

Willis said she hasn't determined whether the Graham call violated the law but said, "It is of interest."

Asked whether she is looking at debunked claims Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani made before Georgia legislative committees casting doubt on the legitimacy of the state's election, Willis said, "We won't overreach, but if those things do seem to be part of a plan to influence the election, they'll become relevant."

## US bombs facilities in Syria used by Iran-backed militia

By LOLITA C. BALDOR and ROBERT BURNS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States launched airstrikes in Syria on Thursday, targeting facilities near the Iraqi border used by Iranian-backed militia groups. The Pentagon said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a U.S. service member and other coalition troops.

The airstrike was the first military action undertaken by the Biden administration, which in its first weeks has emphasized its intent to put more focus on the challenges posed by China, even as Mideast threats persist. Biden's decision to attack in Syria did not appear to signal an intention to widen U.S. military involvement in the region but rather to demonstrate a will to defend U.S. troops in Iraq.

"I'm confident in the target that we went after, we know what we hit," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters flying with him from California to Washington. Speaking shortly after the airstrikes, he added, "We're confident that that target was being used by the same Shia militants that conducted the strikes," referring to a Feb. 15 rocket attack in northern Iraq that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a U.S. service member and other coalition personnel.

Austin said he recommended the action to Biden.

"We said a number of times that we will respond on our timeline," Austin said. "We wanted to be sure of the connectivity and we wanted to be sure that we had the right targets."

Earlier, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the U.S. action was a "proportionate military response" taken together with diplomatic measures, including consultation with coalition partners.

"The operation sends an unambiguous message: President Biden will act to protect American and coalition personnel," Kirby said. "At the same time, we have acted in a deliberate manner that aims to deescalate the overall situation in eastern Syria and Iraq."

Kirby said the U.S. airstrikes "destroyed multiple facilities at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militant groups," including Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The U.S. has blamed Kataib Hezbollah for numerous attacks targeting U.S. personnel and interests in Iraq in the past.

Further details were not immediately available.

Mary Ellen O'Connell, a professor at Notre Dame Law School, criticized the U.S. attack as a violation of international law.

"The United Nations Charter makes absolutely clear that the use of military force on the territory of a foreign sovereign state is lawful only in response to an armed attack on the defending state for which the target state is responsible," she said. "None of those elements is met in the Syria strike."

Biden administration officials condemned the Feb. 15 rocket attack near the city of Irbil in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish-run region, but as recently as this week officials indicated they had not determined for certain who carried it out. Officials have noted that in the past, Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups have been responsible for numerous rocket attacks that targeted U.S. personnel or facilities in Iraq.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 47 of 81

Kirby had said Tuesday that Iraq is in charge of investigating the Feb. 15 attack.

"Right now, we're not able to give you a certain attribution as to who was behind these attacks, what groups, and I'm not going to get into the tactical details of every bit of weaponry used here," Kirby said. "Let's let the investigations complete and conclude, and then when we have more to say, we will."

A little-known Shiite militant group calling itself Saraya Awliya al-Dam, Arabic for Guardians of Blood Brigade, claimed responsibility for the Feb. 15 attack. A week later, a rocket attack in Baghdad's Green Zone appeared to target the U.S. Embassy compound, but no one was hurt.

Iran this week said it has no links to the Guardians of Blood Brigade.

The frequency of attacks by Shiite militia groups against U.S. targets in Iraq diminished late last year ahead of President Joe Biden's inauguration, though now Iran is pressing America to return to Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal. The U.S. under the previous Trump administration blamed Iran-backed groups for carrying out the attacks. Tensions soared after a Washington-directed drone strike that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani and powerful Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis last year.

Trump had said the death of a U.S. contractor would be a red line and provoke U.S. escalation in Iraq. The December 2019 killing of a U.S. civilian contractor in a rocket attack in Kirkuk sparked a tit-for-tat fight on Iraqi soil that brought the country to the brink of a proxy war.

U.S. forces have been significantly reduced in Iraq to 2,500 personnel and no longer partake in combat missions with Iraqi forces in ongoing operations against the Islamic State group.

## Some local GOP leaders fire up base with conspiracies, lies

By GARANCE BURKE, MARTHA MENDOZA, JULIET LINDERMAN and LARRY FENN Associated Press

A faction of local, county and state Republican officials is pushing lies, misinformation and conspiracy theories that echo those that helped inspire the violent U.S. Capitol siege, online messaging that is spreading quickly through GOP ranks fueled by algorithms that boost extreme content.

The Associated Press reviewed public and private social media accounts of nearly 1,000 federal, state, and local elected and appointed Republican officials nationwide, many of whom have voiced support for the Jan. 6 insurrection or demanded that the 2020 presidential election be overturned, sometimes in deleted posts or now-removed online forums.

"Sham-peachment," they say, and warn that "corporate America helped rig the election." They call former president Donald Trump a "savior" who was robbed of a second term — despite no evidence — and President Joe Biden, a "thief." "Patriots want answers," they declare.

The bitter, combative rhetoric is helping the officials grow their constituencies on social media and gain outsized influence in their communities, city councils, county boards and state assemblies. And it exposes the GOP's internal struggle over whether the party can include traditional conservative politicians, conspiracy theorists and militias as it builds its base for 2022.

Earlier this month, the FBI knocked on the door of the Republican Women's Federation of Michigan vice president Londa Gatt to ask where she was on the day of the Capitol attack.

Gatt, a Bikers for Trump coordinator who roars, leather-vested, alongside political rallies on her Harley-Davidson, had helped organize busloads of Trump supporters to join her in Washington on Jan. 6. She says she climbed the scaffolding outside the Capitol building that day "to take a picture of the whole view." And she said she gladly told FBI agents that she did nothing wrong, and left the scene right away as things turned violent.

Since then, Gatt has shared hashtags tied to QAnon conspiracy theories online and posted that she has Trump's personal email. She recently asked her Facebook friends who participated in Capitol intrusions to send messages directly to Trump explaining that he didn't incite them, but instead they acted of their own volition. "The lawyers need our help," she posted.

Gatt is among many conservatives organizing on Twitter, Facebook, Parler, Gab and Telegram, and is working on a digital strategy going forward under different monikers.

"We were cheated out of our legit president and we have no voice because our vote didn't count," she

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 48 of 81

told The Associated Press. "I'm getting ready to start opening up some new pages, focus on getting out people who voted against Trump and replace those with conservative Republicans."

Although Democrats have also used incendiary and aggressive language online, AP focused its research on the GOP because court documents show the overwhelming number of people arrested in association with the Capitol insurrection are longtime supporters of Trump, who has a huge Republican fan base even after leaving office.

Working with Deep Discovery, an artificial intelligence company, AP also helped build a classification algorithm that matched officials to accounts on the right-wing aligned Parler, a social media platform that recently returned after being taken offline for several weeks. AP reporters hand-verified each match using an archived Parler dataset. That archive of 183 million posts and 13 million user profiles, provided in advance of publication by New York University researcher Max Aliopoulos, was captured between August 2018 and Jan. 10, 2021, when Parler was taken offline.

AP also surveyed officials' use of alternate social media sites such as Gab and Telegram, whose active users have soared in recent weeks since Twitter and Facebook barred people from posting extremist content and disinformation.

The AP reached out to GOP officials in many states, and sought comment from those named in this story. Several posted portions of email exchanges with the reporters or discussed the interviews on their social media.

Collectively, state and local Republican officials like Gatt play a major role in shaping the party's future, in part because they recruit and promote candidates to run for office and help control the party's messaging.

Even after the bloody insurrection at the Capitol showed the deadly consequences of online ire, many Republicans continue their furious push to delegitimize the new administration. Experts say it's more dangerous, and influential, when those messages come from elected and appointed GOP officials rather than anonymous gadflies.

"We still have people in this country talking about civil war. I'm talking about high-ranking officials in state governments and elsewhere, talking about civil war, talking about secession, talking about loading up with ammunition," Brian Michael Jenkins, a terrorism expert and adviser at the RAND Corp. think tank, recently told Congress.

Republican National Committee press secretary Mandi Merritt didn't answer AP's specific questions about the online rhetoric but referred to a Jan. 13 statement from Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel: "Violence has no place in our politics. Period."

Last week, Idaho's Kootenai County Republican Central Committee Chairman Brent Regan posted on Facebook: "People who DON'T own a gun should register and pay a fee. Per the Idaho Constitution Article 14 Section 1, all able bodied males between the ages of 18 and 45 are part of the militia and should arm themselves ... That is the LAW."

That posting followed Regan's online messaging in early December, when he boosted a Parler post on his feed: "SIDNEY POWELL'S 'KRAKEN' IS DOD CYBER WARFARE PROGRAM! WE ARE AT WAR! – THE MARSHALL REPORT." Powell, a lawyer who held rallies in support of Trump, referred to her legal strategy as "the kraken," powerful enough to destroy Biden's presidency. However, the Supreme Court on Monday rejected a handful of cases related to the 2020 election filed by Trump and his allies in five states.

Another recent Regan Facebook post: "The thing I object most about democrats is that they incite my base instincts to retaliate in kind."

When AP asked about his posts, Regan said: "My message on social media, print media, and in person is consistent: 'Pray for serenity. Be the eye of the storm. Stay calm. Think clearly. Don't panic. Stay peaceful while demanding integrity and honesty.'"

On Jan. 5, Idaho RNC delegate Doyle Beck, who sits with Regan on the board of a libertarian policy group called the Idaho Freedom Foundation, arrived in Washington where he posted a photo of himself on Facebook with Donald Trump Jr., commenting "TRUMP 2020, Stop the Steal."

Beck told AP he went to a meeting at Trump International Hotel that night with Trump Jr., Alabama Sen.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 49 of 81

Tommy Tuberville, Trump adviser Peter Navarro and Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani, and attended the Trump rally the next day but stayed far from the Capitol building.

AP confirmed that Trump Jr. and Tuberville attended the gathering. Navarro denied attending, and Giuliani said he couldn't remember and would need to check his diary.

On Feb. 2, Beck reposted on Facebook a statement reading: "Why Would You Have To Impeach A President That Lost? Unless Of Course He Didn't. Then You'd Have To Silence Him. Oh, Wait...."

More than a month after the insurrection, Beck told AP he believes the election was stolen, and that he might switch to Parler because he thinks his posts are being censored on Facebook.

"Parler is honest," he said. "They don't try to do this fact check bullcrap."

Some Republican officials are posting theories related to QAnon, which the FBI has called a domestic terrorism threat. And the Department of Homeland Security has warned of the potential for lingering violence from extremists enraged by Biden's election and emboldened by the Capitol attack. But even as Twitter, Facebook and others are rapidly removing, freezing and suspending accounts, the clamor continues.

Two days after he joined the Capitol attack, Sacramento, California, Republican Assembly President Jorge Riley, posted on Facebook: "I won't say I stood by. Come take my life. I'm right here." Then he posted his home address, according to court documents, followed by "You all will die."

Riley was subsequently forced to resign and arrested for his involvement in the insurrection. Riley and his attorney did not respond to requests for comment.

Experts warn that if left unchecked, this type of rhetoric could again incite violence.

"What I care about is the potential loss of life, and preventing what appears to be a pretty massive extremist movement that is growing right now," said Elizabeth Neumann, who was an assistant secretary at the Department of Homeland Security under Trump. "The only way to stop this, aside from law enforcement, is to get the GOP to acknowledge how they have contributed to its growth and get them to speak out about it. Things cannot continue this way."

Many GOP officials told AP that Democrats and the media are ignoring, demeaning or even mocking millions of Americans' legitimate concerns about the election outcome, rather than seriously engaging with them. And they pointed to angry posts from Democrats they said had led to dangerous and costly consequences.

Some of the GOP officials AP surveyed have tempered their online speech in the past month since social media platforms began banning accounts more aggressively and the FBI ramped up investigations tied to Jan. 6.

Still, a rift is opening in some local Republican circles as those who embrace disinformation about election fraud clash with those who recognize Biden's win.

Following Trump's acquittal in his second impeachment trial, Mitch McConnell, the Senate's top Republican, called the claims that the former president won the election "wild myths" and said the insurrection was "a foreseeable consequence of the growing crescendo of false statements, conspiracy theories and reckless hyperbole" online, laying the blame at Trump's feet.

Couy Griffin, a commissioner in Otero County, New Mexico, founded the group Cowboys for Trump, and shows up at rallies on horseback, waving a large American flag. Griffin entered the Capitol grounds Jan. 6, then kept posting on Parler about his support for continuing the fight for Trump. When he got back to New Mexico, he told his fellow county commissioners that he planned to bring his ".357 Henry big boy rifle" and ".357 single action revolver" to the inauguration Jan. 20, according to court documents.

Griffin was arrested near a security checkpoint in Washington before the inauguration and is charged with entering a Secret Service-restricted area without permission. The Republican Party of New Mexico has distanced itself from Griffin, and a recall effort is underway. Griffin told AP he didn't bring guns to DC but he will protect himself.

"I'm not going to be threatened and harassed and bullied," Griffin told AP in an interview. "There's many of us who will continue to take a stand for our freedom and continue to raise our voices and demand that our voices be heard."

Others have faced political consequences.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 50 of 81

Hours before Parler was taken offline on Jan. 10, Virginia state Sen. Amanda Chase posted an image she said was from Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's laptop. "Make no mistake," posted Chase. "The 2020 Presidential Election was stolen by the Democratic Party with the help of our enemies. She's the traitor and leader of the insurrection and coup against the USA."

Chase, who is seeking this year's GOP nomination for Virginia governor and was at the Jan. 6 rally but said she did not go to the Capitol building, has been censured by the Virginia Senate for an alleged "pattern of unacceptable conduct" and is suing.

In a phone call, Chase initially said the post calling Pelosi a traitor didn't sound familiar and could have been the work of an imposter. But after the AP emailed her a link of an archived webpage, Chase confirmed it was indeed her post, and said she "stands by it."

"It's my free speech right. I can say all day long that the election was stolen, that's my right to believe that," Chase said. "And for the press, or for other people to try and cancel the free speech of others who have that opinion is un-American."

About two-thirds of Republicans say — contrary to all evidence — that Biden was not legitimately elected president, according to a recent poll by AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Free speech advocates say the legal definition of inciting violence is extremely narrow, and over-policing online posts, including those spreading misinformation, could undermine democracy.

"We need to be very careful about not painting with an overly broad brush what incitement to violence is, because it's going to have serious consequences if we allow that exception to get wider," said Nora Pelizzari, spokeswoman for the National Coalition Against Censorship. "We can't allow anger at people in power to become punishable."

AP found plenty of anger. Parler posts containing the word "revolution" increased five times faster than the overall rate of message traffic after the election, the analysis found. Also, about 84% of posts referring to the hashtag "#1776" occurred on or after Election Day, according to AP's analysis. Post-election references to "treason" and the QAnon slogan "trust the plan" both increased by about 10 times the overall rate, the data showed.

Republican Ryan Kelley, a planning commissioner in Allendale Township, Michigan, recently announced he's running for governor and started organizing for his campaign on Telegram, saying "the funny biz in the 2020 election that the left brushed under the rug.. Patriots want answers," and pledging to watch a conspiracy theory video pushing Trump's claims of election fraud.

Kelley had made headlines last spring after he organized a protest in Michigan's Capitol, inviting heavily armed militiamen who crowded into the Lansing statehouse. Over the summer, he posted an article about the Michigan Liberty Militia on Parler saying, "Love seeing our Militia highlighted and shown as the good guys they are. #militia" Two members of that group later were charged in an alleged plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. On Jan. 6, Kelley went to the U.S. Capitol but says he was only outside.

Kelley told AP that militia members are "law abiding, lawful citizens that love this country, and maybe you get a couple of them that are bad apples. Question for you is, are bad apples pretty much in everything that we have as far as groups?"

As for his social media use in general he said, "Somebody might look at my posts and think oppositely, think, 'Oh wow, I'm offended by that,' or, 'Oh, man, I feel intimidated by that.' I might look at somebody else's posts that take oppositely of me and think similar things," he said. "The question is, No. 1, is any of them unlawful?"

He said he's simply looking to open conversations with his posts.

New Hampshire state Republican Rep. Terry Roy also continues to push the theory that Biden is not the legitimate winner of November's election.

"THIS guy won 80 million votes? Not in this universe," he posted on the social media platform Gab earlier this month. "I'm busy trying to keep New Hampshire free during the day and preparing for Red Dawn by night." In the 1984 movie "Red Dawn," American teenagers fought Russian invaders.

Roy joined Gab last month, uploading an introductory post showing himself shooting a high-powered bolt-action rifle and displaying a symbol and slogan, "Molon Labe," favored by gun-rights advocates and

some members of the militia group the Oath Keepers. Molon Labe translates to "come and take them." He said the symbol is meaningful for Second Amendment supporters, and that extremist groups can't "hijack" it. He said he referenced "Red Dawn" in part because the film's premise is that citizens can face a foreign invasion, which echoes his beliefs that Americans should embrace gun rights.

After speaking with AP, Roy asked his Gab followers, "Do ANY of you take anything I have ever said to be a call to initiate violence against the Government or anyone else?" Most who responded said no, though several took the opportunity to share their own views involving right-wing conspiracy theories.

Roy said he's now more introspective about what he says online.

"I think it does give me a little pause to just make sure and double-check that hyperbole doesn't run over into encouragement of something that would be illegal," he said. "I always want to make sure that while trying to fire up my base, I don't unnecessarily fire up the crazies."

In Arizona and Illinois, prominent Republicans who refused to support Trump's bid to overturn the election have been rebuked in recent weeks by the state GOP and a central committee, respectively. Last month, the Texas GOP's Twitter account urged people to follow the party on "free speech" social media app Gab using the slogan "We are The Storm," despite its association with the Qanon conspiracy theory.

After the November election, Manhattan, New York, Republican Party chair Andrea Catsimatidis asked on Parler: "Is Joe Biden planning a coup by trying to create his own parallel government?" Earlier this month, she retweeted: "Corporate America helped rig the election."

Reached by phone, Catsimatidis said she believes it is the duty of political officials to share their opinions and reach as many people as possible.

"Political leaders have influence, and the fact that I have developed a social media following is exactly what you should be doing as a political leader," she said. "And I want to make sure that I can get information out."

---

Contributing to this report are Associated Press data journalist Camille Fassett in Santa Cruz, California, and AP writers Rebecca Boone in Boise, Idaho; Michael Householder in Detroit; Helen Wieffering in Minneapolis; Avery Yang in Phoenix; Haleluya Hadero in Atlanta; Michael Kunzelman in College Park, Maryland; Michelle Smith in Providence, Rhode Island; and Thalia Beaty in New York.

---

Contact AP's Global Investigations team at [investigative@ap.org](mailto:investigative@ap.org)

## **Tiger Woods transferred to LA hospital after surgery**

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Tiger Woods was moved Thursday to another Los Angeles hospital after undergoing surgery to his right leg after being badly injured in a car crash.

Harbor-UCLA Medical Center said Woods was transferred to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center for "continuing orthopedic care and recovery."

The hospital didn't provide any other details, saying it was respecting patient confidentiality.

"On behalf of our staff, it was an honor to provide orthopedic trauma care to one of our generation's greatest athletes," Dr. Anish Mahajan, Harbor-UCLA's chief medical officer, said in a statement.

Woods was hurt Tuesday when a 2021 Genesis SUV he was driving on a downhill stretch of road struck a raised median in a coastal Los Angeles suburb, crossed into oncoming lanes and flipped several times.

Mahajan earlier said Woods shattered the tibia and fibula bones of his lower right leg in multiple locations. Those injuries were stabilized with a rod in the tibia. Additional injuries to the bones in the foot and ankle required screws and pins, Mahajan said in the statement released on Woods' Twitter account late Tuesday night.

Woods was wearing a seatbelt and there wasn't any evidence that he was impaired by drugs or alcohol, Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said after the crash.

However, the crash investigation continues.

Harbor-UCLA Medical Center is a Level 1 trauma center, meaning it is qualified to provide the most

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 52 of 81

comprehensive surgical and other care for such injuries. Cedars-Sinai has a renowned Sports Medicine Institute that has catered to professional athletes and a rehabilitation program for sports-related and orthopedic injuries.

The wreck happened on the border between the communities of Rolling Hills Estates and Rancho Palos Verdes. The county supervisor who represents the area has requested a safety review of the roadway, where cars are known to gain speed because of the steep grade and authorities have said wrecks are common.

In 2017, Woods was arrested on a DUI charge when Florida police found him asleep behind the wheel of his car parked awkwardly on the side of the road, with its engine still running, two flat tires and a blinker flashing.

Woods said he had an unexpected reaction to pain medication. He eventually pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of reckless driving. Three weeks after the arrest, he entered a clinic for help dealing with prescription medication and a sleep disorder.

The crash this week was the latest setback for Woods, who has won 15 major championships and a record-tying 82 victories on the PGA Tour. He is among the world's most recognizable sports figures, and at 45, even with a reduced schedule from nine previous surgeries, remains golf's biggest draw.

He was in Los Angeles over the weekend as the tournament host of the Genesis Invitational at Riviera Country Club. Monday and Tuesday had been set aside for him to give golf tips to celebrities on Discovery-owned GOLFTV.

## COVID-19 bill must drop minimum wage hike, arbiter decides

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate parliamentarian dealt a potentially lethal blow Thursday to Democrats' drive to hike the minimum wage, deciding that the cherished progressive goal must fall from a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill the party is trying to speed through Congress, Senate Democratic aides said.

The finding by Elizabeth MacDonough, the chamber's nonpartisan arbiter of its rules, means Democrats face an overwhelmingly uphill battle to boost the minimum wage this year because of solid Republican opposition. Their proposal would raise the federal minimum gradually to \$15 hourly by 2025, well above the \$7.25 floor in place since 2009.

President Joe Biden was "disappointed" in the outcome but respected the parliamentarian's ruling, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said. The Senate has a long tradition of obeying the parliamentarian's decisions with few exceptions, a history that is revered by traditionalists like Biden, a 36-year Senate veteran.

"He will work with leaders in Congress to determine the best path forward because no one in this country should work full time and live in poverty," Psaki said.

Democrats are pushing the massive coronavirus relief measure through Congress under special rules that will let them avoid a Senate filibuster by Republicans, a tactic that Democrats would need an unattainable 60 votes to defeat.

But those same Senate rules prohibit provisions with only an "incidental" impact on the federal budget because they are chiefly driven by other policy purposes. MacDonough said the minimum wage provision didn't pass that test, according to aides who described her decision on condition of anonymity because it hadn't been released.

MacDonough's decision forces Democrats to make politically painful choices about what to do next on the minimum wage, which has long caused internal party rifts.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Democrats "are not going to give up the fight" to raise the minimum wage to \$15.

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee, hailed MacDonough's decision. He said it shows the special procedure that Democrats are using to protect the relief bill "cannot be used as a vehicle to pass major legislative change — by either party — on a simple majority vote."

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 53 of 81

Republicans solidly oppose the \$15 minimum wage target as an expense that would hurt businesses and cost jobs. They also oppose the overall relief bill, saying it's too expensive, not targeted enough at the people and businesses that most need it and a grab bag of gifts for Democratic allies.

In the wake of the decision, Democratic leaders were likely to face unrest from rank-and-file lawmakers, who have long had differences over the federal minimum wage. They can afford little dissension: Democrats have just a 10-vote edge in the House and no votes to spare in the 50-50 Senate.

Progressives seeking to maximize Democratic control of the White House and Congress have wanted party leaders to push aggressively on the issue. Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., who leads the near 100-member Congressional Progressive Caucus, said Senate Democrats should include the wage increase in the relief bill anyway and not be stopped by "the advisory opinion of the parliamentarian and Republican obstructionism."

But Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have voiced opposition to including the minimum wage hike in the relief bill, and other moderates have expressed concerns, too.

Even so, MacDonough's decision might actually make passage of the overall relief bill easier because efforts to find a minimum wage compromise among Democrats could have been contentious.

Democrats have said they could still pursue a minimum wage boost in free-standing legislation or attach it to legislation expected later this year that is to be aimed at a massive infrastructure program. But they'd still face the challenge of garnering 60 Senate votes, a hurdle that has upended Democratic attempts to boost the minimum wage for over a decade.

Senate Budget Committee Chair Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a chief sponsor of the minimum wage effort, blamed "archaic and undemocratic" Senate rules for the setback. He said he'd try amending the overall relief package to erase tax deductions from large corporations that don't pay workers at least \$15 an hour and to provide incentives to small businesses to raise wages.

The parliamentarian's decision came to light the night before Democrats were set to push through the House an initial version of the \$1.9 trillion relief legislation that still includes the minimum wage boost.

"House Democrats believe that the minimum wage hike is necessary. Therefore, this provision will remain in the" bill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said.

The overall relief bill is Biden's first legislative priority. It is aimed at combating a year-old pandemic that's stalled much of the economy, killed half a million Americans and reshaped the daily lives of virtually everyone.

Despite their paper-thin congressional majorities, Democratic leaders were hoping that House approval of the package would be followed by passage in the Senate, where changes seem likely. Democrats are aiming to get the legislation to Biden's desk by mid-March.

The relief bill would provide millions of people with \$1,400 direct payments. It contains billions of dollars for vaccines and COVID-19 testing, schools, state and local governments, the ailing restaurant and airline industries and emergency jobless benefits while providing tax breaks to lower earners and families with children.

In a study that's been cited by both sides in the clash, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the \$15 minimum wage would increase pay for 27 million workers and lift 900,000 people out of poverty by 2025, but also kill 1.4 million jobs.

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have state minimum wages that exceed the federal \$7.25 hourly floor, with only the District of Columbia currently requiring a \$15 minimum.

Seven states have laws putting their minimums on a pathway to \$15 in a future year, according to the nonpartisan National Conference of State Legislatures.

## Mr. Potato Head drops the mister, sort of

By JOSEPH PISANI AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Is it Mr. Potato Head or not?

Hasbro created confusion Thursday when it announced that it would drop the "Mr." from the brand's

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 54 of 81

name in order to be more inclusive and so all could feel “welcome in the Potato Head world.” It also said it would sell a new playset this fall without the Mr. and Mrs. designations that will let kids create their own type of potato families, including two moms or two dads.

But in a tweet later that afternoon, Hasbro clarified that while the brand is changing, the actual Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head characters will still live on and be sold in stores. In a picture posted on Twitter, the “Mr.” and “Mrs.” names are less prominently displayed at the bottom of the box, instead of the top.

“While it was announced today that the POTATO HEAD brand name & logo are dropping the ‘MR.’ I yam proud to confirm that MR. & MRS. POTATO HEAD aren’t going anywhere and will remain MR. & MRS. POTATO HEAD,” the company tweeted.

The tweet came after news of the brand name change exploded on Twitter, with people asking if Barbie will change her name next. “I think Hasbro needs to drop the “Bro” and just be “Has,”” another person tweeted.

Hasbro appears to want to have it both ways: expand the brand, while not killing off its most iconic characters, which appeared in the “Toy Story” films.

“They are looking to broaden the franchise,” said Robert Passikoff, founder of marketing consultancy Brand Keys. “You take the focus of what is essentially one character and now allow it to be a platform for many characters.”

Kimberly Boyd, a senior vice president at Hasbro, said the intention of the brand name change was to be more inclusive and to have the characters still live within the Potato Head universe.

“It created a lot of excitement,” she said about the reaction.

GLAAD, an LGBTQ advocacy group, applauded the more inclusive Potato playset.

“Hasbro is helping kids to simply see toys as toys, which encourages them to be their authentic selves outside of the pressures of traditional gender norms,” said Rich Ferraro, GLAAD’s chief communications officer, in a statement.

Many toymakers have been updating their classic brands in recent years, hoping to relate to today’s kids and reflect more modern families.

“It’s a potato,” said Ali Mierzejewski, editor in chief at toy review site The Toy Insider, about the new playset. “But kids like to see themselves in the toys they are playing with.”

Barbie, for example, has tried to shed its blonde image and now comes in multiple skin tones and body shapes. The Thomas the Tank Engine toy line added more girl characters. And American Girl is now selling a boy doll.

Mr. Potato Head first hit the toy scene in 1952, when it didn’t even come with a plastic potato — kids had to supply their own vegetable to poke eyes, a nose or mustache into. Hasbro, which also makes Monopoly and My Little Pony, bought the brand and eventually added a plastic spud.

## Olympics gymnastics coach kills himself after being charged

By ANNA LIZ NICHOLS and ED WHITE Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — A former U.S. Olympics gymnastics coach with ties to disgraced sports doctor Larry Nassar killed himself Thursday, hours after being charged with turning his Michigan gym into a hub of human trafficking by coercing girls to train and then abusing them.

John Geddert faced 24 charges that could have carried years in prison had he been convicted. He was supposed to appear in an Eaton County court, near Lansing, but his body was found at a rest area along Interstate 96, according to state police.

“This is a tragic end to a tragic story for everyone involved,” Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said.

Nessel earlier announced that Geddert was charged with a bushel of crimes, including sexual assault, human trafficking and running a criminal enterprise. The charges were the latest fallout from the sexual abuse scandal involving Nassar, a former Michigan State University sports doctor now in prison.

Geddert, 63, wasn’t arrested and transported to court. Rather, Nessel’s office allowed him to show up on his own.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 55 of 81

"We had no indication that Geddert intended to flee or hurt himself or others. We had been in contact with his attorney and were assured of his cooperation," Nessel spokeswoman Kelly Rossman-McKinney said.

Calls seeking comment from attorney Chris Bergstrom weren't immediately returned.

Geddert was head coach of the 2012 U.S. women's Olympic gymnastics team, which won a gold medal. He was long associated with Nassar, who was the Olympic team's doctor and also treated injured gymnasts at Twistars, Geddert's Lansing-area gym.

Among the charges, Geddert was accused of lying to investigators in 2016 when he denied ever hearing complaints about Nassar. But the bulk of the case against him involved his gym in Dimondale and how he treated the young athletes whose families paid to have them train under him.

The charges against Geddert had "very little to do" with Nassar, said Assistant Attorney General Danielle Hagaman-Clark.

Geddert was charged with using his strong reputation in gymnastics to commit a form of human trafficking by making money through the forced labor of young athletes.

"The victims suffer from disordered eating," Nessel said, "including bulimia and anorexia, suicide attempts and attempts at self harm, excessive physical conditioning, repeatedly being forced to perform even when injured, extreme emotional abuse and physical abuse, including sexual assault.

"Many of these victims still carry these scars from this behavior to this day," the attorney general said.

Nessel acknowledged that the case might not fit the common understanding of human trafficking.

"We think of it predominantly as affecting people of color or those without means to protect themselves ... but honestly it can happen to anyone, anywhere," she said. "Young impressionable women may at times be vulnerable and open to trafficking crimes, regardless of their stature in the community or the financial well-being of their families."

Geddert was suspended by Indianapolis-based USA Gymnastics during the Nassar scandal. He told families in 2018 that he was retiring.

USA Gymnastics said in a statement late Thursday that news about the charges against Geddert would "lead to justice through the legal process."

"With the news of his death by suicide, we share the feelings of shock, and our thoughts are with the gymnastics community as they grapple with the complex emotions of today's events," the organization said.

On his LinkedIn page, Geddert described himself as the "most decorated women's gymnastics coach in Michigan gymnastics history." He said his Twistars teams won 130 club championships.

But Geddert was often portrayed in unflattering ways when Nassar's victims spoke during court hearings in 2018. Some insisted he was aware of the doctor's abuse.

Sarah Klein, a gymnast who trained under Geddert for more than 10 years and was assaulted by Nassar, said the coach's death was an "escape from justice" and "traumatizing beyond words."

"His suicide is an admission of guilt that the entire world can now see," said Klein, a lawyer.

Rachael Denhollander, the first gymnast to publicly accuse Nassar of sexual abuse in 2016, said she was proud of the women who stepped forward against Geddert.

"So much pain and grief for everyone," she said on Twitter after his death. "To the survivors, you have been heard and believed, and we stand with you."

White reported from Detroit.

Nichols 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.

## Monarch butterflies down 26% in Mexico wintering grounds

By MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The number of monarch butterflies that showed up at their winter resting grounds in central Mexico decreased by about 26% this year, and four times as many trees were lost to illegal

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 56 of 81

logging, drought and other causes, making 2020 a bad year for the butterflies.

The government commission for natural protected areas said the butterflies' population covered only 2.1 hectares (5.2 acres) in 2020, compared to 2.8 hectares (6.9 acres) the previous year and about one-third of the 6.05 hectares (14.95 acres) detected in 2018.

Because the monarchs cluster so densely in pine and fir trees, it is easier to count them by area rather than by individuals.

Gloria Tavera, the regional director of Mexico's Commission for National Protected Areas, blamed the drop on "extreme climate conditions," the loss of milkweed habitat in the United States and Canada on which butterflies depend, and deforestation in the butterflies' wintering grounds in Mexico.

Illegal logging in the monarchs wintering grounds rose to almost 13.4 hectares (33 acres), a huge increase from the 0.43 hectare (1 acre) lost to logging last year.

Jorge Rickards of the WWF environmental group acknowledged the lost trees were a blow, but said "the logging is very localized" in three or four of the mountain communities that make up the butterfly reserve.

In addition, wind storms, drought and the felling of trees that had fallen victim to pine beetles or disease, caused the loss of another 6.9 hectares (17 acres) in the reserve, bringing the total forest loss in 2020 to 20.65 hectares (51 acres). That compares to an overall loss of about 5 hectares (12.3 acres) from all causes the previous year.

Tavera said the drought was affecting the butterflies themselves, as well as the pine and fir trees where the clump together for warmth.

"The severe drought we are experiencing is having effects," Tavera said. "All the forests in the reserve are under water stress, the forests are dry."

"The butterflies are looking for water on the lower slopes, near the houses," she noted.

Tavera also expressed concern about the severe winter storms in Texas, which the butterflies will have to cross — and feed and lay their eggs — on their way back to their northern summer homes in coming months.

"This is a cause for worry," Tavera said, referring to whether the monarchs will find enough food and habitat after the winter freeze.

It was also a bad year for the mountain farming communities that depend for part of their income on tourists who visit the reserves. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, visits fell from around 490,000 last year, to just 80,000 in the 2020-2021 season.

Environmentalist and writer Homero Aridjis, who grew up around the reserve, said the decline in butterflies and rise in logging was not surprising, given the reduction in Mexican government funding for protected natural areas and environmental work.

"While the reserves were closed to tourism during practically the whole (winter) season, the way was open for loggers, with no control," Aridjis said. "The question is, can the monarch migration survive this environmental negligence?"

The U.S. group Center for Food Safety called for the monarchs to be granted endangered species protection, noting "the minimum population threshold needed to be out of the danger zone of extinction is six hectares."

It was unclear whether the drop in tourism income contributed to the increased logging. Rickards said there has long been pressure on the area's forests from people who want to open land for planting crops.

Felipe Martínez Meza, director of the butterfly reserve, said there have been attempts to plant orchards of avocados — hugely profitable crop for farmers in the area — in the buffer zones around the reserve.

The high mountain peaks where the butterflies clump in trees are probably a bit above the altitude where avocado trees like to grow, Martínez Meza said. But the buffer zones provide protection and support for the higher areas, and he said more must be done to combat the change in land use.

Frequently, illegal logging is carried out by outsiders or organized gangs, and not by the farm communities that technically own the land.

Millions of monarchs migrate from the U.S. and Canada each year to forests west of Mexico's capital.

The butterflies hit a low of just 0.67 hectares (1.66 acres) in 2013-2014.

Loss of habitat, especially the milkweed where the monarchs lay their eggs, pesticide and herbicide use, as well climate change, all pose threats to the species' migration.

While there was plenty of bad news for the butterflies — very few showed up to some historic wintering sites like Sierra Chincua — there was the welcome news that a new wintering site was discovered nearby, in a mountaintop near the Lagunas de Zempoala protected area, near Mexico City.

Tavera said the wintering site had always been there, but was so difficult to reach that it wasn't discovered until earlier this month.

## **BLM launches Survival Fund amid federal COVID-19 relief wait**

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation is formally expanding a \$3 million financial relief fund that it quietly launched earlier this month, to help people struggling to make ends meet during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The foundation, which grew out of the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement nearly eight years ago, said Thursday that it plans to make up to 3,000 microgrants of \$1,000 each to people who it believes need it most. The BLM foundation has already begun asking recipients to apply for the Survival Fund grants as it builds out its philanthropic arm.

If approved, the money is deposited directly into recipients' bank accounts or made available on prepaid debit cards, the foundation said — no strings attached.

"This came from a collective conversation with BLM leadership that Black folks are being hurt the most financially during the pandemic," BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors told The Associated Press.

"I believe that when you have resources, to hoard them is a disservice to the people who deserve them," she said.

Details about the initiative were shared with the AP ahead of the announcement. As of Thursday afternoon, the foundation reported the response had been overwhelming and it was no longer accepting applications for the initial round of the fund.

Cullors, the foundation's executive director, said that so far the Survival Fund's first recipients have included the families of people killed by police or who died while incarcerated, grassroots community organizers, people who identify as transgender, single parents and formerly incarcerated individuals.

Before Thursday, at least 300 people had been approved for grants. The fund is being administered through UpTogether, a project of the Family Independence Initiative, which works to disrupt the cycle of poverty through direct investment to low-income families and budding entrepreneurs.

One Survival Fund recipient, Kusema Thomas, said he has been earning \$1,500 less in monthly income since the start of the pandemic. The 45-year-old Los Angeles resident and father of 11-year-old and 4-year-old sons had been working as a community organizer and mental health specialist at a shelter for youth victims of domestic violence. His hours were cut back due to the pandemic.

Thomas, who was also formerly incarcerated, said that when he was asked to apply for BLM's Survival Fund, he thought he was being pranked. But when the \$1,000 grant showed up, he said it reminded him of the value of communities collectively pooling resources to bring relief and aid to their own.

"It reinforces some of the things that have just been natural to us as a community," Thomas told the AP. "It's a point of pride, that's connected to our history of being able to support each other. It's how we show love."

Thomas said he is using the money to teach his sons how to begin saving, something that he wasn't taught as a child.

The Survival Fund is part of the foundation's 2021 focus on economic justice, particularly as it relates to the ongoing socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on Black communities. On Tuesday, the BLM foundation revealed that it had raised \$90 million last year, much of it after the May 2020 death of George Floyd, a Black man whose last breaths under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer sparked protests across

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 58 of 81

the U.S. and around the world.

And it comes as the nation awaits Congress to take action on a nearly \$2 trillion relief package that includes \$1,400 direct stimulus payments to individuals who earn less than \$75,000 in annual income. The House of Representatives was expected to approve the package this week and send it over to the Senate, which is narrowly controlled by Democrats.

President Joe Biden has pledged to pass a new round of COVID-19 relief legislation within the first 100 days of his administration. He's about 35 days in.

Still, Cullors criticized the effort, saying it was "unacceptable" that moving relief dollars into Americans' hands was not the first thing the Biden administration did when it took over.

However, passage of the aid bill, expected next month, is happening far faster than earlier relief efforts during the Trump administration, which languished for months as Republicans and Democrats failed to reach agreement.

During that time, mutual aid and direct assistance programs like BLM's Survival Fund have increased in popularity. According to the nonprofit Town Hall Project, which created the Mutual Aid Hub to track various collective efforts last March, the number of mutual aid groups in the U.S. grew from 50 to more than 800 in 48 states by last May.

Black mutual aid efforts, in particular, date back to the 1700s, when enslaved Americans pooled their money to buy each other's freedom from bondage. In the late 1960s, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense created survival programs in which members provided groceries and breakfasts to the elderly and schoolchildren, as well as health care screenings through community clinics.

Cullors said the Survival Fund is a tribute to that legacy.

Morrison is a member of AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow him on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/aaronlmorrison>.

## **EXPLAINER: What were the warnings before the Capitol riot?**

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

Capitol Police leadership had plenty of intelligence warning that armed extremists were planning to target the Capitol over President Donald Trump's election loss, according to new testimony Thursday. But their rank-and-file officers were still left exposed against armed rioters who came within steps of lawmakers.

In an appearance before a House subcommittee, acting Chief Yogananda Pittman said none of the warnings forecast the mass attack that actually took place.

Both Democrats and Republicans took issue with that, saying the intelligence sounded both specific and credible.

"I cannot get past a glaring discrepancy between intelligence received and preparation," Rep. Katherine Clark, D-Mass., said during Thursday's hearing before the House Appropriations Committee.

Pittman became acting chief when her predecessor, Steven Sund, resigned in the wake of the insurrection. At the time of the attack, she was serving as assistant chief for protective and intelligence services.

Here's some of what was learned from Pittman's testimony:

### **WHAT INTELLIGENCE DID POLICE HAVE BEFORE THE JAN. 6 ATTACK?**

Three days before the attack, the Capitol Police department's own security assessment warned that militia members, white supremacists, and other extremists were planning to come to Washington and target Congress in what they saw as a "last stand" to support Trump.

Pittman says the details of that assessment were shared throughout the department, with sergeants and lieutenants told to spread the word to rank-and-file officers.

It's not clear how effective that messaging was, however. Four officers interviewed by The Associated Press last month say they had little or no warning of what would happen and felt they were left unprepared for the attack.

Pittman also faced questions about an FBI memo, received the night before the attack, that warned

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 59 of 81

extremists planned to wage "war" to prevent Joe Biden's election victory from being certified. She said that memo never reached her, but that it would not have changed the department's preparations anyway.

SO POLICE KNEW VIOLENCE WAS LIKELY. WHAT DID THEY DO TO PREVENT IT?

Pittman said the force took appropriate measures to protect the building and the lawmakers who were inside. She said they stationed armed officers at the homes of congressional leaders, intercepted radio frequencies used by the invaders, and deployed counterintelligence officers to the Ellipse rally where Trump was sending his supporters marching to the Capitol to "fight like hell."

But the mob made it through the police line and smashed their way into the Capitol, fighting past officers who were outnumbered and overwhelmed. Many officers didn't know if they could use force and lacked guidance on how to stop the rioters, leaving some to improvise.

WHY DIDN'T THE DEPARTMENT DO MORE TO PREPARE?

Pittman argued that the intelligence from Jan. 3 was not specific or credible enough to predict the kind of insurrection that actually took place. The same goes for the FBI memo, she said. She said that even if department leaders had seen that warning, they wouldn't have changed their plans because it was considered "raw" intelligence and not something that the department could act on.

"No credible threat indicated that tens of thousands would attack the U.S. Capitol, nor did the intelligence received from the FBI or any other law enforcement partner indicate such a threat," Pittman said. Questioned later in the hearing, Pittman acknowledged that police estimate around 10,000 people were demonstrating outside and around 800 people broke inside.

Lawmakers seized on her claim that the warnings didn't lay out the actual threat.

Clark, the congresswoman from Massachusetts, described the Jan. 3 assessment as a listing of "who, what, when, why."

WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

Pittman noted that she had taken "corrective measures" to better share intelligence in the future. But there are still several investigations going on into the law enforcement response.

Speaking after the hearing, Rep. Tim Ryan, the House subcommittee's chairman, stopped short of saying Pittman should be fired. But he said there are "a lot of concerns" on the committee about her leadership and noted the lack of trust among the rank and file.

The Capitol Police union issued a vote of no confidence last week against Pittman.

"I think there's some real questions about the decision making that was made, and I'm going to leave it at that," he said.

---

Associated Press writers Michael Balsamo and Mary Clare Jalonick in Washington contributed to this report.

## **New coronavirus variant in New York spurs caution, concern**

By MARION RENAULT Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Another mutated version of the coronavirus has popped up in New York City, and experts reacted to the the news with a mixture of caution and concern.

The new variant first appeared in the New York area in late November, and has since cropped up in neighboring states, according to researchers at the California Institute of Technology, one of two teams to share their work this week.

But how problematic the variant may be isn't known yet. Viruses are constantly mutating — or making typos in their genetic code — as they spread and make copies of themselves.

"Most are not of particular concern," said Francois Balloux, director of the University College London's Genetics Institute.

However, he added, "Noticing them early, flagging them, raising concern is useful."

That's because some genetic tweaks can be worrisome, especially if they help the virus spread more easily, make it more deadly or curb the effectiveness of vaccines. Scientists use genome sequencing and other research to figure out which are a potential problem.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 60 of 81

New York City health officials and Mayor Bill de Blasio on Thursday sought to tamp down worries about the new variant, emphasizing that the new research is preliminary and little is known about the variant.

"Some variants are just that, they're variants," said Dr. Jay Varma, senior health adviser to the mayor.

WHAT DID THEY FIND IN NEW YORK?

Two research groups — at Caltech and Columbia University in New York — released papers this week describing their findings about the new variant. Neither paper has been published or reviewed by other scientists.

The Caltech researchers found that the new variant showed up in about a quarter of the 1,200 virus sequences they looked at this month. The variant has also shown up in New Jersey and Connecticut and has made "isolated appearances across the country," said CalTech's Anthony West, a co-author of the paper.

On Thursday, Columbia University researchers released their research that scrutinized about 1,100 virus samples from patients treated at the university's medical center, dating back to November. During the second week of February, the new variant was identified in 12% of the samples, they reported. They also found patients infected with the mutated virus were more likely to be older and have been hospitalized.

Both groups noted that the new variant has a mutation that could potentially weaken the effectiveness of vaccines — a mutation seen in other worrisome variants.

"There is clearly something to keep an eye on," Balloux said.

HOW MANY OTHER VARIANTS ARE THERE?

New variants have been showing up throughout the pandemic, but three are considered the most worrisome — they've been designated "variants of concern." They were first detected in Britain, South Africa and Brazil but have spread to other countries.

The one identified in the U.K. late last year has since been found in 45 U.S. states, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The strain is concerning because it has so many mutations, nearly two dozen. Some are on the spiky protein that the virus uses to attach to and infect cells — and that current vaccines and antibody drugs target.

One of the spike protein mutations is seen in the variants discovered early on in Brazil and South Africa, and, now, the new variant in New York.

A variant that has been spreading in California is also getting attention. It's been found in 40% to 50% of samples examined by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, according to Director Barbara Ferrer. But there isn't enough rigorous research to determine what, if any, effect its mutations might have.

WHAT'S NEXT?

After what many described as a slow start, the federal government in recent weeks has ramped up its genetic sequencing to look for and study virus variants to figure out which ones might be a problem. In the meantime, Ana S. Gonzalez Reiche, a virologist at Mount Sinai's Icahn School of Medicine, urged caution.

"Without evidence, we don't need to alarm ourselves about every variant detected," she said.

Studies are raising concern that first-generation COVID-19 vaccines don't work as well against a variant that first emerged in South Africa as they do against other versions. In response, drug companies are already figuring out how to modify their vaccines.

Experts say that in the meantime, public health measures like social distancing and masks will reduce opportunities for the coronavirus to continue mutating and run rampant.

"Emerging of variants will occur," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert, told NBC on Thursday. "The trick is when they do occur, to prevent them from spreading."

---

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.

## Chief: Police heeded Capitol attack warnings but overwhelmed

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, MARY CLARE JALONICK and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 61 of 81

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lawmakers pressed the acting U.S. Capitol Police chief Thursday to explain why the force wasn't prepared to fend off a violent mob of insurrectionists even though officials had compiled specific, compelling intelligence that extremists were likely to attack Congress and try to halt the certification of Donald Trump's election loss.

Acting Chief Yogananda Pittman conceded there were multiple levels of failures that allowed hundreds of pro-Trump rioters to storm their way into the U.S. Capitol, overwhelming outnumbered officers and breaking through doors and windows.

However, she denied that law enforcement failed to take seriously warnings of violence before the Jan. 6 insurrection. Three days before the riot, Capitol Police distributed an internal document warning that armed extremists were poised for violence and could invade Congress because they saw it as the last chance to overturn the election results, Pittman said.

Her testimony drove home a seeming disconnect between the intelligence and the preparation. Lawmakers, who were witnesses and potential victims last month as well as investigators now, are trying to get answers to why this symbol of American democracy was overrun so quickly by a mob whose plans were online and known.

Reports aside, the assault was much bigger than expected, Pittman said.

"Although we knew the likelihood for violence by extremists, no credible threat indicated that tens of thousands would attack the U.S. Capitol, nor did the intelligence received from the FBI or any other law enforcement partner indicate such a threat," she said. Later, under questioning by the House subcommittee's chairman, Rep. Tim Ryan, Pittman said that while there may have been thousands of people heading to the Capitol from a pro-Trump rally, about 800 people actually made their way into the building.

Pittman's testimony provided the clearest and most detailed picture so far that Capitol Police were so concerned by the intelligence that they took extraordinary measures, including giving assault-style rifles to agents guarding congressional leaders and having other officers waiting with evacuation vehicles for top lawmakers to flee the Capitol, if needed.

On Jan. 6, however, as the invaders wielded metal pipes, planks of wood, stun guns and bear spray, the vastly outnumbered rank-and-file officers inside the building were left to fend for themselves without proper communication or strong guidance from supervisors. The officers weren't sure when they could use deadly force, had failed to properly lock down the building and could be heard making frantic radio calls for backup as they were shoved to the ground and beaten by rioters, with some left bloodied. Five people died, including a Capitol Police officer and a woman that police shot.

While Pittman said in her testimony that sergeants and lieutenants were supposed to pass on intelligence to the department's rank and file, many officers have said they were given little or no information or training for what they would face. Four officers told The Associated Press shortly after the riot that they heard nothing from then-Chief Steven Sund, Pittman, or other top commanders as the building was breached. And officers were left in many cases to improvise or try to save colleagues facing peril.

One officer said the department did not hold planning meetings with rank-and-file officers prior to Jan. 6 as it does with routine events like holiday concerts. The officer and others who spoke to AP were not authorized by the department to speak publicly and were granted anonymity.

Thursday's hearing highlighted specific intelligence failures. Lawmakers focused not only on the Capitol Police force's own advance assessment of threats but on why senior department officials never reviewed a report from the FBI that warned about concerning online posts foreshadowing a "war" at the Capitol. That warning made its way to investigators within the police force and to the department's intelligence unit but was never forwarded up the chain of command, Pittman said.

Even if it had reached the top officials, Pittman argued, Capitol Police wouldn't have done anything differently. Before she was named acting police chief — Sund, the former chief, resigned after the riot — Pittman was the assistant chief in charge of intelligence operations.

"We do not believe that based on the information in that document, we would have changed our posture, per se," Pittman said. "The information that was shared was very similar to what U.S. Capitol Police already had, in terms of the militia groups, the white supremacist groups, as well as the extremists that

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 62 of 81

were going to participate in acts of violence and potentially be armed on the campus.”

Ryan, a Democrat from Ohio, said the internal report that the protests would be focused on the Capitol, and then the FBI memo firming that up “should have elevated the response, and it didn’t.”

“And that’s where, you know, leaders get paid for judgment. And that was some bad judgment,” Ryan said. “And they also get paid to have nerve, and courage, to make the tough decisions when those tough decisions needed to be made.”

The panel’s top Republican, Washington Rep. Jaime Herrera-Beutler, said the top Capitol Police officials “either failed to take seriously the intelligence received or the intelligence failed to reach the right people.”

The issue was also raised of whether police were hampered by a reluctance by higher-ups to call for National Guard troops to help. The police force is overseen by a separate body — the Capitol Police Board — which includes the sergeants at arms of both houses. Sund said at a separate hearing on Tuesday that then-House Sergeant at Arms Paul Irving was concerned about the “optics” of the guard defending the Capitol, a contention Irving denied.

In her testimony, Pittman denied that race played a role in the failure to heed warning signs. Images of white rioters moving unimpeded through the Capitol evoked comparisons to the far more heavy-handed response of law enforcement to Black Lives Matter protests and other marches and rallies. Pittman noted that she became the department’s first Black chief when she replaced Sund.

Pittman is not only facing pressure from congressional leaders, but also faces internal criticism from her own officers, particularly after the Capitol Police union recently issued a vote of no confidence against her.

Ryan stopped short of saying Pittman should be fired but said there are “some real questions about the decision making that was made.” He said there are “a lot of concerns” among Republicans and Democrats on the committee about her leadership and noted the lack of trust on her force.

---

Merchant reported from Houston.

## House votes to expand legal safeguards for LGBTQ people

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Democratic-led House passed a bill Thursday that would enshrine LGBTQ protections in the nation’s labor and civil rights laws, a top priority of President Joe Biden, though the legislation faces an uphill battle in the Senate.

The bill passed by a vote of 224-206 with three Republicans joining Democrats in voting yes.

The Equality Act amends existing civil rights law to explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identification as protected characteristics. The protections would extend to employment, housing, loan applications, education, public accommodations and other areas. Supporters say the law before the House on Thursday is long overdue and would ensure that every person is treated equally under the law.

“The LGBT community has waited long enough,” said Rep. David Cicilline, D-R.I., who is gay and the bill’s lead sponsor. “The time has come to extend the blessings of liberty and equality to all of Americans regardless of who they are and who they love.”

Republicans broadly opposed the legislation. They echoed concerns from religious groups and social conservatives who worry the bill would force people to take actions that contradict their religious beliefs. They warned that faith-based adoption agencies seeking to place children with a married mother and father could be forced to close, or that private schools would have to hire staff whose conduct violates tenets of the school’s faith.

“This is unprecedented. It’s dangerous. It’s an attack on our first freedom, the first freedom listed in the Bill of Rights, religious liberty,” said Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La.

The House passed the Equality Act in the last Congress with unanimous Democratic support and the backing of eight Republicans, but Donald Trump’s White House opposed the measure and it was not considered in the Senate, where 60 votes will be needed to overcome procedural hurdles. Democrats are trying to revive it now that they have control of Congress and the White House, but passage still appears unlikely in the evenly divided Senate.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 63 of 81

This time, Republican Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania and John Katko and Tom Reed of New York sided with Democrats in voting for the bill.

The Supreme Court provided the LGBTQ community with a resounding victory last year in a 6-3 ruling that said the Civil Rights Act of 1964 applied to LGBTQ workers when it comes to barring discrimination on the basis of sex. Civil rights groups have encouraged Congress to follow up that decision and ensure that anti-bias protections addressing such areas as housing, public accommodations and public services are applied in all 50 states.

Biden made clear his support for the Equality Act in the lead-up to last year's election, saying it would be one of his first priorities.

Democratic Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, D-Penn., said the Equality Act is needed to end "the patchwork of state laws" around gay rights and create "uniform nationwide protection."

"It's been personal since my baby sister came out to me almost 40 years ago," Scanlon said. "For many people all across this country and across this House, that is when the fight hits home."

The debate among lawmakers on Capitol Hill also become personal. Rep. Marie Newman, D-Ill., whose daughter is transgender, tweeted a video of herself placing a transgender flag outside her office. Her office is across the hall from Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., who was recently blocked from serving on two committees because of past comments and tweets.

"Our neighbor, @RepMTG, tried to block the Equality Act because she believes prohibiting discrimination against trans Americans is "disgusting, immoral, and evil." Thought we'd put up our Transgender flag so she can look at it every time she opens her door.," Newman tweeted.

Greene responded with a video of her own in which she puts up a sign that reads: "There are Two genders: MALE and FEMALE. "Trust The Science!"

"Our neighbor, @RepMarieNewman, wants to pass the so-called "Equality" Act to destroy women's rights and religious freedoms. Thought we'd put up ours so she can look at it every time she opens her door.," Greene tweeted.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., pointed to the exchange to advocate for the bill Thursday.

"It breaks my heart that it is necessary, but the fact is, and in fact we had a sad event here even this morning, demonstrating the need for us to have respect," Pelosi said, at one point pausing and taking a deep sigh. "Not even just respect, but take pride, take pride in our LGBT community."

Gay and lesbian members of Congress spoke about how meaningful the bill is for them.

"Look, we're not asking for anything that any other American doesn't already enjoy," said Rep. Chris Pappas, D-N.H. "We just want to be treated the same. We just want politicians in Washington to catch up with the times and the Constitution."

Leaders at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote lawmakers this week to say they had grave concerns about the bill. Among the concerns they raised is that the bill would expand the government's definition of public places, forcing church halls and equivalent facilities to host functions that violate their beliefs, which could lead to closing their doors to the broader community.

Republicans cited an array of consequences they said could occur if the bill passed into law, from eliminating the existing ban on the use of government funds for abortion, to allowing transgender people into women's shelters and transgender youth into girls sports. Democrats likened the effort to past civil rights battles in the nation's history.

Cicilline challenged Republicans, "I hope you will bear in mind how your vote will be remembered years from now."

Some of the nation's largest corporations are part of a coalition in support of the legislation, including Apple Inc., AT&T, Chevron and 3M Co., just to name a few of the hundreds of companies that have endorsed it.

After the vote advocacy groups weighed in, with the Human Rights Campaign describing the vote as "bringing us closer to ensuring that every person is treated equally under the law." Meanwhile, the conservative Alliance Defending Freedom called on the Senate to "reject this dangerous bill — for the good of all Americans."

## Brazil death toll tops 250,000, virus still running rampant

By DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Brazil's COVID-19 death toll, which surpassed 250,000 on Thursday, is the world's second-highest for the same reason its second wave has yet to fade: Prevention was never made a priority, experts say.

Since the pandemic's start, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro scoffed at the "little flu" and lambasted local leaders for imposing restrictions on activity; he said the economy must keep humming along to prevent worse hardship.

Even when he approved pandemic welfare payments for the poor, they weren't announced as a means to keep people home. And Brazilians remain out and about as vaccination has started up — but rollout has proven far slower than was anticipated.

"Brazil simply didn't have a response plan. We've been through this for the last year and still we don't have a clear plan, a national plan," Miguel Lago, executive director of Brazil's Institute for Health Policy Studies, which advises public health officials, told the Associated Press. "There's no plan, at all. And the same applies to vaccination."

Whereas other countries' daily cases and deaths have fallen, Latin America's largest nation is parked on an elevated plateau — a grim repeat of mid-2020. In each of the last five weeks, Brazil has averaged more than 1,000 daily deaths. Official data showed a confirmed death toll total of 251,498 on Thursday.

At least 12 Brazilian states are in the midst of a second wave even worse than the one faced in 2020, said Domingos Alves, an epidemiologist who has been tracking COVID-19 data.

"This scenario is going to get worse," Alves told the AP, adding that the virus was spreading faster among the population. In Amazonas state, where the capital, Manaus, saw hospitals run out of oxygen last month, there have been more than 5,000 deaths in the first two months of the year, about as many as in all of 2020.

"It is the most difficult moment that we have had since the confirmation of the first case," Carlos Lula, chair of the National Council of Health Secretaries, was quoted as saying Thursday by O Globo newspaper. "We have never had so many states with so much difficulty at the same time."

Alves and other public health experts said the spread is exacerbated by authorities' reluctance to follow recommendations from international health organizations to implement stricter restrictions.

It is up to governors and mayors to impose lockdowns or other restrictions to contain the virus. The states of Sao Paulo and Bahia recently introduced nighttime curfews, but experts say the moves are too late and insufficient.

"They are not containment measures; they are palliative measures, always taken after the fact," said Alves, who is also an adjunct professor of social medicine at the University of Sao Paulo. "'Lockdown' has become a curse word in Brazil."

Miguel Nicolelis, a prominent Brazilian neuroscientist, warned in January that Brazil had to either enter lockdown or "we won't be able to bury our dead in 2021." He had been advising northeastern states on how to combat COVID-19, but recently left his position, dissatisfied with their refusal to go into lockdown, the Folha de S.Paulo newspaper reported.

"Right now, Brazil is the largest open-air laboratory, where it is possible to observe the natural dynamics of the coronavirus without any effective containment measure," he wrote on Twitter on Tuesday. "Everyone will witness the epic devastation."

There are some exceptions, but they remain marginal and have failed to inspire a broader movement.

Sao Luis, capital of northeastern Maranhao state, was the first Brazilian city to go into full lockdown last May. It was successful, notwithstanding Bolsonaro's efforts to undermine the restrictions and sow doubt about their efficacy, according to the state's governor, Flávio Dino.

"It has been very difficult to manage distance and prevention measures," Dino said, adding that the first obstacle was an economic and social one, especially after the federal government's emergency pandemic

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 65 of 81

aid program ended last year.

Lago noted that Bolsonaro rarely even comments on the pandemic anymore, and has effectively moved on to other priorities, including securing support in Congress for loosening gun control laws and passing economic reforms. His administration is seeking to reinstate some COVID-19 welfare payments, but for a smaller group of needy Brazilians.

The only preventative measure Bolsonaro consistently supported was the use of treatments like hydroxy-chloroquine, which showed no benefit in rigorous studies.

Bolsonaro's administration has also adopted a hands-off approach regarding the vaccination campaign. It relied mostly on a deal to purchase a single vaccine, AstraZeneca, which has been slow in coming. The national immunization effort to date has relied mostly on Chinese-made CoronaVac shots secured by Sao Paulo state, though the federal government is now trying to buy others.

Brazil's decades of experience with successful vaccination programs and its large nationwide public health care network led many experts to believe that immunization — even if it were to start with a delay — would be a relatively speedy affair. In previous campaigns, the nation of 210 million was able to vaccinate as many as 10 million people in a single day, health experts noted.

Five weeks after the first shot, Brazil has vaccinated only 3.6% of its population. That is more than double Argentina and Mexico, but less than one-fourth that of Chile, according to Our World in Data, an online research site that compares official government statistics.

"There is no way to be fast with a shortage of vaccines; that is the crucial point," said Carla Domingues, who for eight years coordinated Brazil's national vaccination program, until leaving her position in 2019. "Until there is greater supply, the speed will be slower, as you have to keep selecting who can be vaccinated."

Meantime, the virus continues to run rampant across Brazil, and take its toll.

In the Sao Paulo state city of Araraquara there have been more deaths so far this year than all of last year and intensive-care unit occupancy surpassed full capacity, with people on waiting lists to enter ICUs and get treatment. Local authorities responded Sunday by announcing a full lockdown — making Araraquara only the second city to impose such a restriction.

"We never imagined we would reach this point," said Fabiana Araújo, a nurse and a coordinator of the city's committee to fight COVID-19. "It was the only option."

— AP writers David Biller contributed from Rio and Mauricio Savarese from Sao Paulo.

## **Biden directive expands jobless aid to more unemployed**

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Unemployed Americans who have turned down job offers because they feared their prospective employers weren't providing sufficient protection from the coronavirus would qualify for jobless aid under a directive the Labor Department issued Thursday.

The measure would also expand a federal unemployment-benefits program, established in last spring's economic relief package, to cover workers who have lost hours or who were laid off because of the pandemic. It would also cover school employees who lose jobs or work hours because of school closings.

The federal program, known as Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, made the self-employed and gig workers eligible for jobless aid for the first time.

"Until now, unemployment insurance benefits during the pandemic have been too scattered and too uncertain," said Patricia Smith, senior adviser to the labor secretary. "That begins to change today, with many more workers now eligible for unemployment insurance benefits."

The directive stems from an executive order President Joe Biden issued last month. The White House said it sought to "ensure that unemployed Americans no longer have to choose between paying their bills and keeping themselves and their families safe from COVID-19 by clarifying that workers who refuse unsafe working conditions can still receive unemployment insurance."

Speaking to reporters, department officials declined to estimate how many Americans would now become newly eligible for jobless benefits.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 66 of 81

The benefits will be made retroactive, officials said. People who applied for unemployment aid after Dec. 27 can receive retroactive payments back to Dec. 6. Those who applied before then and were turned down can receive retroactive payments dating back to when they first applied.

With unemployed Americans now receiving a \$300 weekly federal payment on top of state benefits that average about \$320 a week, the retroactive aid could result in significant lump sum payments. The department estimates that states won't be able to update their jobless-benefit systems to include the new criteria until late March, which could mean that the first payments would amount to about four months of benefits.

Workers whose place of employment have closed because of the pandemic are already eligible to receive jobless aid from the federal program. But workers who were laid off even as their company remained open, such as waiters at a restaurant that stayed open for delivery, weren't eligible. This directive will now cover those workers, the Labor Department said.

For the unemployed who have turned down jobs out of concern over the coronavirus, applicants will have to state under penalty of perjury that their prospective employer wasn't meeting state or local guidelines on mask-wearing or personal protective equipment, said Suzi Levine, a deputy assistant labor secretary.

The potential for large lump sum payments could encourage fraud, which has bedeviled unemployment assistance programs all year. Levine said the Labor Department would continue to combat fraudulent claims.

"It is imperative to not let such callous theft deter us from bolstering our support for America's workers and families who are suffering through the double impact of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and associated job losses," she added.

On Wednesday, the Labor Department's Office of the Inspector General released a report that said it had found \$5.4 billion in fraudulent payments between March and October of 2020.

While that is a small fraction of the \$400 billion in jobless aid that was paid last year, "the OIG expects that the actual amount of potential fraud is much larger," the report said. It noted that California has estimated that at least 10% of its payments, or \$11 billion, and as much as 27%, or \$29 billion, were fraudulent.

## **Biden marks 50M vaccine doses in first 5 weeks in office**

By ZEKE MILLER and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Days after marking a solemn milestone in the pandemic, President Joe Biden is celebrating the pace of his efforts to end it.

On Thursday, Biden marked the administration of the 50 millionth dose of COVID-19 vaccine since his swearing-in. The moment came days after the nation reached the devastating milestone of 500,000 coronavirus deaths and ahead of a meeting with the nation's governors on plans to speed the distribution even further.

"The more people get vaccinated, the faster we're going to beat this pandemic," Biden said at the White House ceremony, noting that his administration is on course to exceed his promise to deliver 100 million shots in his first 100 days in office.

"We're halfway there: 50 million shots in 37 days," Biden said. "That's weeks ahead of schedule."

All told, more than 45 million Americans have been administered at least one dose of the approved vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna since they received approval from the Food and Drug Administration in December, with more than 20 million receiving both required doses.

As part of the ceremony, four front-line workers — a pair of emergency medical technicians, a school counselor and a grocery store worker — received vaccine doses on live television, part of the White House's efforts to build confidence in the vaccination program.

Biden predictions that by late spring there will be enough vaccine to administer to anyone that wants it, but that hesitance of the vaccine will limit the number of people who want it. "We'll have the vaccine waiting," Biden said, predicting that point could come within 60 to 90 days.

He promised a "massive campaign to educate people" about the safety and efficacy of the vaccines, in hopes of stimulating demand as the nation aims to vaccinate about 80% of adults to reach herd immunity and end the pandemic.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 67 of 81

Biden said he planned to tour a U.S. military-run mass vaccination site in Houston on Friday, one of several ways his administration is aiming to speed injections, particularly once supply increases.

Biden noted the promise of a third vaccine receiving approval as soon as this weekend, as Johnson & Johnson's single-dose candidate undergoes review by the FDA.

"We have a plan to roll it out as quickly as Johnson & Johnson can make it," Biden said.

Meeting with governors, Biden appealed for their help in passing his \$1.9 trillion "American Rescue Plan," which provides funding to expand vaccination and testing as well as economic relief for people struggling during the pandemic.

"The economic toll of this pandemic continues to tear through our country as brutally as the virus itself," Biden said.

Biden also warned that variants could continue to spread, leading to more cases and hospitalizations. He appealed to Americans to keep up with social distancing measures and wear face coverings.

"This is not the time to relax," he said.

## Defense head Austin weighs warship needs in Pacific, Mideast

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

ABOARD THE USS NIMITZ (AP) — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told sailors on the USS Nimitz Thursday that he hopes to avoid long ship deployments like the more than 10 months they just spent at sea. But as he made his first aircraft carrier visit as Pentagon chief, he acknowledged the demand for American warships around the globe as he wrestles with security threats from China in the Pacific and Iran in the Middle East.

Standing in the ship's hangar bay, Austin said he will make a decision soon on whether to send a carrier back to the Middle East, where the Nimitz had been. But he said there have been times when the U.S. has opted not to have a carrier strike group in that region.

"There's going to be gaps," he said. "As we do that, we do things to make sure we have resources in the right place so can respond."

The Nimitz, which left its homeport of Bremerton, Washington, last April, has been at sea for nearly 300 days, including several weeks of pre-deployment exercises. By the time it gets home in March, the ship and its strike group — which includes the USS Princeton and the USS Sterett — will have sailed about 99,000 nautical miles around the globe.

The ship's return home has triggered renewed debate over whether the U.S. should keep a persistent aircraft carrier presence in the Middle East as a deterrence to Iran. And it underscores the persistent competition for Navy ships as the U.S. and the Pentagon focus on China as a key threat that has required an escalating presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Over the past year, however, military commanders have successfully argued for a carrier presence in the Gulf region because of threats from Iran and Iranian-backed militias. Just a year ago, the U.S. poured more than 20,000 additional troops into the Middle East to counter escalating tensions with Iran that peaked with the missile attack on American forces in Iraq in early 2020.

The Nimitz's lengthy deployment was largely due to decisions to keep it in the Middle East last year and this year to serve as a deterrent to Iran. Sailors late last year were just starting to head home, after being held in the Gulf region for an extended time. But in early December, as the U.S. pulled troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, then-acting defense chief Christopher Miller announced that they would be staying in the region -- forcing the ship to turn around and head back to the Gulf.

On Dec. 31, Miller announced the ship was finally going to head home. It's now off California.

President Joe Biden has announced plans for a Pentagon review of national security strategy on China as part of his push to recalibrate the U.S. approach with Beijing. Biden's call for a new task force to review strategy comes as the new administration shows growing recognition of the challenges that the U.S. faces from China's modernized and more assertive military.

The review will weigh U.S. intelligence, troops levels in the region, defense alliances with China and more.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 68 of 81

Speaking to reporters traveling with him on the Nimitz, Austin said that as directed by Biden, he is doing a detailed review of how the U.S. forces are positioned around the globe to ensure resources are focused on national security priorities.

His visit to the ship came on Austin's first travel as defense secretary. He spent two days on the West Coast, largely visiting military vaccination centers in San Diego and Los Angeles.

But as he spoke to sailors on the ship, he acknowledged their sacrifices in being away from families for so long. Recalling his 18-month deployments to Iraq as a commander, the retired Army general said, "I understand the stress that that can place on families.

"Any potential adversary out there in this ocean or any other ocean, has to know when they look at what you've accomplished, that the United States takes very seriously our security commitments around the world," Austin said.

He added, however, "I don't want deployments like this one to be the norm, and so we need to take a hard look at that, but you handled it very very well."

## **New York woman loses job, leads pantry feeding thousands**

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — While dozens of New Yorkers lined up outside in the rain, shopping carts at the ready as they waited for free food, Sofia Moncayo led her team in prayer.

"We're super grateful for these people here. In Jesus' name we pray," she said, and the group of women around her clapped, cheered and replied: "Amen." "Now," she said, "let's get to work."

By then, they had worked almost nonstop for hours. They picked up heavy boxes, separated thousands of items and removed snow from the curb. They were cold, wet and tired. No one would pay them and they didn't care. They were just happy to be there for someone else that day.

During the coronavirus pandemic, Moncayo has led the food distribution program through Mosaic West Queens Church in the Sunnyside neighborhood. The initiative began in March; Moncayo took charge a month later, as it expanded to serve hundreds of people.

Since then, Moncayo has had her own struggles. She was furloughed from her job at a construction company and remains unemployed. And she also owes five months of rent for the martial arts studio that she owns with her husband in the neighborhood.

But she has continued to lead fundraisers and coordinate dozens of volunteers who distribute more than 1,000 boxes of food to families twice a week.

"I think helping others has to do something to your brain chemically because if we had not being doing everything that we're doing, I think this would have been a much scarier time," she said. "Being able to dig in and help others, it really gives you perspective and helps you believe that you're going to be OK too."

Most of the food is donated by a neighborhood restaurant and other sources. There's also been help from the Farmers to Families Food Box Program overseen by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Moncayo, who was born in Colombia, was moved to volunteer by her Christian faith by memories of the food insecurity she faced growing up in New York. She recalled how she would join her family in lines to pick up bread and cheese from pantries and how sometimes she felt shame.

"One of the things that we wanted to make sure is that we don't look at people on the pantry line as people that need food, and really focus on, 'hey, these are our neighbors.'"

Sunnyside resident Carol Sullivan lost her stage manager job when Broadway theaters closed because of the virus. She was hesitant at first about receiving food from a pantry, but she said that Moncayo and the other volunteers made her feel welcome.

"It has been a link to the community that I didn't have before and it also saves a lot of anxiety over having to have money to pay for food over having to pay for the bills," Sullivan said.

"If you have a dollar, you have to stretch it in so many places. Having them has made the choice less stressful."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

## As hospital numbers fall, fatigued staff get relief at last

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — When COVID-19 patients inundated St. Louis hospitals, respiratory therapists arriving for yet another grueling shift with a dwindling supply of ventilators would often glance at their assignments and cry, heading into the locker room to collect themselves.

"They were like, 'Man, another 12 hours of this slog of these on-the-verge-of-death patients who could go at any moment.' And just knowing that they had to take care of them with that kind of stress in the back of their head," recalled Joe Kowalczyk, a respiratory therapist who sometimes works in a supervisory role.

Now the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in the U.S. has dropped by 80,000 in six weeks, and 17% of the nation's adult population has gotten at least one dose of a vaccine, providing some relief to front-line workers like Kowalczyk. On his most recent shift at Mercy Hospital St. Louis, there were only about 20 coronavirus patients, down from as many as 100 at the peak of the winter surge.

"It is so weird to look back on it," he said. "Everyone was hitting their wit's end definitely toward the end just because we had been doing it for so long at the end of year."

The U.S. has seen a dramatic turnaround since December and January, when hospitals were teeming with patients after holiday gatherings and pandemic fatigue caused a surge in cases and deaths. Health officials acknowledge the improvement but point out that hospitalizations are still at about the same level as earlier peaks in April and July and right before the crisis worsened in November. Deaths are still persistently high, though much lower than the peak in early January, when they sometimes exceeded 4,000 per day.

Hospitalizations in Missouri were hovering around 3,000 a day during a stretch from late November into January but have since fallen about 60%. As of Monday, 1,202 people were hospitalized, according to state data.

In Wisconsin, hospitalizations dropped dramatically over the last three and a half months, from a high of 2,277 patients on Nov. 17 to 355 on Wednesday, according to the Wisconsin Hospital Association. And the patients who are hospitalized are not as sick. The number of patients in intensive care has dropped 81% since Nov. 16.

State health officials on Feb. 15 removed all staff from a field hospital set up in October at the state fairgrounds in suburban Milwaukee. They have stopped short of dismantling the facility out of concern that the state could experience a surge in cases sparked by variants of the virus that causes COVID-19.

"It's a balancing act. You don't want to close it too soon until you really believe we're on the other side of this pandemic, yet we don't want to tie up (the fairgrounds) too long if we're truly not going to need the facility," state Department of Health Services Deputy Secretary Julie Willems Van Dijk said.

Behind the overall positive trends in hospitalizations are worrisome hints that the worst may not be over, said Ali Mokdad, professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

"In the past week, we're seeing the slowdown of the decline," Mokdad said. In many states, hospitalizations are leveling off or actually rising.

The biggest driver in the overall decline in U.S. hospitalizations is people's behavior in December and January, Mokdad said. For the first time in the U.S., the shape of the wave is symmetrical, with the decline as steep as the rise.

"This didn't happen before in the previous two waves," Mokdad said. "For us, in the business, it's like 'Wow we are doing something really good right now.'"

In Minnesota, non-intensive care hospitalizations dropped from around 1,400 in late November to just

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 70 of 81

233 as of Tuesday. The number of intensive care patients has dropped about 85% since early December to just 59 patients on Tuesday, according to state data.

Hospitalizations in Illinois hovered around 6,000 patients for several days in late November but fell to 1,488 by Monday, a decrease of about 75%. The number of patients in intensive care has dropped as well, from 1,224 on Nov. 25 to just 361 on Monday, according to the state health department.

In hard-hit California, hospitalizations have dropped a stunning 70% since January, from 22,821 patients on Jan. 5 to 6,764 on Tuesday. The number of patients in intensive care has fallen from a high of 4,971 on Jan. 10 to 1,842 as of Tuesday, according to state data.

In Kansas, where many rural hospitals lack ventilators, the situation was so dire at one point that patients were being flown hundreds of miles for treatment.

But the number of hospitalizations in the state has dropped nearly 84%, from 1,282 on Dec. 2 to 208 on Sunday, according to the state health department. More than 300 people were in intensive care in December; that's down to just 50 now, state data shows.

"It has just kind of been quiet out here with COVID," said physician assistant Ben Kimball, who works primarily at Graham County Hospital in Hill City, a town of about 1,500 in rural northwest Kansas.

At the peak of the surge, he once resorted to flying a patient to a hospital in Denver, about 250 miles (402 kilometers) away. All the closer hospitals capable of providing more advanced care were full and turning away patients.

"We are pretty fortunate, I think," he said. "I can definitely feel that things are getting better. We aren't constantly struggling for bed space. We have had a few overnight observation COVID patients, but we haven't sent anyone out in a while."

Kris Mathews, the administrator of Decatur Health, a small hospital in rural northwest Kansas, also spent hours on the phone arranging transfers for patients at the peak of the surge. His staff fell ill themselves, and those who were well worked overtime caring for coronavirus patients.

"I could feel the staff's weariness and fatigue," he wrote. "Nobody complained to me about it, but I could see and feel them burning out."

Now it's been weeks since the hospital cared for a coronavirus inpatient. Thinking back, he said, "I couldn't be more damn proud."

Richmond reported from Madison, Wisconsin. AP Medical Writer Carla K. Johnson in Washington state also contributed to this report.

## Conservative gathering to feature Trump's false fraud claims

By JILL COLVIN and STEVE PEOPLES Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A gathering of conservatives this weekend in Florida will serve as an unabashed endorsement of former President Donald Trump's desire to remain the leader of the Republican Party — and as a forum to fan his false claim that he lost the November election only because of widespread voter fraud.

Matt Schlapp, chairman of the Conservative Political Action Conference and a Trump ally, said discussion panels on election integrity would highlight "huge" evidence of illegal voting in Georgia, Nevada and elsewhere that ultimately swung the election for Democrat Joe Biden.

Such baseless claims fueled the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol and have been repeatedly dismissed by the courts, the Trump administration's leading security officials and senior Republicans in Congress, including Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

The conference marks the first significant gathering of Republicans since the election and its aftermath as the party reckons with the faction that continues to support Trump as its leader and those who think the GOP needs to move quickly beyond the turbulent era of his presidency. Conference organizers, representing the first camp, did not invite any of the 17 Republican members of Congress who voted to support Trump's second impeachment or any major Trump critics.

McConnell, a regular at the annual conference, will not be on the program after publicly chastising Trump

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 71 of 81

for inciting last month's deadly insurrection at the Capitol. McConnell and his allies are worried that Trump will undermine the party's political future should the former president and his conspiracy theories continue to dominate Republican politics.

But at the conference, which will feature Trump along with most of the GOP's leading 2024 presidential prospects, organizers say election fraud will be a major theme.

"Because we pretty much wiped away scrutiny in a lot of these important swing states, you had a lot more illegal voting. That is not an opinion, that is fact," Schlapp told The Associated Press before the conference's kickoff Thursday evening.

But in five dozen court cases around the country after the election, no such evidence was presented, and Trump's then-attorney general, William Barr, said the Justice Department also had found none.

At the conference, though, those fact-based assessments are likely to be few, if any.

Trump himself is headlining the three-day session in a Sunday speech that will be his first public appearance since leaving the White House on Jan. 20. The event is being held in central Florida, having been blocked from meeting at its usual Maryland hotel by coronavirus restrictions in that state.

Trump has been keeping a relatively low profile since he moved from the White House to Palm Beach a month ago. He is expected to use his speech to assert his standing as the head of the party, as well as to harshly criticize Biden's first month in office, including the new president's efforts to undo Trump's immigration policies.

"I think the broader point will be: Here's where the Republican Party and conservative movement and the America First movement goes from here," said senior Trump adviser Jason Miller. "In many ways, this will be a throwback to 2016, where the president ran against Washington. Here we'll see the president address the fact that the only divide in the Republican Party is between the elites and the conservative grassroots in the party."

Trump has begun to wade back into the public, calling into friendly news outlets after the death of conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh and after golfer Tiger Woods' serious car accident. His aides have been meeting this week to set benchmarks for fundraising and organization for candidates seeking his endorsement as he tries to plot a future that will include backing those who will challenge lawmakers who voted for his impeachment and whom he deems insufficiently loyal.

"They need to show that they're going to be serious candidates before asking the president to get out there for them," Miller said.

Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton, among several scheduled speakers who are contemplating a 2024 presidential run, declined to describe Trump as the outright leader of the GOP.

"In opposition, when you don't have the White House, there are many more voices that lead the party," Cotton said in an interview.

The event will feature a seven-part series on "Protecting Elections," including one titled "Why Judges & Media Refused to Look at the Evidence," featuring Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala. The conservative congressman addressed the rally near the White House just before the Jan. 6 Capitol attack, telling the crowd, "Today is the day American patriots start taking down names and kicking ass."

Others who attended "Stop the Steal" rallies and participated in efforts to overturn the results will also be featured alongside panelists bemoaning China's power, "Cancel Culture," and "California Socialism."

Trump has a long history with CPAC, which played a key role in his emergence as a force in conservative politics. He attended the conference every year he served as president.

While he is mulling running again four years from now, the event will feature speakers thought to be considering their own runs in 2024, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Sens. Ted Cruz of Texas and Josh Hawley of Missouri, and Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida and Kristi Noem of South Dakota.

In the interview, Cotton refused to say there was widespread election fraud in the 2020 election. In an implicit nod to those who do, he encouraged efforts by Republican officials in various states to strengthen election security. Voting rights groups fear that such efforts will make it more difficult for many people, especially nonwhite voters, to cast ballots.

"I don't want election procedures that were adopted in the middle of a pandemic to become the normal

practice," Cotton told the AP. "Especially when those procedures are -- just as a factual matter -- more susceptible to potential fraud."

Among those who will not be in attendance this weekend: Former Vice President Mike Pence, who has maintained a low profile since leaving the White House and refusing to go along with Trump's efforts to overturn the election.

Schlapp noted that controversial Trump loyalist Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., was not invited to address the conference, although she was welcome to attend.

"You really can't include everybody," he said.

Peoples reported from New York.

## Manhattan prosecutor gets Trump tax records after long fight

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A New York prosecutor has obtained copies of Donald Trump's tax records after the Supreme Court this week rejected the former president's last-ditch effort to prevent them from being handed over.

The Manhattan district attorney's office enforced a subpoena on Trump's accounting firm within hours of the Supreme Court's ruling on Monday and now has the documents in hand, a spokesperson for the office, Danny Frost, said Thursday.

District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. had been fighting for a year and a half for access to Trump's tax records for a criminal grand jury investigation into his business dealings. The documents are protected by grand jury secrecy rules and are not expected to be made public.

Vance, a Democrat, is conducting a wide-ranging investigation that includes an examination of whether Trump or his businesses lied about the value of assets to gain favorable loan terms and tax benefits. The district attorney is also scrutinizing hush-money payments paid to women on Trump's behalf.

Vance's office issued a subpoena to Trump's accounting firm, Mazars USA, in August 2019 seeking eight years of his tax returns and related documents.

Trump's lawyers immediately went to court to block its enforcement, first arguing that he was immune from being investigated while president.

When the Supreme Court rejected that argument 7-2 last July, Trump's lawyers returned to a lower court and argued the subpoena was issued in bad faith, overly broad, might have been politically motivated and amounted to harassment. An appellate court rejected that argument and the Supreme Court on Monday declined to intervene.

In a three-word statement after the Supreme Court ruled on Monday, Vance said only: "The work continues."

Trump has called Vance's investigation "a fishing expedition" and "a continuation of the witch hunt — the greatest witch hunt in history."

Vance is leading the investigation along with his general counsel, Carey Dunne, who made arguments on behalf of the office at various appellate court hearings. Vance recently hired former mafia prosecutor Mark Pomerantz as a special assistant district attorney to assist in the probe.

Vance, whose term expires at the end of the year, hasn't announced if he will seek reelection, leaving questions about who will lead any Trump-related prosecutions in the future.

Vance's subpoena sought from Mazars USA not only the final versions of Trump's tax returns, but also draft versions of those returns and "any and all statements of financial condition, annual statements, periodic financial reports, and independent auditors' reports" held by the company.

Mazars did not object to the subpoena and, in a statement at the time, said it would "respect the legal process and fully comply with its legal obligations."

The Mazars subpoena also sought engagement agreements that define the accountants' role in creating the tax returns and financial statements; source documents providing the accountants with raw financial data; and work papers and communications between the firm and Trump representatives.

Those would include communications showing how the raw data was analyzed and treated in the preparation of the records.

The New York Times separately obtained years of Trump's tax data and published stories last year detailing some of his finances, including that he paid just \$750 in federal income tax in 2017 and no income tax in 11 of 18 years because of major losses.

## Watchdog reviews complaint about FBI surveillance warrant

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department's internal watchdog is reviewing a former Boeing engineer's allegations that he was unfairly investigated by the FBI on suspicion that he was spying for China, according to correspondence and court filings reviewed by The Associated Press. It's the latest challenge related to secretive surveillance powers used in some terrorism and espionage cases.

The inspector general review is unfolding amid broader scrutiny of the FBI's process for applying for court-authorized surveillance in national security investigations. Errors in applications submitted during the Russia investigation of Donald Trump's first presidential campaign, as well as in a larger sample of applications subsequently scrutinized by the watchdog office, have spurred bipartisan concerns about government surveillance powers and yielded rare alignment from pro-security and pro-privacy voices in Congress.

Concerns about the accuracy of surveillance applications sought under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, or FISA, were a prominent theme in Monday's confirmation hearing of attorney general nominee Merrick Garland. Under repeated questioning from Republican senators, Garland stressed his belief in the need to be "careful" and precise in representations made in applications.

At issue in this case is a warrant the FBI obtained in 2014 from the secretive Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court to search the computers of Keith Gartenlaub as agents investigated whether he had leaked to the Chinese design plans for a C-17 military cargo plane.

Gartenlaub has denied that accusation and was never charged with any espionage-related crimes, but federal prosecutors did bring child pornography charges after finding images on his hard drive. He was convicted in federal court in California and sentenced to more than three years in prison.

He has long maintained his innocence, insisting that the files were not his, were never opened and date to a period in his life when numerous people had access to his computer while he lived at a beach house. In any event, he argues, the FBI had no basis to search his computers in the first place since there was no evidence he had conspired with China.

Having now completed his sentence, he moved last year to vacate his conviction and his lifetime probation, alleging that he was victimized by an error-tainted investigation and that there was no basis to suspect him of espionage. As part of the lawsuit, Justice Department lawyers have revealed that the inspector general is reviewing Gartenlaub's complaint, acting on his request that it do so.

In a January court filing, government lawyers said the inspector general anticipated that it would take at least six months to finish reviewing the issues that Gartenlaub raised. In addition, an August letter from the inspector general's office to Gartenlaub's lawyer said his allegations were being looked at by the oversight and review division. A separate letter last year to Rep. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., also disclosed a review by the office.

"To me, this is a canary in a coal mine case," said Gartenlaub's lawyer Tor Ekeland.

A spokeswoman for the inspector general's office declined to comment.

Gartenlaub has publicly maintained for at least five years that he was unfairly targeted by the FBI and that the allegations in the original application were mistaken. He has said, for instance, that the FBI misstated his position at Boeing and that he didn't have access to the information that was obtained by the Chinese so he could not have disclosed it.

"It's an entirely different thing to take a national security warrant and then use it to prosecute a domestic, criminal crime," Ekeland said. "Without that FISA search warrant, they have no case. It's not some ancillary thing."

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 74 of 81

Though Gartenlaub was convicted of unrelated crimes, his underlying allegations about flaws in the FISA process have gained traction over the last year following revelations by the inspector general of 17 significant errors or omissions in applications submitted to surveil a former Trump campaign aide during a probe into possible coordination between the 2016 campaign and Russia.

The FBI, in response to the report, issued dozens of corrective actions designed to ensure the accuracy and thoroughness of its FISA applications.

Months later, the inspector general office revealed that a broader audit of 29 FISA applications had turned up problems in each, including apparent errors or inadequately supported facts. The FBI has said that most of the errors were minor and would not have affected a judge's decision that there was probable cause for the surveillance.

"I'm no Trump fan, but I thank him for this one," Ekeland said of the renewed scrutiny on the FISA process. "He shined attention onto this bloated national security apparatus that is unaccountable."

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>.

## Debate amid pandemic: Should foundations have to give more?

By GLENN GAMBOA AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The viral pandemic wiped out jobs and businesses and left many U.S. families unable to afford food. It also caused a crisis for charities: Too much need, too little funding.

And now it's sparking debate over a divisive question: Should philanthropic groups donate more money to charities? Should they be forced to?

Ask someone like Chuck Collins, and you'll get a resounding yes.

Collins, director of the Inequality and the Common Good program at the Institute for Policy Studies, a progressive think tank, believes the government should compel foundations and donor-advised funds to step up their contributions. Philanthropic groups enjoy tax-favored status, the thinking goes, and many of them have watched their assets multiply from stock market gains and other investments.

"We're in the middle of an emergency," Collins said. "The pandemic is a serious thing that we need to do something about right now."

Collins and others are pushing a proposal for Congress to require foundations and donor-advised funds to contribute at least 10% of their investment assets each year for three years.

If passed, it would be the first significant change in laws governing nonprofit funding since the Tax Reform Act of 1969. That law set a rule by which foundations must donate at least 5% of their assets annually to maintain their tax-exempt status. Donor-advised funds, which are akin to charitable investment accounts, aren't now required to make any donations in any one year.

The payoff, advocates say, would be an additional \$200 billion for charities that serve families suffering hardships from the pandemic. The proposal has the backing of some leading philanthropists, including Scott Wallace of the Wallace Global Fund and Abigail Disney.

"We had no way to envision the level of inequality and concentrated wealth we have now in 1969," Collins said. "We can do something about that."

Still, it remains far from clear that his proposal can gain enough political support to make it through Congress. Even within the philanthropy community, some leading figures favor far more modest steps to increase donations. Others prefer to keep the status quo.

Philanthropist John Arnold, co-founder of Arnold Ventures, for one, is skeptical of any government mandate to compel foundations to increase their payouts. Arnold argues that the same goal can be achieved in other ways — by, for example, reducing loopholes that let foundations count donations in dubious ways or allow them to consider compensation paid to family members as part of their annual payouts. He also questions the idea of making any government-mandated contribution requirements only temporary.

"It's a little tricky for groups to double their payout for a limited number of years and then revert back," Arnold said. "I also think it's hard for a lot of groups to handle sudden surges of money, then a pullback."

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 75 of 81

It's hard to run an organization like that."

Arnold proposes a more modest solution — the Initiative to Accelerate Charitable Giving. Under this plan, assets in a donor-advised fund would have to be donated within 15 years. Arnold would also add a sweetener: Foundations that donate more than 7% of their assets in any year wouldn't have to pay the excise tax, usually amounting to under 2%, that they normally face.

His plan — developed with Ray Madoff, director of Boston College Law School's Forum on Philanthropy and the Public Good — has the support of some of America's biggest foundations, including the Ford Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

But even the Arnold plan faces resistance from some nonprofits that oppose any government effort to induce foundations to increase their payouts. Among them is the Philanthropy Roundtable, a conservative-leaning network that opposes government involvement in private charitable donations.

"We actually don't think it will accelerate giving at all," Elise Westhoff, the Roundtable's president and CEO, said of Arnold's proposal. "It's really a solution in search of a problem."

In the midst of last year's devastating pandemic recession, charitable giving rose modestly for the year. The gain was boosted in part by a record-setting year from donor-advised funds, including Fidelity Charitable, whose contributions jumped 24% to \$9.1 billion.

Likewise, the Ford Foundation increased its giving last year, in part by issuing \$1 billion in social bonds, which are intended to raise money to address social causes, such as economic inequality.

"Charitable giving has been a silver lining through this crisis and, frankly, through throughout history," Westhoff said. "One of the reasons that is the case is because it's always been voluntary."

Though precise numbers are hard to produce, donor-advised funds are believed to pay out an average of 20% a year. Jake Cook, a managing director for BDO, said he thinks a risk in having the government impose payout requirements on the funds is that some donors might actually reduce their giving.

"When you put a minimum in place," Cook said, "then you potentially have a target number that people start working towards, even if they were giving more."

Westhoff says that scenario concerns her. When it appeared that the Initiative to Accelerate Charitable Giving was gaining momentum in Congress, the Philanthropy Roundtable led a coalition of 64 "free-market and conservative organizations" that urged Congress to reject any new restrictions on charitable giving — even on a temporary basis, as Collins and other advocates favor.

Conservatives have also expressed concern about Xavier Becerra, President Joe Biden's nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. In 2008, Becerra referred to tax-deductible charitable donations as a "\$32 billion earmark" that would be scrutinized if nonprofits didn't improve their record of donating to minority communities.

All this dissension makes it less likely Congress will act on the issue, warns Steve Taylor, United Way Worldwide's senior vice president and counsel for public policy.

"Members of Congress have nothing to gain by passing legislation in any sector, including the nonprofit sector, that the sector is divided on," Taylor said. "If you have a small group saying, 'This is what we need,' and then you have a bunch of charities and donors saying, 'No, we don't need that' — that ends the conversation right there."

Even though United Way would presumably benefit from increased donations from foundations and donor-advised funds, Taylor said he worries that these proposals will distract Congress from delivering more direct aid for nonprofits. Such aid might include increased tax incentives for donations to charities and more support for nonprofits in the next version of the government's Paycheck Protection Program.

"The bad actors are going to find a way around this," Taylor said, "and the good actors are then going to be left with a bureaucratic burden that isn't really going to make any difference."

Teri Behrens, executive director of the Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University, says it's too early to tell whether or how Congress might act. Nevertheless, she says her research suggests that any federal effort to spur donations carries risk.

Even if Congress were to require foundations and donor-advised funds to pay out at least 10% of their investment assets annually for three years, Behrens said it could take 20 years to replenish the money

that would be spent in those three years.

"We are taking money away from future needs by doing this," she said.

On the other hand, Behrens said numerous nonprofits are shuttering now, and her research suggests that the trend will outlive the pandemic.

Collins, who is holding out hope for his plan to require increased payouts, argues that the tax system's favorable treatment of foundations and donor-advised funds may provide the strongest rationale.

"If taxpayers weren't subsidizing their existence," he said, "they might have a point about their sovereignty. But you and I are chipping in a substantial amount of money: Seventy-five cents of every dollar that a billionaire gives to charity is lost tax revenue, so that's why there's a public interest."

The Associated Press receives support from the Lilly Endowment for coverage of philanthropy and nonprofits. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Explainer: Mount Etna puts on its latest spectacular show

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Mount Etna, the volcano that towers over eastern Sicily, evokes superlatives. It is Europe's most active volcano and also the continent's largest.

And the fiery, noisy show of power it puts on for days or weeks, even years every so often, is always super spectacular. Fortunately, Etna's latest eruption captivating the world's attention has caused neither injuries nor evacuation.

But each time it roars back into dramatic action, it wows onlookers and awes geologists who spend their careers monitoring its every quiver, rumble and belch.

### WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

On Feb. 16, Etna erupted, sending up high fountains of lava, which rolled down the mountain's eastern slope toward the uninhabited Bove Valley, which is five kilometers (three miles) wide and eight kilometers (five miles) long. The volcano has belched out ash and lava stones that showered the southern side.

The activity has been continuing since, in bursts more or less intense. The flaming lava lights up the night sky in shocking hues of orange and red. There's no telling how long this round of exciting activity will last, say volcanologists who work at the Etna Observatory run by the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology.

While public fascination began with the first dramatic images this month, the explosive activity began in September 2019, becoming much stronger two months ago. The current activity principally involves the south-east crater, which was created in 1971 from a series of fractures.

### HARD TO MISS

Etna towers 3,350 meters (around 11,050 feet) above sea level and is 35 kilometers (22 miles) in diameter, although the volcanic activity has changed the mountain's height over time.

Occasionally, the airport at Catania, eastern Sicily's largest city, has to close down for hours or days, when ash in the air makes flying in the area dangerous. Early in this recent spell of eruptive activity, the airport closed briefly.

But for pilots and passengers flying to and from Catania at night when the volcano is calmer, a glimpse of fiery red in the dark sky makes for an exciting sight.

### LIVING WITH A VOLCANO

With Etna's lava flows largely contained to its uninhabited slopes, life goes on in towns and villages elsewhere on the mountain. Sometimes, like in recent days, lava stones rain down on streets, bounce off cars and rattle roofs.

But many residents generally find that a small inconvenience when weighted against the benefits the volcano brings. Lava flows have left fertile farmland. Apple and citrus trees flourish. Etna red and whites are some of Sicily's most popular wines, from grapes grown on the volcanic slopes.

Tourism rakes in revenues. Hikers and backpackers enjoy views of the oft-puffing mountain and the

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 77 of 81

sparkling Ionian Sea below. For skiers who want uncrowded slopes, Etna's a favorite.

## IT CAN BE DEADLY

Inspiring ancient Greek legends, Etna has had scores of known eruptions in its history. An eruption in 396 B.C. has been credited with keeping the army of Carthage at bay.

In 1669, in what has been considered the volcano's worst known eruption, lava buried a swath of Catania, about 23 kilometers (15 miles) away and devastated dozens of villages. An eruption in 1928 cut off a rail route circling the mountain's base.

More recently, in 1983, dynamite was used to divert lava threatening inhabited areas. In 1992, the army built an earthen wall to contain the lava, flowing from Etna for months, from hitting Zafferana Etnea, a village of a few thousand people. At one point, the smoking lava stopped two kilometers (just over a mile) from the edge of town.

Over the last century, a hiccup in geological time, low-energy explosive eruptions and lava flows, both fed from the summit and side vents, have characterized Etna.

## US jobless claims at 730K, still high but fewest in 3 months

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell sharply last week in a sign that layoffs may have eased, though applications for aid remain at a historically high level.

Jobless claims declined by 111,000 from the previous week to a seasonally adjusted 730,000, the Labor Department said Thursday. It is the lowest figure since late November and the sharpest one-week decline since August. Still, before the virus erupted in the United States last March, weekly applications for unemployment benefits had never topped 700,000.

The latest figures coincide with a weakened job market that has made scant progress in the past three months. Hiring averaged just 29,000 a month from November through January. Though the unemployment rate was 6.3% in January, a broader measure that includes people who have given up on their job searches is closer to 10%.

All told, 19 million people were receiving unemployment aid as of Feb. 6, up from 18.3 million the previous week. About three-quarters of those recipients are receiving checks from federal benefit programs, including programs that provide jobless aid beyond the 26 weeks given by most states.

Last week's drop in applications was concentrated in two states, California and Ohio, where they fell by a combined 96,000. Ohio officials had said earlier this month that a surge in new applications was driven in part by a jump in potentially fraudulent claims. That now appears to have faded.

California's system operates on a biweekly bases, which can make its weekly data choppy.

This month's devastating winter storms and power outages in Texas and some neighboring states might have also disrupted the filing or processing of some claims. Applications for jobless aid fell by one-sixth in Texas to about 35,000.

Yet last week's decline in applications was broad-based, with 36 states and the District of Columbia reporting fewer people seeking unemployment benefits. That suggests that employers might be cutting fewer jobs.

"The drop may be signaling a turning point for labor market conditions," said Nancy Vanden Houten, lead economist at Oxford Economics.

Still, she cautioned, "the data continue to suffer from noise related to issues of backlogs and fraud. We expect a more sustainable labor market recovery to take hold closer to mid-year with broader vaccine distribution and the arrival of more fiscal support."

In the meantime, economists say, widespread business shutdowns in states hit by the ice storms could cause an increase in applications for jobless aid in coming weeks.

Despite the weakened job market, key sectors of the economy are showing signs of picking up as vaccinations increase and government rescue aid works its way through the economy. The Federal Reserve's ultra-low-rate policy is providing important support as well.

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 78 of 81

Retail sales soared last month as many Americans spent the \$600 checks that were included in a relief package enacted in December. Factory output also rose and has nearly regained its pre-pandemic levels. And sales of newly-built homes soared last month.

Michelle Meyer, an economist at Bank of America, on Monday upgraded her forecast for growth this year to 6.5%, which would be the fastest since 1984. Daily coronavirus infections are down more than 70% from their peak, Meyer noted, which should lead to more states and cities relaxing business restrictions.

Further economic relief is also likely, she said, as Congress considers President Joe Biden's proposal for a new aid package amounting to \$1.9 trillion.

The Fed has pegged its short-term interest rate near zero to encourage more borrowing and spending. Chair Jerome Powell stressed in testimony to Congress this week that the Fed plans to keep its rate ultra-low until the job market has recovered – even if inflation has begun to surpass the Fed's 2% target level by then. That soothed the stock market, which had fallen in the past week on fears that rising interest rates and the threat of inflation might lead the Fed to raise rates too quickly and potentially derail the economy.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury note has risen sharply in anticipation of more robust economic growth and is now 1.45%. At the start of the year, the 10-year yield was below 1%.

In his testimony this week, Powell downplayed the inflation risk and instead underscored the economy's struggles, including the 10 million jobs that remain lost since the pandemic erupted nearly a year ago. That's a deeper job loss than was inflicted by the Great Recession of 2008-2009.

But on Wednesday, Richard Clarida, a Fed vice chair, sounded a more optimistic note in remarks to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Clarida pointed to the distribution of vaccines and the economic relief package that the government enacted late last year as reasons for a sunnier outlook.

"The prospects for the economy in 2021 and beyond," Clarida said, "have brightened, and the downside risk to the outlook has diminished."

Even the ice storms and widespread power outages in Texas, damaging as they were to residents and businesses there, are unlikely to inflict a major blow on the overall U.S. economy, according to Oxford Economics.

Oren Klachkin, lead U.S. economist at Oxford, estimates that the harsh winter weather will slightly lower growth in the January-March quarter to a still-blistering 6.8% annual rate, down from a previous estimate of 7.1%.

## 'Blinding Lights' and more hits the Grammys left in the dark

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The wattage in The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights" wasn't strong enough to compete at the Grammys – but the song isn't the only electrifying No. 1 hit that the Recording Academy snubbed.

The Weeknd joins an exclusive club of songs that were crowned biggest hit of the year by Billboard but fell short at the Grammy Awards.

It's been 10 years since a song that dominated the year in music didn't garner a nomination at the Grammys, and that was "TiK ToK," the drunken party anthem and multi-platinum debut single from pop singer Kesha.

And in the last 30 years, only five No. 1 songs of the year have missed out at the Grammys. Others joining The Weeknd and Kesha are the rock-pop hit "Hanging by a Moment" from Lifehouse, the top song of 2001; R&B trio Next's racy hit "Too Close," which won over 1998; and the 1996 pop culture moment that was the "Macarena," by Spanish duo Los del Río.

"It's horrible company to be in," Ron Aniello, who produced "Hanging by a Moment" and discovered Lifehouse, said with a laugh.

"We're talking about industry people voting, we're not talking about the public, so it's quite different," Aniello continued. "I think that was a very popular song for the general public but I'm not sure how seriously (the Grammys) took the band to put them first for voting. If you remember it was their first hit. They had no history. 'We're going to vote for Lifehouse for best song of the year? Why should we? Who

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 79 of 81

are they?' They were undefined as artists, so maybe that had something to do with it."

Like Lifehouse, Kesha was a new artist marking her breakthrough when her song became the year's biggest hit. Though she launched multiple successes from her debut album, the girl who jokingly sang about brushing her teeth with Jack Daniels and described her personal style as a "garbage chic" wasn't immediately seen as a serious musician, and it didn't surprise many when she didn't earn Grammy recognition in her debut year, especially for "TiK ToK."

On the other hand, there are monster tracks like "Blinding Lights" that feel like a shoo-in at the Grammys. The Weeknd's song is spending its record-extending 50th week in the Top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100 chart and is also the longest-running No. 1 hit of all time on the R&B chart, spending 47 weeks — and counting — on top.

"It is kind of surprising because you think that someone with that kind of energy behind him or push or visibility would at least have gotten the nomination," said Paul Jackson Jr., an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music and Grammy-nominated musician who played on The Weeknd's global hit "I Feel It Coming."

"I'll give you another one that's surprising — if you look in 1984, 'When Doves Cry' was not nominated," he continued. "Huge record."

While Prince's lead single from "Purple Rain" didn't score a nomination, the soundtrack and the title track won Grammys. George Michael's "Faith" won album of the year but the title track — the No. 1 song of 1988 — did not compete in any Grammy categories.

Jackson Jr. played guitar on the No. 1 song of 1986 — Dionne Warwick's "That's What Friends Are For" — which won the Grammys for song of the year and best pop performance by a duo or group with vocals.

"It was a big collaboration," Jackson Jr. said of the tune which also featured Stevie Wonder, Gladys Knight and Elton John. "It was dealing with AIDS awareness and a lot of things like that. So there was a big push behind it from a lot of the (voting) members."

"That's What Friends Are For" is just one of nine Billboard year-end No. 1 hits to win the song of the year Grammy. Ten of the top songs of the year have been named record of the year.

Since the Grammys held its first show in 1959 — to honor the music of 1958 — Billboard has named 63 No. 1 songs of the year. Of the 63 hits, only 18 songs have missed out on Grammy nominations, including "Blinding Lights." Twenty-eight of the 45 nominated No. 1 songs have won Grammys, which currently has 84 categories.

Only five year-end No. 1 tunes have won both song and record of the year, including Adele's "Rolling In the Deep" in 2012, Kim Carnes' "Bette Davis Eyes" in 1982, Roberta Flack's "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" in 1973, Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" in 1971, and Domenico Modugno's "Nel Blu Dipinto di Blu (Volare)" in 1959.

Aniello said one of the reasons a song may not get a Grammy nomination could be the result of record label politics.

When thinking of why "Hanging by a Moment" missed out, he said: "That year we were on DreamWorks and it was 'I'm Like a Bird' by Nelly Furtado, that's the song that the label chose to push for a Grammy." Furtado's offbeat Top 10 debut single went on to win best female pop vocal performance and was nominated for song of the year. Furtado also competed for best new artist and best pop vocal album.

"Is it fair? It's just what it is," he continued. "We were all just new at it. We had no idea. ... We just kind of probably thought you had to pick a unicorn to win a Grammy somewhere, like it was magical. We didn't realize it was probably more political than anything else."

Grammy rules state that just because a track is the most successful song of the year does not mean it deserves to be nominated — that means chart placement, radio airplay or streaming success are not part of the voting process. The academy's voting body includes artists, producers, songwriters and engineers.

"It's an industry award," Jackson Jr. explained. "It's not necessarily based on just popular vote. It's based on people thinking that this has merits to win."

Aniello — who produced the Bruce Springsteen albums "Wrecking Ball," "High Hopes," "Western Stars"

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 80 of 81

and "Letter to You" — said though The Boss has won 20 Grammys, he's never picked up big prizes such as record or album of the year, despite being one of music's most revered performers.

"It's just a quirky thing," he said. "The Grammys don't make sense to me."

When he thinks about what Lifehouse created two decades ago — opening doors for Christian-leaning rock songs to live on pop radio — he's proud, and content.

"The song is very deep. I'm fine with not having a Grammy," he said. "It doesn't matter to me because the song reached who it needed to reach."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 26, the 57th day of 2021. There are 308 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 26, 1993, a truck bomb built by Islamic extremists exploded in the parking garage of the North Tower of New York's World Trade Center, killing six people and injuring more than 1,000 others. (The bomb failed to topple the North Tower into the South Tower, as the terrorists had hoped; both structures were destroyed in the 9/11 attack eight years later.)

On this date:

In 1904, the United States and Panama proclaimed a treaty under which the U.S. agreed to undertake efforts to build a ship canal across the Panama isthmus.

In 1940, the United States Air Defense Command was created.

In 1942, "How Green Was My Valley" won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 1941, beating out nine other films, including "The Maltese Falcon" and "Citizen Kane."

In 1945, authorities ordered a midnight curfew at nightclubs, bars and other places of entertainment across the nation.

In 1952, Prime Minister Winston Churchill announced that Britain had developed its own atomic bomb.

In 1966, South Korean troops sent to fight in the Vietnam War massacred at least 380 civilians in Go Dai hamlet.

In 1984, the last U.S. Marines deployed to Beirut as part of an international peacekeeping force withdrew from the Lebanese capital.

In 1994, a jury in San Antonio acquitted 11 followers of David Koresh of murder, rejecting claims they had ambushed federal agents; five were convicted of voluntary manslaughter.

In 1998, a jury in Amarillo, Texas, rejected an \$11 million lawsuit brought by Texas cattlemen who blamed Oprah Winfrey's talk show for a price fall after a segment on food safety that included a discussion about mad cow disease.

In 2014, Republican Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer vetoed a bill pushed by social conservatives that would have allowed people with sincerely held religious beliefs to refuse to serve gays.

In 2017, at the 89th Academy Awards, "Moonlight," an LGBT coming of age drama, won three Oscars, including best picture of 2016 (in a startling gaffe, the musical "La La Land" was mistakenly announced as the best picture winner before the error was corrected).

In 2019, after making his way from Pyongyang in an armored train, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un arrived in Vietnam's capital ahead of a summit with President Donald Trump, who arrived later in the day aboard Air Force One.

Ten years ago: In a statement, President Barack Obama said Moammar Gadhafi had lost his legitimacy to rule and urged the Libyan leader to leave power immediately. Space shuttle Discovery arrived at the International Space Station, making its final visit before being parked at a museum.

Five years ago: New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie stunned the Republican establishment by endorsing Donald Trump for president.

One year ago: President Donald Trump declared that the U.S. was "very, very ready" for whatever threat

# Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Feb. 26, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 235 ~ 81 of 81

the coronavirus would bring; he put Vice President Mike Pence in charge of overseeing the country's response. The World Health Organization reported that the number of new coronavirus cases outside China had exceeded the number of new infections in China for the first time. Brazil's government confirmed the first case of the coronavirus in Latin America; a 61-year-old man who had traveled to Italy had tested positive. Facebook said it was banning ads that made false claims about products tied to the coronavirus. As Christians around the world marked the start of Lent with Ash Wednesday, worshipers found churches closed and rituals changed by virus fears. An employee at a Wisconsin brewery opened fire on co-workers, killing five of them before taking his own life. Maria Sharapova retired from professional tennis at the age of 32, after a career that included five Grand Slam titles.

Today's Birthdays: Country-rock musician Paul Cotton (Poco) is 78. Actor-director Bill Duke is 78. Singer Mitch Ryder is 76. Actor Marta Kristen (TV: "Lost in Space") is 76. Rock musician Jonathan Cain (Journey) is 71. Singer Michael Bolton is 68. The president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (REH'-jehp TY'-ihp UR'-doh-wahn), is 67. Actor Greg Germann is 63. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., is 63. Bandleader John McDaniel is 60. Actor-martial artist Mark Dacascos is 57. Actor Jennifer Grant is 55. Rock musician Tim Commerford (Audioslave) is 53. Singer Erykah Badu (EHR'-ih-kah bah-DOO') is 50. Actor Maz Jobrani (TV: "Superior Donuts") is 49. R&B singer Rico Wade (Society of Soul) is 49. Olympic gold medal swimmer Jenny Thompson is 48. R&B singer Kyle Norman (Jagged Edge) is 46. Actor Greg Kikaart is 44. Rock musician Chris Culos (O.A.R.) is 42. R&B singer Corinne Bailey Rae is 42. Pop singer Nate Ruess (roos) (fun.) is 39. Tennis player Li Na is 39. Latin singer Natalia Lafourcade is 37. Actor Teresa Palmer is 35.